

THIS BOOK'S BACK STORY

The book you are about to read has not been proofread or edited by a well-qualified individual, but that shouldn't stop you from reading, and here's why.

In the event you haven't heard, I created a literary challenge between Rowena and 100 other novels selected by PBS for their series, The Great American Read. To discover America's 'best-loved book', viewers of the series could vote for their favorites once each day through October 18, 2018 at midnight PT and the same was true of Rowena's readers.

Unfortunately, when I learned about the PBS series and had the idea for the challenge, there was insufficient time to have dad's book professionally reviewed and published, and still wage a successful competition against the selected novels. So I did the best I could and launched the challenge.

Learn More about...

[The Voting Process](#)

[PBS's Series](#)

[The 100 Novels](#)

[Rowena's Literary Challenge](#)

P.S. This was an exciting but challenging project and as I think about all the work involved, it's offset by my imagination of what could have been. Wouldn't it have been amazing if on the PBS finale in October 2018, they admitted that a previously unknown book had come out of nowhere to finish with more votes than one or more of their 100 selections? It didn't happen like that but just thinking about the possibilities makes me recall the effort in a good way and push forward with my project of getting dad's work widely published.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY FALL 1896

The coach was comfortably warm; but, huddled next to the large, glowering man, the child's appearance suggested that no amount of external warmth could dispel the chill that gripped her. Her proximity to him, although not that of an offspring enjoying the security of a loving parent, was close enough to indicate that they were, in some way, attached.

"Garwood, twenty minutes!"

The conductor, moving easily between the seats of the swaying car, continued his bored monotone: "Ten minute stopover. Garwood, twenty min..."

With a waft of cold air, the door of the vestibule slammed closed on any additional information that may have been forthcoming.

She shivered and glanced up furtively. "Garwood, Papa?"

The voice, matching the child in size, confirmed what her appearance implied.

With the man's brusque nod, offering nothing more than annoyed acknowledgment, a second tremor gripped the tiny body; and, drawing her knees tight against herself, she moved closer to him.

Glaring down, he snapped: "Don't get so close, child, you'll muss my suit!" He cuffed her leg with a huge hand. "And get your feet off the seat!"

Blinking back the tears she obeyed, and sought to become one with the cushions.

There were those who would have viewed her as merely wistful, but intuitive observation would have revealed a child, if not abused, acutely aware of being unwanted. Had this not been so, in another time, she would have been a living *Rockwell*.

The brazen flip and diminutive bows, ending the copper colored pigtails, offered a hint of the picture's charm, but ended there. The sprinkling of freckles, peppered across the dainty nose, and spilling out over her cheeks, did little to mask the pain and misery reflected in the expressive blue eyes.

If any had taken note of her despondency, it had brought no outcry, no desire to gather her up and sooth away the hurt; so she remained; alone and lost; in a world she could not comprehend, at the mercy of forces against which she had no defense.

* * * * *

The wind, gift of a late October storm, blew rich with winter's promise. Roaring across the barren fields, it drove chilling barbs into the bones of all living creatures, and threatened the flesh thereof. Heavy with the harvest of unrelenting drought, it lay a pall of doom upon the ravaged land. As it tore at the trees, whose few remaining leaves clung desperately to lives too dear to relinquish, its quest left them trembling in naked despair.

Those of humankind, forced to brave the storm, scuttled about wrapped as mummies with hats pulled low. Range animals, in dealing with nature's wrath, huddled together in the dumb acceptance of their kind. Unconcerned with the plight of man or beast the undulating carpet of

dust streamed across the land, engulfing everything in its path. Forming great drifts at any obstruction, it crept in under doors and around windows. Defying all efforts to thwart it, it sidled through keyholes, uncaulked chinks and crevices, some so miniscule as to be avoided by mouse and insect alike. With its victory inevitable, it rampaged over rooftops, sifted beneath shingles and gathered about chimneys and stovepipes to drift down on all that lay below.

The locomotive's huge headlight glowed dimly in the premature gloom of late afternoon. A plume of blue-black smoke rose only inches from the great stack, before racing ahead to become part of the deepening quasi-night.

The mesmerizing rhythm of spinning steel along its stationary counterpart began to change. With each turn of the wheels the happy clickity-clacks were elongated until they became a morose chant: Ca-lump, caa-lumpah, caaa-luumpaahh... With a mournful groan, the once cheery cadence died amid the cacophony of screeching brakes and hissing steam.

With the sounds of suitcases, and other belongings, being dragged from overhead racks and beneath the seats, several passengers prepared to leave the train.

The vestibule door burst open. "Garwood! Ten minute stopover. Newspapers-magazines-candy-coffee— and tobacco in the Harvey House."

The big man stood and stepped into the aisle. Retrieving two suitcases from the rack, he dropped the smaller one beside the girl. "Come along, child, we best be gettin' off."

Abruptly he turned, and walked to the end of the car, leaving the child staring after him.

Flexing her thin legs, the girl slid to the floor; and, with the satchel bumping at her heels, struggled to keep up.

"Hurry, Child! I don't have all day!"

She hastened her step, nearly falling in the attempt.

His laugh was mirthless. "I swear," he muttered, as he hurried down the stairs, "you're as clumsy as your mother was!"

As the girl reached the vestibule, a blast of cold, dust laden wind swept through the door. Drawing back, she dropped the bag to cover her eyes; and from the platform she could hear the man's harsh voice: "For heaven's sake, girl; get a move on!"

At the foot of the stairs the porter shifted his gaze from the annoyed man to the frightened child and, with three quick steps, was at her side. "Here, young lady, let me take that."

Grasping the suitcase, he whispered, "Those are pretty big steps. Better take my hand."

There were no words, but what he saw in the child's eyes would obscure far more eloquent thanks for years to come. As he eased her down to the rough planks, he said quietly. "Mind your step, little one, the cracks are nearly as big as those dainty feet of yours. I'll just give your bag to..."

He glanced up in time to see the man disappear into the station. "Well, my goodness— here, let me carry that."

She shook her head. "Papa would be mad."

Grasping the handle with both hands, she started to leave— then, freezing mid stride, turned and executed a childish curtsy. "Thank you, very much, sir!"

The words had come as those oft repeated instructions of a mindful parent, but the adoration in her eyes left him staring sadly after her.

The conductor touched his shoulder. "It ain't something for us to be meddlin' in, John, but I know how you feel."

John shook his head. "Who is that man?"

"Her father."

"Father!" He peered skeptically at his companion. "You're joshin' me."

The answer was obvious in the other man's eyes.

"Dear, Lord," muttered John. "How could a man treat any child that way, never mind his own?"

The conductor shrugged. "I was talkin' with the station agent up in Algona, where they got on. Seems her mother died a few months ago, and he got himself some woman friend that don't want the girl around, so he's givin' her to a family here in Garwood."

Again John shook his head sadly. "I know there's lots 'bout people I don't know, but— did you see those eyes— the look on her face?"

"Uh-huh, but never you mind. You can't do anything about it, and he'll be with us all the way to Des Moines."

John moved uneasily. "I know but..."

"No buts, John! You an' me, we've worked together long enough that color don't make a whole lot of difference, but you know what company policy is! You best be forgettin' that girl!"

John nodded. He was all too familiar with "policy" and he would keep his *place*, but forget? Never!

As the child struggled through the door, her father was standing close to an even larger man; they were talking earnestly. Then, as the huge door banged against her heels, her father shook hands with the other man, and walked toward her. As he neared, their eyes met for an instant, hers pleading, his void of feeling. As he passed, he patted the top of her head. "You be a good girl, hear?" he said sternly, and walked on.

The rush of cold about her ankles told her that he was gone, and she was completely, frighteningly alone. Tears threatened, and even though her father's admonition forbade them, it was to be a brave but brief battle.

As the big door swung inward, it struck the back of her head a resounding blow. The suitcase fell from her clutch, and she squeezed her eyes tight shut. Then, with tiny fists pressed hard against them, she waited fearfully for the unknown.

"Rowena." She heard her name, her full proper name spoken quietly. To a child sensing fear, pain and loneliness to be the sum of her life, the deep, soft voice offered a promise of something better. She felt his nearness, and the gentle touch of a large, strong hand on her shoulder. "Are you hurt, dear?"

Without lowering her hands, she shook her head.

The voice, kind and reassuring continued, even softer than before. "I'm Jason Carlson. It's too bad your father couldn't wait to introduce us properly, but he did have to hurry to catch the train." A short blast from the engine's whistle added emphasis to his words. "No matter, you and I will get to know each other before long. For right now, though, you'll have to call me *something*. I don't think I'd like Mister Carlson. Um, how about, Uncle, Jason?"

There was, in the gentle touch and soft voice, something that stirred distant memories, those of joy and laughter, and others she could no longer recall at just a whim.

As she whispered, "Uncle Jason", somewhere a tiny flame flickered. Slowly her hands relaxed, and she drew them aside. Then, opening her eyes, she tried vainly to smile.

A pair of trousers' legs towered before her. Dark blue and neatly pressed, they seemed to reach forever. Her eyes traveled upward to the vee at the joining of the vest. Then on past the great gold chain hanging loosely across the line of buttons, to the point at which his black tie shown starkly against the gleaming white shirt. From above the stiff collar a face smiled down at her. It was not like her father's. There were no dark bushy brows crouched above fierce black eyes. These, nearly white, were laughingly placed on a broad forehead above two beautiful blue eyes. At the moment, however, these seemed very sad, but she knew instinctively that they would twinkle like stars when they were happy. Beneath a lovely mustache, the wide smiling mouth opened, and again the concerned voice spoke soothingly.

"Well, hello there. I thought I might never see your face— what with your hands covering it up; but my— you should never hide it, it's a lovely face, and you have beautiful eyes." He chuckled softly. "But— I think I'll like them better when they're laughing instead of being unhappy... You know, your mother and— my wife were distant cousins, so maybe it would be easier if you called me Cousin, Jason. That way we could be just real good friends. What do you think about that?"

The little face squeezed into a grimace, but this time the tears would not be denied. She could feel them coming, and pawed frantically to push them back.

Suddenly, the big hands slipped gently beneath her arms, whisked her into the air and drew her close to the huge, warm chest. With no understanding of why, she was secure in the love she sensed, and snuggled against him.

In the years to come, Rowena would understand such feelings, and their source, even be able to explain them to others. For the moment, though, so secure in the shelter of this stranger's arms, it was enough that they were there.

Tears remained the immediate problem. Since her mother's funeral, and her father's threat of what would happen if she "so much as let out a peep", they had filled her solitary hours. However, for a child of four, whose world has suddenly become a hostile, love-starved existence, tears in secret shed are of little therapeutic value. Now, warm and safe within the loving folds of this gentle embrace, with her realization that she had nothing to fear, tears came in a seemingly endless torrent. Out across the lovely white shirt they flowed; then down over the beautiful black tie to disappear somewhere beneath the perfectly pressed vest.

Rowena stole a peek at the mess she was creating, and sniffed mightily in an effort to forestall any participation by her nose. One of the big hands moved away, and she tensed instinctively, anticipating its harsh return. The wait was brief, but there was no explosion of pain

as it ended. The hand stole up between her trembling shoulders to pat softly as it pressed her even closer. The flood of tears increased, and her nose, not to be outdone, gave with gusto. The hand moved away, then brushed lightly against her cheek, and the offending protrusion was enveloped in wonderfully scented softness.

"Blow."

It was a command, but spoken so gently as to carry no threat; and she tried to comply, but with little success.

"Once more."

Her second effort was more successful, and another bleary peek found her confronted by a voluminous red bandanna. It would have seemed, to most, completely foreign against the blue suit; but, being utterly unpretentious, it was very comforting to a confused, frightened child.

The big man began to walk slowly. To Rowena, cuddled contentedly in the security so long denied her, the destination was unimportant. The slow, easy gate was pushing the sounds of the wind back into the hazy reaches of her mind. The shrill sound of the locomotive's whistle, and the sudden rapid huffing as the drivers clawed for traction, became only a distant jumble of strangely friendly sounds fading into obscurity.

Jason Carlson, his precious bundle clutched close to his bosom, walked to the ticket window.

"Clarence," he said quietly, "could you give me a hand? She's asleep, and— I hate to wake her. Could you put my overcoat up around her so the wind don't get at her when I go outside?"

The man jumped to his feet. "You bet, Jason." He came hurrying from the office. "So this is the little tike? Poor thing; looks like she's plumb done in... Um, where is your coat?"

"Over there on the bench— by that bag. The other's by the door. D'ya 'spose you could bring them out to the buggy?"

"Do I 'spose? Well— you just bet I can. Here..."

He scurried to the bench, and returned with Jason's greatcoat. "I'll put it over her— like this, then you can hold it with you free hand." He paused, gazing at the sleeping child; two fingers tucked contentedly into her mouth. "She's no bigger'n a button, Jason. How old is she?"

"Be about four'n a half, I reckon. We figure on starting her in kindergarten September next."

Clarence shook his head, sadly. "I was watchin' from the office. Seems she's near scared to death. Peers as though— well, sometimes, seems as though the Good Lord is unjustly hard on the young ones."

Jason nodded. "Does seem so, but she's the answer to prayer for Idee and me. We'll be spendin' the rest of our lives tryin' to make it up to her!"

There was no doubt in Jason Carlson's mind concerning the merit of his vow. From the moment he first tucked his new daughter into bed, he was her captive. The pathetic need of the frightened child at the depot, had moved him deeply; but, as he gazed down at the tiny creature sleeping so peacefully, he was overcome. Tears filled his eyes, and he reached hesitantly for Ida's hand.

"Our little girl, Idee." He squeezed the unresponsive hand. "It'll be wonderful. It's gonna be easier for us, just you..."

For an instant, he had sensed response, then it was gone, and the hand lay cold and motionless in his.

Ida nodded sternly. "It isn't going to be easy, Jason. The child has been bad hurt. She could be spoiled awful, if we're too easy on her. A child's gotta have security, but it needs discipline, too."

"And love." Jason added softly.

Again, Ida's authoritative nod spoke only of partial agreement. "If she's cared for, and brought up proper she'll know she's loved."

Jason lowered his eyes, allowed the hand to slip from his grasp, and Ida moved into the hall. "I'll leave a lamp on the hall table for her," she said. "You comin'?"

The big man sighed and nodded. "In a minute."

So— there would be no miracle. Ida would not be transformed into a tender, loving person. She would be for her daughter as she was for her husband: A friend, helper and, with the child, a teacher, but aloof and distant. *Why?* He wondered, and bent to kiss the soft cheek.

The salt of her dried tears lingered on his lips as he straightened. "Don't you worry, little one, there'll be love, all you will ever need!"

Again, he sighed. How wonderful it would be if Ida could feel as he did. He shrugged helplessly, a sad smile playing across his lips. "Well, we'll just have to do the best we can. Good night, little girl— God bless you."

Turning to leave, Jason paused to look once more at the sleeping child. Barely visible, she nestled deep in the down of the new feather bed, snug and warm beneath the gaily colored comforter. Those, Ida had seen to.

From the moment they were certain that Rowena was coming, Ida had been up every night, often past midnight, working on the comforter, robe and nightgown. This Rowena would never know of, unless he told her. Certainly, it represented love. Love? The word rattled about in his head. No, of course not. How could there be love so soon? Even his own feelings, if he were completely honest, were more of pity than love. That would come later. Ida, in her own way, was as concerned as he, perhaps, even more so. She had seen to it that the child would be warm and comfortable on her first night in her new home. Beyond knowing that it would be so, he had not given it a thought. Perhaps, Ida's miracle was to be different than his. Jason lifted his eyes: "Lord, please, let it be; let there be love— from both of us."

As Ida had promised, a lamp glowed softly on the hall table. She was turning down the wick as Jason stepped from the room.

"You wake her up?"

Certain she had been listening; he shook his head. "No, why?"

"I heard you talkin'. Were you tellin' secrets to a sleepin' child, talkin' to yourself— or prayin'?"

It was an inconsequential question, small talk, but expecting it to be more, Jason found it such.

What's this all about? Does she resent the child?

Although Jason's approach to life, for the most part, was nearly guileless, his relationship with Ida, being a startling exception, was a source of inner conflict. The central figure, the instigator of these battles was an individual he detested, a stranger over whom he seemed to have no control.

In time, the stranger would be identified, and dealt with, but not before all parties involved had experienced devastating turmoil, and heartache. In those times of travail, when Jason jostled with the interloper, on occasion he gained the upper hand, but more often he fared miserably. It would take many such defeats before he came to understand that the love he had envisioned was not always the by-product of swearing to forsake all others.

Unable to satisfy its own questions, Jason's mind, reading all manner of innuendoes into Ida's simple statement, fostered words of anger. Fully primed, and needing no further impetus, he opened his mouth to give them voice.

Ida watched coldly. She had calculated his reaction, and waited eagerly for the outburst. It never came. Jason's lips closed soundlessly and he smiled wanly.

"A little of both, I reckon— um, I'm not real sure."

A peculiar sensation wormed its way beneath his collar, and across his shoulders. He had seen the surprise and disappointment in his wife's eyes, but this— *feeling* did not stem from denying her the altercation; it was more one of gratitude for it having been avoided. It could have represented a *beginning*; but, at the time, neither could appreciate or acknowledge it as such.

Ida made a soft sound in her throat, as though she were about to speak, then turned and stepped across the hall into their room.

CHAPTER TWO

FALL and WINTER 1895

Ida was in bed when Jason entered the room, but she said nothing, watching as he snuffed the lamp, and began to undress. With the sound of buttons striking the back of the old rocker, she knew that the vague silhouette before her was that of her husband's unadorned body. The spark, which had ignited when he had taken hold of her hand, fanned by her fantasies of this moment, had become a burning need. Then, as it always did, her longing became her curse. How could she have sunk into such depravity? She waited, ready to resist, loving him for the gentle, loving tenderness that would allow her to prevail; hating him for the same reason.

There is a story told of two men who worked together for many years. Each day they brought lunches prepared by their respective spouses. Each day one man opened his sack, and withdrew a sandwich consisting of a piece of bologna between two slices of bread. For the second man, opening his lunch was an adventure. Everyday there were such delightful offerings as to make one's mouth water. Appearing regularly, and of particular interest to his partner, was a crab salad sandwich of monstrous dimensions. Through the years, although the first man routinely compared his wife's drab offerings with the culinary delights of the other, and often expressed his high regard for crab salad sandwiches, the second man seemed not to notice.

In time, the first man's lust for the coveted sandwich became an obsession, and he grew to hate his fellow worker for not offering to share. Eventually, this hatred grew to encompass his wife for failing to prepare lunches of a similar caliber.

For the bystander, of course, there is question as to where a problem existed. For most, simple use of the common language would have been the obvious first step toward a solution. For many, however, after a period of silent, expectant waiting, the anger, born of one's assumption of another's evil thoughts, replaces common sense. So, on the day the second man turned to his friend and asked: "Do you want to trade sandwiches? I have crab salad, today." The response was: "No! I hate crab salad." The final, more definitive portion of the statement, *and you, and my wife, and-- myself*, went unspoken.

In today's world of uninhibited, sex and open discussions of it, one is hard pressed to understand the feelings of those raised in times of lesser *enlightenment*. Today, those with even a meager understanding of human relations know that sexual behavior has not changed much through the ages, but how we view such things has.

Having never conceived, and certain she was barren, Ida, by nature of her upbringing, and the manner in which she had come by her meager knowledge, found her desires and fantasies not only vulgar, but contrary to God's ordinances. The product of this was a marriage of little more than convenience.

An empty hanger clicked against the closet dowel; there followed a faint rustle of material, and Jason moved toward the bed safe and secure beneath the folds of his winter nightshirt.

Whether Ida's relief at being spared was greater than her frustration of denial, even she could not say, but she wondered about the body she had seen only once. The years had not been

that many, but still she wondered. The tanned, sinewy forearms she saw everyday. The great muscles across the broad shoulders were visible beneath the heaviest of shirts. Nothing she could see had changed; but about the rest, there hovered a question. She had heard many things concerning the aging male, and Jason was nearing forty-five.

Pride, had Ida been able to recognize it, contributed greatly to her state of mental anguish. For all her lack of worldly aplomb, there was nothing stupid about Ida Carlson. From the beginning, of her association with Jason, she had been aware of being envied. That Jason Carlson was a man among men was no secret to her, or any other woman. Occasionally someone, less discreet than she, would confide to a mutual friend her imaginings of what sharing the bed of such a man might entail. Inevitably the story found its way back to taunt Ida. At such times there had been resentment and embarrassment, but more damning was her sense of frustration and inadequacy. It was obvious to her, although these were the wishful fantasies of frivolous, shallow women, that they might well be fact if such an open, daring partner were sharing Jason's bed.

Ida's knowledge, that it could never be, gave her a heady, perverse sense of power. Of all the things she felt Jason to be guilty of; infidelity was not among them. The confirmation of such an affair, sworn to by the alleged partner, and a witness, would not be considered. Ida was absolutely certain Jason was incapable of betrayal! How there could be such certainty of trust in one area, and so little in others, is for those in similar situations to answer.

* * * * *

Rowena did not meet her new mother that first night. She was still sleeping when Jason had carried her into the house. Once or twice, while she was being readied for bed, she had been vaguely aware of a woman's voice. It was not as cold and harsh as that of the aunt, with whom she had stayed in those weeks following her mother's death, but it lacked the melodic sweetness that lay in the precious memories of her mother. She had been conscious of the warm, fluffy nightgown, as it was pulled over her head, and down about her body. She had heard the strange rattling sounds made by the screeching wind, and been afraid. Then those huge, loving hands had gathered her up, and placed her gently into bed. Fear held no power against the delightful sinking sensation, as she settled into the downy depths.

This was her final memory until the urgent demands of her bladder brought her to the horrible realization that she had no idea of where a toilet might be, if in fact such a thing existed. She had grown up with outhouses and chamber pots, but in the city with her aunt, there had been indoor plumbing. Where was she now? What were the arrangements for such things?

Recalling all too vividly her father's wrath at the occasion of her last accident, Rowena squirmed uncomfortably. The recollections were too clear: The sting of his hand on her bare bottom; his angry words when her mother attempted to intervene, her tears and—the rest she had forced from her mind. Her father, possessing the level of intellect he did, and being of the temperament he was, had given no thought to seeing that the child emptied herself before or during the train ride. Since then, in the prevailing excitement, no one else had considered the matter. Now, the situation had become desperate, and moving was making it worse. Rowena lay very still and concentrated on prolonging the inevitable. The room was not totally dark, but having no knowledge of her surroundings, she dare not get out of bed. She whimpered softly, contemplating which might be the least traumatic, getting up, being unable to find a facility, and wetting the floor, or staying where she was and wetting the bed. Certain that either would involve terrible punishment; the options offered little comfort.

Suddenly, the light grew brighter. From above her came the same gentle voice that had stilled her fears at the station.

"Here now, what seems to be the trouble with our little girl?"

Ida had been ready to get up when Rowena first stirred, but the sounds had ceased, so she had waited. Jason, crawling into bed, had not heard the first movements, but when Rowena's tiny sobs came to him, he was up before Ida could move.

It could only have been Rowena's desperation, and fear; for she had long since given up baby talk, and her mother had taught her the proper way to express her needs. The severity of the moment, however, left no time for difficult phrases, and what burst from her lips was simple eloquence:

"Go potty!"

The covers were snatched away, and those great warm hands whisked her from the bed with such speed that she was forced to squeeze with all her might to avert an instant flood. Her feet touched the floor, the nightgown was pulled up around her waist; and, as the hands closed about her rib cage, the voice whispered: "Sit."

She did as she was told, and her bare bottom touched a ring of cold porcelain. With a sigh, she settled with exquisite relief onto the ignoble chamber pot. Her sigh was accompanied by an involuntary shudder as the terrible pressure began to abate. She relaxed comfortably against the warm hands, and the flow increased.

From above came a soft chuckle, and she was suddenly aware that what she was doing had always been something very private. No one, but her mother, had ever helped her at the toilet. She had stubbornly refused to undress in front of her aunt, an act in which that lady had taken great displeasure; and, for which, had dealt Rowena a vicious spanking. Through it all, clinging to her clothes with the tenacity of a wolverine, she had not shed a tear. Exhaustion — that of the aunt — had ended the ordeal; and Rowena had been locked in the darkened room. She had fallen asleep cowering in a closet, but awakened, the following morning, in bed still fully dressed. The incident was never mentioned.

The word, embarrassment, was, not yet, a part of Rowena's vocabulary; but shame, a word partially understood, was associated with a sensation she was well aware of. It came when she was caught in a childish lie or apprehended in outright disobedience. It had been there when she had vomited on the conductor, and the last time she had wet herself. Now, it was an even more disagreeable feeling, which enveloped her entire being and brought an uncomfortable warmth to her face. The result of her discomfort was a desperate desire to be anywhere, but where she was; and the flow continued.

Feeling somehow violated — another word she had yet to embrace — Rowena longed for the floor to open and swallow her. Then, at long last, there were no more dribbles. The quiet was heaven sent, and she squirmed to be free of the pot, but the hands held her firm.

"Hold still for just a minute, little one."

A puff of something soft was thrust into her hand. "Here, wipe real good."

Finally, it was over. She was back, settled in the warm folds of the feather bed; and, although her eyes were tight shut, she was aware of his nearness. Then, very gently, soft lips touched her forehead, and she felt the delightful tickle of that beautiful mustache.

"I'm so sorry, little one. That was very thoughtless of me. I should have wakened you, so you could go potty before we put you to bed."

Hearing the deep masculine voice repeating her baby phrase was strange, almost comical, but at the same time very reassuring. Her need to disappear lessened, and from that magic storehouse, from whence flows the wisdom of children, came the realization that there had been no need for her discomfort. This man, whose nearness gave her such peace and security, was to fill her life with a love nearly equal to that of her mother's; a love that she would cherish, and return for the rest of her life.

As Jason reentered the bedroom, he spoke softly: "We forgot to put her on the pot before we put her down."

Ida felt the bed dip under his weight, then he was beside her, so close she felt the warmth of him, yet so distant as to leave a chill. She didn't speak.

"Good night, Idee."

Ida had known that sleep would not come easily, but she had no way of foreseeing to what degree her memories and fantasies would trouble her. She lay quietly, listening to Jason's measured breathing, struggling to keep her mind involved with a subject far removed from the comforting, exciting—frightening warmth next to her.

Mumbling incoherently, Jason rolled onto his side, facing from her. The movement brought his body against hers, and she tensed instinctively. Then, as if stayed by an invisible hand, she relaxed. Reveling in his nearness, she reached to touch him. Her heart pounded wildly as her trembling fingers hovered just millimeters from him; but, in the final moment, she withdrew her hand. Cursing the circumstances that had brought her to this place, Ida wept.

Being unable to make her needs known was maddening, but Jason's inability to sense them offered an excuse to see the fault as his. Truly, in many areas, Jason's blame was undeniable, but Ida knew hers to be the lion's share. And this knowledge only fueled the fire that threatened to consume her.

Violently, she reaffirmed her exoneration. She *had* obeyed. She *had* submitted to her husband—and despised it... Instantly, absolution became her persecutor. Recalling those times when she had been lifted to ecstasies beyond what even fanciful dreams had led her to expect; and hypocrisy proved a captor equally as merciless as ignorance.

The desperate need of Ida Carlson's passion slept, not too soundly, beneath an austere exterior, which denied its existence. Even if she had felt delicacy compatible with the subject, it was not one of Ida's attributes. Lacking access to any beguiling feminine ploy, she saw her only manner of communication as being the brutish means employed by males. This understanding, coming only from what she had heard, was yet another conundrum, for Jason was a gentle man, in all respects. But it was not for a woman to initiate, only submit; and, therein, her greatest frustration: The *stigma* of submission, when Jason's needs were more quickly met than hers, precluded fulfillment; and she was left in a state of physical and emotional turmoil. When her eroticism had soared beyond her ability to control it, her comfortably spent; peacefully snoring husband was a source of anger, and degradation without equal. While the alternative afforded some release, it battered her self-esteem, and served only to accentuate her contempt for husband—and her marriage.

Jason stirred and, in the shame of his possible foretelling her thoughts, Ida shrank from his warmth to the cold, inhospitable outer edge of the bed. There she put her mind to the task of deciding how many jars she would need for next year's canning. A rooster crowed, and Ida moved restlessly. Making a drowsy mental note that Jason would sleep yet a little longer, she slept.

A hint of gray settled on the windowsill, but Ida did not see it. During the night sleep had eluded her, but now, for an hour or so, it would be hers. Her dreams, more peaceful and fulfilling than her waking, offered a welcome respite from what she had come to view as her lot. For whatever years God had assigned her, she would accept this bitter existence as being her "just rewards."

CHAPTER THREE

JASON and IDA

The marriage of Jason Carlson and Ida Ravenhurst was not the result of a prolonged or passionate courtship. What began as a casual business association continued in much the same manner up to, and long after, the day they were wed.

Jason had not remained a bachelor due to any disregard or fear of women. On the contrary, he greatly admired, and was attracted to members of the fairer sex. The only boy, and the oldest of four siblings, he had grown to be a considerate and caring man. One who truly wanted, and needed, a woman of like persuasion to share his life.

Jason savored, and revered, his childhood, but he was not blind to the imbalance in his upbringing, and the problems in his parent's relationship. His father, a cattle buyer for the railroad, had been absent far too much of the time. Even though he had been a good provider, the responsibility of raising four children had been left, almost entirely, to his wife. The resulting strain was obvious, at least from Jason's retrospective point of view. For this reason, although he could have been very successful in the same line of endeavor, he chose ranching as his means of livelihood. It was his feeling that this would assure his presence in the household he planned *someday* to head.

Some of the factors responsible for Jason's advanced state of bachelor hood were rooted in his determination never to make hasty decisions, and his desire to become a successful breeder of fine stock, both equine and bovine. His wide recognition as a leader in the latter field was the medal of his uncompromising effort.

Jason's plans for altering his martial status were not plans at all. More accurately stated: they were dreams. This he would have denied, dreams being considered less than manly, but the facts were there. The inclusion of *someday* in those dreams made them nebulous at best. The woman, a necessary part of said *plans*, was of the same stuff. She was a vague sketch, possessing equally imprecise qualifications. She would be attractive and honest, strong of body and mind, and she would stand beside him, preferably slightly behind! They would prosper, and she would give him fine sons who they would love, protect, and rear to become equally fine men.

Jason had been aware of the passing years, but not of their rabbit like tendency to multiply more rapidly than one could compute. Lulled by the security of *someday*, he had allowed them to accumulate in numbers greater than might be considered prudent. It was the *sudden* advent of his thirty-ninth birthday that brought *someday* into sharp focus. It was uncomfortably clear that *someday* could well become never, unless he altered his *plans* somewhat. It was this decision that focused his attention on the fact that no plan existed.

Even though his bachelor status might seem to indicate such, Jason was not a loner. His circle of friends, of both genders, was wide and diversified. No yearly milestone for any member of his family was allowed to pass without at least a brief correspondence from him. He had watched his sisters marry, rejoiced when these unions brought forth children, and marveled at the speed with which those offspring grew. Always, there was the projected *someday* telling him that this, too, would be his.

Now, with frightening swiftness, he was approaching "old age" as the only male of the family, probably past his prime, and still a childless bachelor. A glorious name, its heritage traceable to the Vikings, would die as he went barren to his grave!

True to form, Jason did not allow himself to be panicked into a hasty marriage. More effort would be allotted to finding a suitable spouse, but it would be business as usual— almost. Serious consideration would be given to what qualifications his life partner would possess, and he began listing them, forthwith:

1: Health.

(It was of the utmost importance that she be strong and in good physical condition.)

1-A: Age.

Closely tied to his prerequisite for a strong, healthy woman, was Jason's desire for children. This demanded that she be young enough to give him several offspring, preferably males, and yet not so young as to be a child herself.)

2: Intelligence.

(Second only to an ailing wife, Jason feared acquiring one who was dull. It would be a definite plus if she were one with whom he could discuss business. Of course, there was little chance of a woman possessing any understanding of such conversations, and her comments, if any, would have no bearing on his decision making process. The need of a sagacious ear, however, was of great importance. Nor had it escaped him that a woman capable of some reasoning might be of value in other areas, too.)

3: Breeding.

(Jason was far from being a snob, but who better than one in his field to know the importance of lineage? She must be of good stock! Not so high on the social ladder as to be above him, but someone who might be accepted as— the mayor's wife. Yes! Yes, the idea appealed to him. Not that he entertained any such aspirations, but it seemed a good role model.)

Ida Ravenhurst, with only a slight discrepancy in the area of breeding, would surpass all applicants for Jason Carlson's recently created position of brood mare, interlocutor, farmhand and silent business partner. A twice-rejected *spinster*, of thirty-two, she was certain she would never marry. Proclaiming no particular concern over this supposition, Ida seemed well on her way to the only goal available to her: a career in business. Unfortunately, what such a future comprised, in those times, did little to brighten Ida's outlook.

Whether or not Ida perceived her pretense, as being a lie, is not known, but that it was, was obvious. Two rejections, regardless of their underlying reasons, had confirmed her fearful childhood notion that she was ugly and unwanted. In her youth she was awkward, and not overly attractive. During those years Ida had spent many tearful hours contemplating a bleak, and barren, future. Having failed twice in her attempts to reach the altar, and watching those with whom she had grown up marry, her equivocation, and eventual blatant deception, was understandable if not completely necessary.

Ida had been a large child, always a full head above those in her age group. Ultimately leveling off a few millimeters short of five feet ten inches, she was rarely seen at social functions requiring the presence of a male companion. There were few boys comfortable with a girl they were forced to look up to. With regard to her facial features, had Ida been born much earlier they might well have been those that launched a thousand ships. At another time, the long, rather angular face with its large eyes, high cheek bones and full expressive lips might have been the toast of Broadway, or that which fashion photographer's clamor for. Regrettably, the late 1800's in Midwestern America represented neither the time or place in which such form or features were regarded as being attractive or desirable.

For all her heartbreak in school, Ida was happier there than any place else. A natural scholar with few interests other than studying, she was at the top of her class from the very beginning. At the end of her sixth year her father, seeing education for women as useless, decided that she was to waste no more time in the pursuit of *worthless* education. Despite Ida's frantic, tearful and prayerful pleas, the matter remained nonnegotiable.

It would have ended there if Ida's stepmother — Ida's birth had ended her mother's life — somewhat of a feminist in her time, had not taken charge. Beneath the threat of cold, lonely nights, Ida's father capitulated and the child was allowed to continue her schooling. However, when Ida's graduation from middle school found both parents of the same mind, her schooling ended.

Because Ida's father viewed her education as an expensive waste, it was decided that in addition to Ida's duties about the house and farm, she should be contributing to the family income. She was hired out, for part-time work, to a local tack and feed store, one in which her father was part owner.

Aside from sweeping, dusting and other menial chores, Ida began to learn the basics of the business. Her mathematical skill became immediately obvious, and she was introduced to the company books. Shortly, thereafter, she was put in charge of that chore.

Although Ida had been raised on a farm, there was much about the feeding of livestock that she did not know. This, also, she began to learn. She was taught the specific needs of the various animals, and how to mix the appropriate feeds. Exhibiting an affinity for leather, she began to develop a "feel" for fine hides, and the items produced from them.

At the age of nineteen, Ida was wooed, and won, by the son of the local Baptist Minister. The wedding date was set, and the arrangements well under way, when it was brought to the minister's attention that Ida's maternal great grandmother had been of Jewish persuasion. Even though the lady had forsaken her faith to marry the man of her choice, the stigma was there. In a world wherein *WASP* benevolence blessed no marriage by one of its chosen to one of less illustrious ancestry, there was no breach of promise, and Ida, in words of a different time, was strung out to dry. The young man was sworn to secrecy, an oath that he honored for fully fifteen

minutes. Shortly, thereafter, Ida went to stay with an aunt in Iowa. There she took a position in a local dry goods store.

A year later, a second romance ended when Ida refused to share the wedding bed two weeks prior to the ceremony. Her subsequent depression took the form of compulsive eating. Seeming to lose all interest in her personal appearance, she allowed herself to become even less attractive. In a short time she was a dumpy, overweight, and extremely bitter spinster.

Even the deep apathy, in which Ida shrouded herself, did not lessen her value as an employee, but her attitude and appearance created a problem with customer relations. Her employer placed her in an office with nothing but books and ledgers as companions. It was a simple solution, one that pleased Miss Ravenhurst. No doubt she would have spent the rest of her days so employed, had not the aunt grown tired of her surly disposition.

When it was learned that an uncle, a livestock broker in Chicago, needed a secretary, her aunt purchased a one-way ticket to that city, and bade Ida God's speed.

The move proved to be a blessing for all. To Uncle Charlie Ida was a Godsend. Incredibly quick to learn, her degree of efficiency seriously taxed Charlie's creativity in keeping her busy. To Ida, the prosperous business, with its bustling office, was the essence of life. In each new task she found an exciting challenge. Preoccupation with her duties gave her cause to skip meals regularly, and her body reacted favorably. With the exception of her bosom, which, to her secret approval, remained ample, her figure was soon comparable to that which she had known at graduation. This, coupled with a greatly improved sense of self worth, alerted Ida to the fact that a number of men, some very attractive, passed through her uncle's office regularly. She began to pay considerably more attention to her appearance.

Jason Carlson was very pleased with himself. He had made a decision based on sound business principles. Because of this, success was assured! Soon, there would be a Mrs. Jason Carlson, a woman of sufficient character and pedigree to be a credit to the name. Not only had he made his decision in a timely manner, it had been accomplished without any noticeable modification of his business routine. So it was with a smile of genuine goodwill that he approached Charlie Ravenhurst's office.

Jason had been associated with Charles Ravenhurst for many years, both professionally, and as a friend. Charlie had shared his plan to hire his niece, a fine young woman with excellent references, but Jason had given the matter little thought. Not surprisingly, he had not been immediately impressed with the large young woman from Iowa, even though, excluding her dark hair and eyes, she reminded him of paintings he had seen of his female ancestors. Though duly noting the ease with which she familiarized herself with the rather complicated operations of a brokerage firm, it was not until she emerged from her cocoon of self-pity that he had begun to view her as anything more than a very efficient office fixture.

In the year, and several months, since their first meeting, although Jason had ceased to address her as Miss Ravenhurst, their relationship remained one of business only. This morning, in keeping with his *plan*, Jason would change all that. Since his last visit to Chicago, he had done a great deal of research, and serious thinking. He had been pleasantly surprised to find that Ida Ravenhurst possessed most of the qualities and talents he felt were essential in a prospective spouse.

Jason had given no thought to courtship. He found no reason for it. There had been nothing in his education to acquaint him with the more subtle ways by which one might win the

affection of a lady. This deficiency would, for many years, be part of the reason he was denied the *storybook* marriage he envisioned. His social involvement, with members of the opposite sex, was confined almost exclusively to the wives of friends and business associates. All such relationships, with the exception of one, had been cordial and platonic. His enlightenment, as to what one might expect of a woman in the intimacy of the bedroom, had come from that exception:

During his sixteenth summer, and while still the male equivalent of a virgin, Jason had accompanied his father on an extended trip to Chicago. While there, it was necessary for the elder Carlson to attend numerous meetings. Although the gatherings would have broadened Jason's education, his father considered knowledge of the brokerage business to be more important at the time. Jason was left in the care of an aging broker, and his third, much younger, wife. What the lad gained from the venerable broker was of great value. What that gentleman's wife gave him was the essence of every boy's fantasy!

Upon meeting him, and being completely captivated by the young giant, the clever lady saw to it that she had him to herself for an hour or two nearly everyday. Finding his youthful savagery, and recuperative powers, pure delight, she could see no reason to lessen her pleasure by teaching the boy any of the gentler, less violent aspects of making love. Jason, finding the experience most rewarding, was blithely unaware of what he could have learned from this woman. Unfortunately, his sexual education ended there, and it was with knowledge and experience only slightly greater than Ida's that he approached his wedding night.

Jason was still smiling as he entered Charlie's outer office.

"Good morning, Ida!"

He looked more closely. Did he see a touch of color on her cheeks? Certainly, he thought, her hair was done in a manner he had not seen before. He was about to draw attention to this, when it occurred to him that it might well have been this way for all time, so he remained silent.

"Good morning, Mister Carlson."

The avenue of first name familiarity had remained one way, and Jason had come with the intent of changing that, but before he could speak Ida continued.

"You were away longer than usual, this time."

Jason responded with a smiling nod, encouraged that she had noticed, but wishing that she had not spoken. Now, he was unable to call her attention to the continued use of mister. It was beginning to appear that perhaps he had over simplified, ever so slightly.

"Actually," he said thoughtfully. "I was home longer. I'm away when I'm in Chicago."

He searched her face for some indication that this was of consequence to her, but nothing appeared.

She nodded absentmindedly. "True; I hadn't thought of it that way." She nodded toward the door. "Uncle Charlie is expecting you, go right in."

It was nearly an hour later when Jason left Charlie Ravehurst's office. His preoccupation, with those matters they had discussed, left him ill prepared for that which had yet to be

accomplished. He was a step or two beyond her desk when he remembered the original mission. Stopping abruptly, he whirled and blurted out: "This will be my last night in town..."

It had seemed an adequate opening, but now he realized that anything, which might follow, would be second cousin to an ultimatum. The lengthening silence was becoming uncomfortable, and Jason knew that Ida, courteous and thoughtful lady that she was, would not allow it to continue much longer. There were alternatives, but none appealed to him, so he stumbled on.

"I- uh, I- I was wondering— would you do me the honor of taking dinner with me this evening"?

He waited; almost wishing he had held his tongue. A peculiar dryness crept about inside his mouth and, because Ida had made no effort to speak, he felt it possible that she had not heard.

"We- we could leave right from here. Nothing fancy, you know— some nice, quiet place— um, up town? I assure you, I would see to it that you were home in a timely manner..."

The absence of response and Ida's apparent lack of concern, were the visible reactions to the maelstrom of thoughts bombarding her mind: What had taken him so long? Granted, she hadn't done much to encourage him, but certainly more than a proper lady should. Surely he had noticed! Today, anticipating his visit, hadn't she had done her hair differently, and applied a brazen amount of rouge? Certainly, he must have seen...

Normally, he would call on her uncle several times during the course of his stay in the city; but today, after a long absence, he was leaving again. Why? And why was he asking her out under those circumstances? If their *date* were less than perfect, there would be no tomorrow to try again, no time for apologies. The *why's* were endless, and the most distressing of the lot was: *Why aren't you answering him?*

She recalled the first time Jason Carlson had entered the office. The sight of him had nearly taken her breath away. The great blue eyes and fair, though deeply tanned, skin...The premature streaks of silver in the glorious, dark blond hair...And— the size of him; he was a man to make her feel almost diminutive. Ida had known that her sights, trained on this Adonis, were set far too high. Nonetheless, she had aimed and waited; waited for this moment. Now, it was slipping away as she sat dumb before him.

"Wh- why I-I-I'd be delighted, Mister Carlson, I..."

"Under the circumstances," Jason interjected, "wouldn't it be easier if you called me, Jason?"

A trace of additional color touched her cheeks. "Oh, I- I couldn't, I..."

Ida knew she was drowning in her own stupidity. Why couldn't she? He'd asked her to dine, and she had accepted.

"W- well, all right, but- but not here in the office." She stammered lamely. Then, in an attempt to reopen the door she had partially closed: "But whenever we see each other— socially..."

She almost gasped. *How could I have said that?* The intent of her statement, so clear when she had formed it, was somehow lost. Had he heard what she had meant to say, or did he

see her as the stupid, silly child she was? She glanced up helplessly, but he seemed oblivious to anything beyond her acceptance, for he was saying:

"Then I'll be looking forward to seeing you this evening. What time may I call for you?"

"Oh— uh, we close the office at six o'clock. It will take me a few minutes to straighten up. Is six-thirty all right?"

Jason nodded. It would give him barely enough time to complete his business, but he would be there, on time, of this he had no doubt.

Whether Jason Carlson, among others of his time, was more or less a male chauvinist is difficult to say. All women were treated as ladies. If, by chance, one should prove herself something less, she was merely avoided whenever possible. Well mannered and kind, Jason found women of little value beyond that of companionship, the ability to cook, wash, keep house, and provide offspring. The act, preceding the latter, was not ignored, but neither was it of primary concern. None of this indicated an inability to love, for he would come to love too deeply; but within the confines of the times, in a strange covert manner, it would add to the problems his marriage would face. Overall, in the broadest sense, and most simply stated, it was a man's world.

What followed Jason and Ida's first evening together, never reached the momentum of a courtship, or became a physical experience in any way. It took them nearly a year to arrive at a level of freedom that afforded a comfortable relationship. Once this was accomplished, they were married.

It is well documented that the sexual standards of the late 1800's were not that far removed from those of the early 1600's, all of the 1900's, or any other period of time. Infidelity, adultery and promiscuity were not rare occurrences involving the dregs of humanity. Prostitution flourished, and none of these activities took place only in the bowels of large cities, or in obscure roadside taverns in rural areas. The poor, middle class, and very wealthy were all guilty, or partakers, if one wishes to choose a particular phrasing. The *changes* have taken place in public awareness, acceptance and/or denial.

In more modern times, mobility has pushed the percentage of partakers slightly higher. However, before automobiles there were buggies and wagons. Both were marvelously adaptable conveyances. When hitched behind a good horse, either could move along a deserted road without need of hand to steer or foot to stop. If so desired, either combination could stand immobile for hours without need of attention. Where no motels existed, haylofts were in abundance, as were quiet paths through the woods. Of the latter, a couple could, by merely stepping a few feet off the beaten way, commune with nature in a most delightful manner. There were, of course, times when these lovers, in their exuberance, failed to seek out a spot free of certain types of vegetation, and their bodies soon hosted incriminating rashes.

Even in the face of such damning evidence, however, rarely was there disparaging mention made of the episode wherein it was incubated, unless the seeds of love bore fruit.

For most, who ventured *illegally* into the garden of Eros, this trespass fostered the hills of home, and trials of life. Whether due to an honest sense of duty, a desire to save face, or the shotgun, and rather inflexible code, of a prospective grandfather, there were probably fewer children born to unwed mothers. Whether this is an improvement over today is open to discussion. It cannot be denied, though, that the double standard, and women's subservient

position did provide *homes* for many children who, otherwise, would have met the fate of the unwanted in earlier and later times.

In referring to female subservience and male domination, the following note is added:

Without becoming involved in a theological dissertation, this writer finds the biblical reference to male superiority ambiguous, at best. The Bible's verification that man, allegedly created in God's likeness, was brought to his knees by a woman seems to drastically limit those areas in which he might claim superiority.

In England, not too long after Ida and Jason were married, Havelock Ellis was thinking, researching and writing concerning human sexuality, but his torch was yet only a spark amidst the darkness. It would be unjust to brand, as totally ignorant, all who married prior to Mr. Ellis, Masters and Johnson, Dr. Ruth or any of the current *enlightened ones*. Nearly so, as it would be to consider the gross over abundance of such information available today, as being mandatory reading for newly weds.

Even in the generations preceding Ida and Jason, there were men who not only took of women, but also gave. There were women who wanted to give themselves in a relationship where fulfillment was reciprocal at all levels. There were parents who, to the best of their ability, instructed their children in all facets of reaching maturity. Regrettably, retrospect allows us to see some of that information as less than factual. This is made more understandable by the fact that some still see our earth as being flat.

At the time of Ida's marriage, her knowledge of its physical aspects was precariously close to that of her experience: nonexistent. Her stepmother, although broad minded for her time, had been content to give Ida unto adulthood in blissful ignorance, allowing her to secretly suffer through her first menstrual cycle certain she was going to die. A chance conversation with a friend who had an older sister, gave her enough information to ease her through an experience, which still retains elements of trauma, even under the most enlightened circumstances.

The inadequacies of her education, and her inability to share what little information she did possess, would become frighteningly apparent when Ida tried to meet the needs of her daughter. In facing the tragedies that would engulf Rowena's life, and fully aware that much of the child's education had come from alternative sources, would bring Ida a devastating sense of guilt.

Jason Carlson entered the connubial partnership with a fairly well rounded knowledge of the female anatomy and psyche. Much to his father's disdain, he had been very active in the upbringing of his three sisters. Four years older than his closet sibling, he had diapered, bathed, fed and assisted the two youngest with toilet training. When he was eleven, his mother shared her meager knowledge of what he could expect as a maturing male and, realizing he would soon be witnessing a comparable change in his sisters, explained that process, also.

Jason grew to be a loving, compassionate confidant to all his sisters. Often, problems that could not be spoken of to anyone else were brought to him. The experience allowed him to reach manhood able and anxious to be considerate of those womanly differences which most men held up to ridicule, and looked on only as an inconvenience—for them. What this could have saved Rowena, the telling of her story only partially reveals. Why it did not happen, remains lost in the tangle of mystery, and nonsense, much of the day's collective psyche wound about gender roles, and the inconceivability of their overlapping.

Jason's mother, a woman devoted to that honorable calling, was a loving caring woman who truly enjoyed her husband's company, and found the physical aspects of marriage pure delight. Thoroughly satisfied with Mr. Carlson's *bedside manner*, she had naturally assumed he would pass his knowledge along to his son. Sadly, this misconception left Jason's education the miserly sum of what he learned from breeding animals, the less than accurate stories that *gentlemen* tell, and the errant wife of an aging livestock broker. This, less than rudimentary, knowledge left him ill prepared for his union with the rather cool, undemonstrative Ida Ravenhurst.

There is a time, for most of us, when making adjustments is relatively simple. It comes, usually, while the grace of youth is still upon us; but a few pass that way again when the wisdom of time has made them more flexible. In the case of Ida and Jason, neither instance was true. They entered marriage well established individuals, and neither exhibited any willingness to relinquish that quality. In what way they may have considered, dreamed, or fantasized about marriage, no one will have cause to know, but that they were completely unprepared to deal with what theirs offered, became painfully obvious.

CHAPTER FOUR

WINTER 1895

Winter arrived in Garwood with predictable bluster. The drought ended in a deluge, turning a world of dust into a sea of mud. With plummeting temperatures, the soggy mass became a frozen wasteland of wagon ruts and livestock tracks. The snow, usually dreaded, and always difficult, came as a blessing by making smoother the travel surfaces.

The few horseless-carriages in town had been relegated to limited service when the dust flew. With the freeze they had disappeared completely. Now their owners traveled by buggy, sleigh or afoot; and mindless of dust, rain or snow, the wind continued, unabated. It buffeted those reincarnated dust age mummies, threatening to upend them as they fought to maintain their footing on the glare of ice or frozen snow.

It had been a difficult year. The first of many some predicted. A once in a lifetime occurrence, others said. Regardless, in Garwood, as in other parts of the world, where climates were less than temperate, winter was a season needed, respected, and endured. Though not beloved, it was essential; the land and its inhabitants could not survive without it. Lore, both ancient and of the day, repeatedly pointed out the importance of the first frost. There were those who *knew* that many of nature's offerings, such as lay dormant during winter, would not reach their full potential unless touched by frost. And precipitation, of any kind, was and is the lifeblood of farm life.

Some of winter's changes, being kinder, and less of life and death, are more endearing when viewed in the benevolence of retrospective nostalgia. After the glare of summer's drought, and the gloom of fall, winter's chilling breath is refreshing. It cleanses the air, and wakes the spirit. What once was dust and grime glistens pure and white. Winter waxes glorious when its icicles catch the morning sun, rivaling the beauty of spring's first green. Winter smiles on a dreary, treeless mound, and it becomes a magic wonderland, where sleds of every description careen about its slopes. Winter sings above a quiet pond, and it becomes a silver stage where skaters, young and old, glide above the fish they couldn't catch last summer. Winter joys abound when friends skim along a frozen creek where, weeks before, they had hiked its rocky banks.

All this winter was, and is— and a great deal more. It is the backbreaking chore of shoveling its residue from paths, roads and doorways... cords of firewood carried... months without fresh vegetables, and wearing too many clothes... days of numb fingers, and nights of getting up to stoke the fire. But most find ways of dealing with its dreary days, and housebound nights; and, soon, in the salvation of spring, the cycle begins anew.

In the relatively short interval separating her arrival in Garwood, and the year-end holidays, Rowena became, if nothing more, comfortable in her new home. Because her recollections of past holidays had seemed so sketchy, Jason and Ida had no reason to anticipate that she would attach any special significance to those forthcoming.

Of the limitless capabilities, possessed by the human mind, much is professed, though little is known; however, our understanding, superficial as it may be, tells us that if in truth there is a human likeness to God, it must be within the mind, particularly, that of a child.

So it was that these first holidays with her new parents would become a page in Rowena's life to bear a special marker. In retrospect, it would be viewed as the time she began to accept the memories of her mother, as being those belonging to a part of her that was no more. Not a sudden revelation, this cognizance simply settled about her, leaving her comprehension of it for another time. To see love as part of what she felt might be overly optimistic or romantic. In being wanted, however, she had found a sense of security and permanence, which allowed her misunderstood recollections, of past festive days, to don the aura of fond memories; those she would cherish for a lifetime. Fewer, now, were the prayers petitioning her mother's return, and fewer still the tears of sorrow. With that lovely woman, from whom her love had come, and in whom her love remained, Rowena shared a special place. For her father, for whom her feelings were beyond understanding, there was no such place. This void, and the questions surrounding it, left her with an, as yet, unfulfilled need.

The changes in their daughter, those Ida and Jason had detected, were attributed to the excitement of the coming holidays, thereby marking the time as a turning point for them, also. Even though Jason's, hoped for, miracle had failed to materialize; Rowena was a part of their lives around which a limited amount of compatibility existed. They were both concerned with her well being, and discussions of what that comprised seemed most natural, even when mutual consideration in other matters was nonexistent.

Both Jason and Ida had felt, despite the apparent *settling in*, it would be best to keep the holiday festivities as simple as possible. So it was decided that they would not attend the annual family Thanksgiving Day get-together. It was not a popular decision, especially among those of the family anxious to meet the newest member; and, in a time when children's feelings were given little, if any, consideration, it represented one of landmark proportions.

Because the gathering was not to have been at the Carlson home, there were thinly veiled hints intimating that Ida's motives were spiteful. It was no secret that she reveled in the preparation of holiday extravaganzas. Hints, innuendoes, and downright unkind remarks were to no avail; Ida and Jason were of one accord, and that, therefore, was that!

Even with the advent of the 20th century, Christmas had not yet been allowed to cast its shadow over the day of thanks. That grand occasion was unto itself. Its imminence was anticipated with nearly the same intensity as that commemorating the virgin birth. Its preparations were, in many ways, more exacting than those of the Yuletide. Young and old alike, those who felt fortunate to be enjoying it again, and those anxious to see many more, held it in high esteem. Neither was it spirited back into the closet for the hastening of Christmas. It was still being fondly discussed when the last bit of meat had been boiled from the turkey's skeletal remains, and warmly remembered long after the soup of that rendering had been consumed.

Christmas, at least in rural America, was not yet the huge commercial enterprise it would someday be. Surprisingly, this lack seemed only to enhance its inherent beauty. Its promise of life, and its message of love were a living part of the season. For many, its beginnings lay in the snow of Christmas past when, in attics, sewing rooms, milk sheds, barns and cellars— any hidden corner where loving hands could work in secret, gifts were being fashioned. The saving of money, meager as it might be, was carried on from year to year in Mason jars, cracker tins, and sugar bowls in anticipation of the next Noel. It was a time of firelight and song, of bells and candles, of gifts and giving, and of love and caring. It was the essence of those things evoked by the birth of a Messiah.

When Rowena May Bruanhauser first came to their attention, Jason and Ida were aware of the difficulties, which might surround the adoption of this child. Though aware of her family history, they knew nothing about her, beyond having been assured that she was *normal*. Because of this lack it seemed wisest to let her go into an orphanage. There, they could visit, get to know her and, perhaps, being her home for short periods. Common sense told them this was the better way to approach the situation. It would make their final decision, if nothing else, an informed one. After all, it was altogether possible that this might not be a child they wished to call their own.

These thoughts, and many more compounded by the urgency of their need, demanded much attention during the short time allotted them to make their decision. But nothing, not even the fact that Rowena was a distant, if not kindred, relative of Ida's, influenced that judgment as much as the tragic plight of the child.

Being thoroughly appraised as to the nature of Rowena's father, Ida and Jason were haunted by what she was being forced to endure. Ida knew, all too well, what the thoughts of this unwanted child might be. Jason, unable to imagine a child not being wanted, had only conjecture to rely on, but even this provisional picture was more than he could bear. Protocol and common sense were placed well out of reach by Rowena's needs, and the decision was made with consideration of little else.

In nearly every transaction, when the custody or care of anything passes from one to another, be it land, chattel or livestock; verbal or written communications are also passed. Generally, these include information, garnered by the former custodian, which would enable the successor to more adequately care for whatever has come under his or her jurisdiction. The sum of such information, forwarded to Jason and Ida, concerning their new daughter, was a birth certificate of questionable authenticity.

A timid child, Rowena was, from the first, in awe of Ida. She had never seen a woman of such stature. Ida's voice, matching her size in power, was intimidating. She could, with equal skill, and depending on her mood, use it as a tool or weapon. Although very much a woman, she, in no way, resembled the delicate, soft spoken, sweetly feminine mother Rowena loved so dearly. It is doubtful, in those first weeks, that Rowena saw anything in either of her new parents beyond security.

"She's afraid of animals, you know!"

They had just come from putting Rowena to bed. Ida had spoken before picking up the darning basket, and settling into her chair. As she reached across the small table to turn up the lamp, her eyes sought Jason's for some response. Seeing none, she spoke again.

"She won't go near the chickens. Waits outside when I'm in the pen feedin' or gatherin'... An' another thing, she won't let me out of her sight; if I get into the shadow, or behind a wall or somethin', by the time I get back she's puddlin' up."

Jason nodded. "I know, Idee, but it isn't just animals, or you bein' out of sight. She's scared, scared, and mixed up. She knows her mother's dead, but she can't seem to understand about her father... Truth is— guess I don't either. I 'spose she's afraid we're going to send her away, run off and leave her, or some other terrible thing. Poor child doesn't rightly know what to expect. We just got to be patient, an- and give her lots of love."

Ida frowned, giving her full attention to weaving the needle back and forth across the sock stretched over the gourd. Suddenly, she stopped and allowed her work to slip into her lap.

"She's been with us near two months, now. We ain't been to church since she came. People are beginnin' to talk. She ought to be startin' Sunday school."

Again, Jason nodded. "Uh-huh, I know, but don't you think we ought to take her to church with us a few times first? Uh, I mean, 'fore takin' her to Sunday school.

"Well," Ida's brow crinkled in thought. "I 'spose so, but best we start this comin' Sunday!"

Although common sense had been bypassed in the process of Rowena's adoption, it was more evident in the months of trial and error that followed. Had there been competent counseling available, however, and had the two seen fit to seek it, many of their mistakes might have been avoided. Even an untrained observer might have recognized the reversal of parental roles as being detrimental to Rowena. Jason's gentle, loving nature, rekindled memories the girl found warm and friendly. Conversely, Ida's size, and rather abrupt, business like approach, much like Rowena's father, frightened the child. Where Ida represented a constant, which Rowena needed, Jason was the love to which she clung. Her favoritism, being quite obvious, served only to expand the breach in the Carlson's relationship.

It could be justly assumed that Ida and Jason were, at least, subliminally aware of the true nature of the situation. Certainly, it is no secret that even in the most selfless act there lies a nucleus of self-service. So they stumbled on; each giving in order to receive; neither aware that love—anything given in this manner denied their beloved that which she needed most: a family.

* * * * *

"Is it a big church, Mama?"

The child twisted to face her, and Ida lost her grip on the plait.

"Rowena!"

The girl shrank back, and Ida cursed her inability to hold her temper. Her voice softened and she smiled at the tiny grimacing face. "Well, yes— yes I guess it is a big church." The question triggered one of her own: "Was the church you went to a big one?"

The girl nodded.

Did your mommy and daddy take you?"

During Rowena's first few weeks any mention of her mother was an invitation to tears, but recently this had not been so, and Ida spoke without hesitation.

The small head moved in a negative manner. "No, just mommy."

"Oh." Ida had suspected as much. "Well, ours is a real nice church, but— young lady, if you don't hold still so's I can finish your hair, you won't get to see it today.

Rowena nodded and relaxed. "Will we sing pretty songs, Mama?"

Whereas, Jason had not pushed for an identifying title, Ida had. What had begun as "Mama Carlson" had been comfortably shortened to Mama, while Jason had been Papa almost from the beginning.

Interestingly, Rowena had always spoken of her own father as Papa, but never her mother as anything but Mommy or Mother.

"Of course we will. Do you know any hym— uh, church songs?"

The question provoked a solemn nod.

"What songs did you sing?"

"Jesus Loves Me."

Ida smiled warmly, touched by the conviction in the child's voice. "Oh, yes, that's a lovely song. I used to sing it in Sunday school."

A hint of perplexity crossed the little face, indicating that the reference had not gone unnoticed. There was a moment of silence, followed by a confused frown, then: "What's Sunday school?"

"Well, let's see..." Ida's brow furrowed. "It's— I guess it's like church for children. You learn about Jesus, sing songs, draw pictures— and there are lots of nice little girls and boys to play with. I'll bet you'd like Sunday school. What do you think?"

Eyes down cast, Rowena gave a moment to quiet thought; then her gaze met Ida's in the mirror. "Yes-mm-hmm, I think so. Am I going to Sunday school today?"

"Oh— I don't think so. We thought it would be nice if you came with us so you could meet our pastor. Maybe in another week, or so— we'll see. Is that all right with you?"

Ida had sensed the shoulders tense with the introduction of Sunday school. Now, they relaxed, but as Rowena nodded her approval another question crossed her face. "What's a pastor?"

Ida was startled. "Oh! Um, when you went to church with your mamma, was there a man that stood up in front and talked?"

"Yes-mm-hmm."

"What did you call him?"

"Brother Willoughby."

"I see. Well, Brother Willoughby was your pastor. A pastor is sort of the leader of the church."

"Brother Willoughby lived in a little house behind the church."

Ida nodded, again. "That would be called the parsonage."

Recollection and understanding were apparent. "Uh-huh, mommy said."

Ida placed a brightly colored bow at the end of the braid. "There, now you can wear your fur cap, and not mess up your hair."

The night had hosted a gentle storm, and morning light fell on six inches of fresh, white powder. From the blue-pocked, pewter sky a few irresponsible flakes still drifted aimlessly down to blend into the lovely scene.

Jason lifted the reins and, with a soft click of his tongue, let them drop gently across the horse's broad rump. "Come on, girl, let's go to church."

With a quiet, nasal whinny the animal expelled great puffs of white vapor and moved eagerly down the drive. With a toss of her head, and a second blustery evacuation of her lungs, she turned at the gate to begin the first cutting of tracks along the road to town.

Even though the new snow muffled the sounds of the high stepping trot, in the crystal clarity of morning, the gay harmony of her harness bells wafted crisp and clear across the fields of endless white. Lifting her head, another fluttering, steamy blow sent bits of frost dancing on the wintry breeze, and her hooves created small flurries of powder as she lengthened her stride.

"Easy, girl," cautioned Jason. "We got plenty of time. Slooow, now, slooow."

He glanced down at Rowena, snuggled warmly between he and Ida. "You like to ride in the sleigh, don't you, little one?"

The child clapped her mittened hands. "Me like Dolly!"

There were times when Rowena tended to trade her more precise speech habits for those, less affected, phrasings of her earlier childhood. For most parents, the times of correctness are those longed for, with Jason and Ida the opposite was true. It had become quite obvious that *baby talk* came in those moments when their daughter was completely at ease. This was their primary reason for accepting the deviation, but not the only one. In both there was still a secret longing for the baby that had been denied them. Their original plan of adoption, in fact, had been to obtain an infant; but Rowena's deplorable situation had made that impossible. Now, with her occasional lapses, there seemed to be an easing of that emptiness, a partial filling of the void.

It had also come to their attention that their lovely mare, Dolly, for reasons that escaped them, was not the source of fear that the other farm animals appeared to be.

Jason nodded, and exchanged knowing glances with Ida. "Well, when we get to church, you can help me tether Dolly. I'll show you how we fasten her feed bag so she can have something to nibble on while we're at the meeting."

Early arrival assured the Carlsons of a hitching rail position near the entrance. Whereas pew positions were assigned, tethering space was not, and latecomers were forced to make do with trees, hobbles or tether weights.

Stepping to the ground, Jason grasped Rowena about the waist and lifted her down. Then, turning to Ida, he offered his hand. Regularly ignored, this gesture had long been abandoned where there were none to observe; but, today, as he knew she would, she accepted with a gracious smile.

"Thank you, dear."

He had hoped, if for nothing more than to set a good example, that he and Ida could curtail their exchange of harsh words in Rowena's presence. And they had— for a time; but it was becoming increasingly easy for them to indulge their anger when she was within hearing range. This, even though they were aware of the adverse effect it had on her.

"You're quite welcome, Madam," he replied with an affected accent. He sighed quietly; and, as their hands remained entwined, a sense of remorse washed over him. He smiled softly. "Quite welcome, dear one."

For an instant, Ida's fingers tightened about his, then the hand went limp and fell away.

"Rowena! Come along, child, let's get you inside where it's warmer."

The soft squeak of snow beneath their feet was intensified, as she and her daughter started up the wooden stairs. Jason looped the reins over the rail, and hurried to Ida's side. Laying a hand on her shoulder, he said: "Would it be all right if I showed Ween how to take care of Dolly? It peers she don't have no fear of her. Might be a good way for them to get better acquainted. 'Sides, um, I sorta—promised."

Hostility flared, but faded quickly, as Ida said, "Why— y- yes, I 'spose so. You go ahead, I'll be talkin' with Pastor and Missus Quintain. But don't you be too long, service'll be startin'!"

As the two headed back toward Dolly, the sound of harness bells announced the arrival of another family. Jason waved as the horse and sleigh drew up near theirs. "Mornin', Hiram, Miz Oakes. Mornin' boys. Beautiful day."

The sleigh, containing Mr. and Mrs. Oakes and their two sons, Jacob, 12, and Aaron, nearing 14, drew to a halt. The boys, ignoring Rowena, muttered a dutiful greeting in Jason's direction, and scuttled off in search of other boys their age.

The elder Oakes moved toward Jason and his charge with eyes aglow, their faces hosting benevolent smiles. "Well, well," purred Mrs. Oakes. "So this is Rowena. Land sakes, Hiram, look at that hair! It be bout as red as it can be. Oh, my, ain't she gonna be a heart breaker?"

What nature had denied Hiram and Beulah Oakes in height, she more than compensated for in bulk. The two, surging across the snow, apparently represented more mass than Rowena was comfortable with. With a whimper, she disappeared behind her father's leg; and, as much as was possible, became one with the folds of his trousers.

Jason chuckled softly, and lifted her carefully into his arms.

"A mite shy, ain't she?" Wheezed Mrs. Oakes, between labored inhalations.

Jason nodded. "Goes a bit beyond that, I'm afraid."

Beulah had stopped, in order to give the child breathing room, but Hiram lurched on, arms outstretched. "Oh, she's just bein' coy. Ole Uncle Hiram knows just what little girls like."

Rowena's scream, Jason's hurried back step, and Beulah's fingers embedded in the flesh of his shoulder, brought Hiram to a sudden stop, his arms hanging limply in utter dejection.

Jason's embarrassment was acute. "Hiram, I'm- I... I don't know what to say. Th- the child's not much used to people. I should have warned you, but I didn't have time. I..."

"Wull," mumbled Hiram, feeling only slightly better. "I wasn't gonna eat her... Child acts like a bad beat horse!"

"HIRAM!" Beulah's voice cut the morning like the crack of a whip, destroying the modicum of self-esteem Hiram had regained.

"Now, now, Missus Oakes, don't be too hard on Hiram. I understand; Ween will, too—someday. She just ain't up to it right now... But, Hiram, you may be right, uh— 'bout the horse I mean. We ain't real certain, but... Well— Id'n me have talked 'bout it some— uh, this ain't the place right now, though."

It was common knowledge that Hiram had wanted their second child to be a girl. His inability to show affection toward a male child, even an infant, had made it difficult for all concerned. When it appeared that Mrs. Oakes would not be having more children, there had been talk of adopting when the boys were old enough to understand. The Oakes and Carlsons had discussed the procedure's merits when the former first considered it as an option.

Jason put his hand on Hiram's shoulder. "You folks thought any more 'bout adopting?"

Hiram shook his head. The question had done nothing to lift his spirits, but knowing that there was understanding— and caring, changed the hue of his feelings.

Beulah moved forward to stand beside her husband, her hand entwined in his. "We sorta figured if the Lord wants us to have a girl— or anymore children, he'll see that it happens."

Hiram brightened considerably. "Yeah!" He chuckled. "It give us a good excuse to try more often."

"HIRAM!"

There was no bite to the whiplash, this time. Only a loving swat delivered to Hiram's hind side by a blushing Beulah.

Jason squirmed nervously. "I was just fixin' to show Ween how to set the feed bag. Guess I'd best get to it, 'fore Ida comes after us."

Beulah beamed. "Well, of course. You men see to the animals; I'll tell Ida you're on your way."

CHAPTER FIVE

SUNDAY SCHOOL and OTHER THINGS

WINTER 1895

Rowena's first Sunday at church was many things, the sum of which fell well short of anything satisfying or fulfilling. Any attempt to understand this would involve considering a number of facts, an equal number of unknowns and, even then, one would be left with questions. In retrospect, the day was seen as educational, even though it was embarrassing for Jason and Ida, and frightening for Rowena. Of the many friends who, "...just wanted a peek at the little tike..." few ever saw more than the back of her head. Fortunately, Pastor Quintain's sermon contained less hellfire than usual. When it became *mandatory* that he wrestle Satan, however, Rowena's sobs, though muffled by the bedlam of battle, punctuated the ensuing *AMEN* choruses. Huddled between her parents, even the congregation's heartfelt response to Ida's request for "Jesus Loves Me" did little to ease the situation. If there is in children a certain God like quality, there is also a goodly portion of another, less desirable, entity. Unquestionably, Rowena was an overly fearful child, and not without reason; but to deny that she used this "disability" to gain her own ends would represent a judgment more of heart than mind. Whether Jason was ever able to admit it is not known, but Ida's growing recognition of the subterfuge was yet another brick in the wall separating she and her husband.

Once Rowena was convinced that Dolly was, indeed, taking them home, her mood changed dramatically. The sniffling sobs, and apprehensive glances in the direction of the church, lessened in relation to the distance Dolly's rhythmic gait was putting between them and that *frightening* place. Releasing her death grip on Jason's arm, she began taking note of the countryside.

Jason, studying his daughter, wondered at the resiliency of children. As he thought of what this tiny creature had faced in her brief time on earth, he was nearly overcome. Tears touched the corners of his eyes, and he smiled across at his wife.

Ida, glancing down at the child, returned the smile, and wondered, too.

Following Rowena's first day at church, and the fiasco it represented, Ida and Jason concentrated their efforts on the upcoming baptism. It took place, with only minor problems, the Sunday following Thanksgiving. That ceremony, and the Sundays preceding it, underscored the wisdom of their decision to celebrate Thanksgiving alone. It also pointed out the need of getting Rowena into Sunday school, so that she might be with other children, begin to develop some independence, and learn some of life, as it existed beyond that with her parents.

Sunday school became a reality after one aborted attempt in which Rowena raced screaming from the class when Jason left. A second try was successful only after he consented to stay with her. On the third Sunday, however, something, possibly peer pressure, prompted Rowena to confide that she felt he should leave. In the weeks following, it became obvious that Sunday school was the best idea Rowena had ever had.

Christmas, with its exciting preparations, the party and play at church, the endless list of friends, and relatives, who would visit, or must be visited, was a twofold blessing for Jason and

Ida. Sharing its wonder with their daughter for the first time would have been all they could have asked for, but being witness to the beginning of her transformation was an added blessing beyond anything they had expected.

As with the deceptively few verses of Genesis, which tell of God's creative acts, recounting the changes in Rowena's life will be treated in a like manner. Even if there had been time for the Carlson's to record them, they were too complicated and varied for them to chronicle. Some changes were simply too subliminal for them to comprehend. And, of course, not all the changes took place in Rowena. A case in point, her baptism:

The First Community Church of Garwood was free of any denominational ties. It had been designated independent when, to form a congregation of considerably less than fifty, it was necessary to draw parishioner from a distance of over twenty miles. In those times, the need of spiritual guidance had overshadowed that of denominational identification. Through the years no particular creed had been adopted, although a rather inexact set of guidelines had been established. Their approach to baptism recognized sprinkling as being sufficient for infants and younger children, with immersion reserved for those twelve years of age, or older. However, there was a great deal of latitude to allow for personal choice. For Ida, sprinkling was not what the Lord considered adequate, regardless of age.

"Idee, you got any idea what might happen if Pastor Quintain immerses that child?"

The conversation, as did many, was taking place in the kitchen. They had plowed this ground many times before, each occasion punctuated by angry, spiteful words, and ending in the dramatic exit of one the parties.

Ida glared at her husband. "Well, for one thing— she'll get a mite wet!"

The statement, which could have constituted a humorous break, was delivered with a bitter sarcasm that left its intent very obvious. Jason fumed silently for a moment, then with quiet restraint: "She might go into convulsions. You know, well as I, how she is."

Ida's initial response was a rush of air, expelled with, as nearly as can be put into print: "Harrumpff! Ain't never seen no one get convulsions from bein' a little wet! An' yes, I do know how she is. It's you that don't! She's got you wrapped 'round her finger. She ain't no more scared of bein' baptized than I am!"

They were seated at the table; it was late, and Rowena was asleep in her bed. This mattered little, however, for after only a few weeks, they had stopped giving any thought to being overheard when anger invaded their conversations.

Jason stood, and moved nervously about the room. "Id'— how can you say that? You've seen her. Look at the way she was in church and- and Sunday school."

Ida continued to glare. Her words, forced between tightly drawn lips, sizzled like drops of water on a hot skillet. "No! You look! Look at how fast she run you off when the other kids began to make fun of her. Look how she loves it, now. She'd go even if she had to walk!"

Jason, feeling himself out gunned, changed his tactics. "But— what earthly difference can it make if Pastor Quintain sprinkles some water on her, instead of half drowning her?"

"HALF DRO..." For a moment, Ida's jaw hung slack. Then: "Jason, that's just plain stupid! An- and you know it!"

Jason did know it, and he didn't like being made to appear so, particularly, by his own words. Given to over dramatizing on occasion to make a point, he had allowed anger to override logic. Now, he was embarrassed, another sensation he did not like, and one which negatively impacted the situation to an even greater extent.

There were words available; words that seemed ideally suited to the occasion. As yet, however, his anger had never escalated to a point that would allow him to use foul or profane language before a woman— any woman. He clamped his teeth together, grinding them audibly as he paced around the table.

Ida sat quietly; content to rest on her laurels, while Jason, too angry to speak, continued pacing.

The ensuing moments of relative quiet disclosed that their daughter was awake.

Jason, already on his way to the stairs, gave Ida a sidelong glance, which embraced neither love nor understanding. His leaving did not signal an argument won or lost; but one cannot a warrior be without an adversary.

Due to years of conditioning, Jason and Ida were never more than a few words from an altercation. This powerful undercurrent surfaced with little provocation; but in most incidents, presence was a source of fuel. Desertion of the battlefield, by either combatant, signaled the end of hostilities. Whether by outright choice, accident or subliminal acknowledgment of their near childishness, their confrontations were brief. Never representing a major fracture, which might be recognized as such, and repaired; they were the little foxes that would someday destroy the whole vine.

For Jason, Rowena was oil upon troubled waters. Her nearness, often merely the thought of her, brought a degree of serenity obtainable from no other source. His mood mellowed even more, as he reentered the kitchen to find a plate of Ida's cookies in the center of the table, and that lady engaged in pouring boiling water into the teapot. She smiled as he crossed the room.

"She all right?"

Jason nodded. "Don't think she ever really woke up. Just crawled out of her covers and got a mite cold. I tucked her in an' she settled right down."

Ida nodded, her smile fading slightly. She had not expected her relationship with Rowena to be as Jason's. Despite this foreknowledge, the difference, far greater than anticipated, had become a source of profound anguish. Though capable of painfully intense love, expressing it openly was something she considered herself incapable of; and so, derived a measure of fulfillment in expressing her love by doing for those she loved. Perhaps the most devastating aspect of this, given that she was partially aware of its cause, was that she felt herself unable to change it.

In being forced to accept as pure fantasy her dreams of knowing her daughter's love, or of being her confidant and mentor, Ida had come to know misery equal to that found in her barren marriage.

As Jason crossed the room, Ida motioned toward the cupboard.

"Fetch the cups and saucers."

He retrieved the requested items, placed them across from each other on the table, and seated himself. Ida finished the setting with two small plates, and their everyday napkins; then she seated herself with the teapot, snug in its cozy, resting at her elbow.

"It'll have to steep a bit longer," she said quietly, and drew her chair closer to the table. "Help yourself to the cookies."

Jason pulled his napkin free of its ring, tucked it into his shirt, and took three cookies.

"These them oatmeal'n raisin?"

Ida nodded. Uh-huh, knew they's your favorite."

For Jason, the easy colloquial speech patterns had been something to be acquired; something absorbed in a process similar to that of osmosis. For Ida, born to them, they were merely a return to the simpler ways of life before Chicago. Through the years, their gentle infusion into the Carlson's parlance had gone unrestricted. More formal speaking habits, however, remained readily available whenever they deemed a situation warranted such usage. Probably not as careful around Rowena as they could have been, they did highlight the difference, and encourage her to seek the path of propriety.

For a couple of minutes, aside from the teakettle bubbling quietly at the back of the great cook stove, Jason's chewing was the only sound. He was about to pick up the third cookie, when he paused and looked into Ida's eyes.

"Lan' sakes, Idee, I don't rightly reckon there be a better cook than you, anywhere!"

The words came from the multitude of thoughts whirling through his mind when he had returned to the kitchen. Now, with the perfection of his wife's handiwork tantalizing his taste buds, he sensed a sudden rush of compassion for this stately, austere, maddeningly stubborn and, sometimes, pathetic woman.

For an instant, he had become the nucleus of a spinning, hollow sphere. Upon the inside of its outer shell was projected his life with Ida. So strategically placed were the segments that, as they whirled before him, they appeared in perfect chronological order. As a point of light passing across a sensitive photographic plate, their impressions were etched in his mind. In an immeasurable increment of time, he was made aware of her feelings; and with the same speed and intensity, they became his own.

Had Jason been asked to recall those thoughts, he would have found it impossible, but they created a need to escape the weight of this burden he and Ida struggled beneath. Unfortunately, though many broad avenues had beckoned, he had neither the strength nor wisdom to follow them. He was left with only words; and those, so pitifully weak, had taken Ida by surprise.

"Wh- why, t'ain't no different'n I always make, Jason."

Had his wife been a businessman, with whom he was dealing, Jason would have sensed that he had unlocked the first door, that with care he could reach this individual at a level wherein their dealings would be amicable and profitable. A simple adjustment of his thought processes would have brought Jason all he had dreamed of, but the moment, lost in the environment it found itself, fled.

Jason shook his head slowly and reached across to pat Ida's hand. "No, Id'— t'atin't no different. Um..." He frowned. "I- I think—I think that's sorta what I meant."

Ida flushed slightly. "Jason..." She feigned reproach. "I don't think that makes any sense, but—" her eyes dropped to avoid meeting his gaze. "I- I kinda like the way it sounds."

For less time than it took the great hall clock to travel from *tick* to *tock*, Ida was a flustered young girl, longing for the attention of this man. Just as quickly, she was in control again. With a flourish she lifted the pot. "Be plenty strong enough, by now."

His plate empty, Jason took another cookie, dipped it in his tea, and hastened it to his mouth. With a sigh of contentment, he worked his jaw on the softened mass. Smiling, Ida watched as she sipped her tea and nibbled at the cookie she held.

Although silence held them captive, there was no tension, and because neither wished to be the first to destroy this quiet harmony, it continued.

It was Ida who finally spoke' and her return to the topic was neither, cautious or quiet. **"Well, my stars!"**

In the act of reaching for his cup, Jason jumped, nearly spilling its contents. "Wh- what's wrong, Id'?"

His wife appeared almost apologetic as she continued, in a considerably softer tone. "Why, we been carryin' on, like a couple of fish mongers, 'bout somethin' that don't make no difference, anyway. Least not for a spell."

There was no need for Jason to speak; his expression spoke eloquently of his confusion.

Ida, having no intention of dealing with a request for further enlightenment, continued quickly:

"We been fussin' 'bout how the child's gonna be baptized, when, by rights, she can't be 'cause she ain't ours yet."

"You mean 'cause the papers ain't come back?"

Ida nodded quietly. " 'Spose somethin' happens, and they don't come back? The child would be baptized with the wrong name."

Finding her argument simplistic and childish, Jason was about to pounce when his "half drowned" flashed before him. He spoke in a quiet, conciliatory tone.

"Id', baptism ain't a legal ceremony. No one'd have to know."

Ida's struggle for control was obvious, but she spoke with quiet reserve. "Well, I'd know, an' and so would the Lord!"

Jason's smile came more easily. "No question 'bout that. But do you reckon he'd really care?"

Ida's smile teased the corners of her mouth, as she conceded: "Noo, no I don't 'spose he would, but it would be embarrassin'; you know how people would talk."

Jason nodded. *Semi-public* discussion was a foregone conclusion, a certainty. Gossip, particularly that involved with idle rumors, and some outright backbiting lies, was the sustaining

blood of small town social life. It was the wise hostess who varied her guest list regularly to assure her gatherings would not lack for conversation fodder.

"Well, Id', you know— people are gonna talk, no matter what."

Ida was about to speak, when Jason held his cup toward her. "You 'spose I could have a little more tea? Sure does taste good!"

As she lifted the pot Ida smiled slyly. "It's gonna get you outta bed in the middle of the night."

When she had obliged, he took a careful sip; and, returning the cup to its saucer, sat quietly toying with its handle. "You know..." He said thoughtfully. "Peers we got kind of a standoff here, an'— like you said, it won't make no difference for awhile. Why don't we just let it simmer a spell? I sure am enjoyin' this— these cookies. I'd hate to spoil it."

Whether the compromise was seen as such by either, matters little. It was another door opened, one whose beck would not be long ignored.

CHAPTER SIX

SPRING 1896

Before they married, Jason had explained to Ida, although the manner of their meeting made it somewhat redundant, that his being away occasionally was mandatory. Having lived alone for several years, Ida had experienced no problem with his being away— until now.

This being Jason's first absence since Rowena's adoption, and with school scheduled to start the following Monday, Ida had felt the trip better postponed. Well aware that her relationship with the child differed greatly from Jason's, she was not comfortable being the one solely responsible for her first day of school. There was good reason to believe that Rowena would not look kindly upon the one who *abandoned* her.

Even though Ida and Jason had explained that kindergarten was much the same as Sunday school, Rowena's anxiety had been building for some time. This being Saturday, the second day of Jason's absence, she had been very fussy and, since going to bed, had wakened several times. Now, as Ida returned to her bed, she was aware of how cold and empty it was, and she reached for the quilt.

Drawing the covers about her shoulders, she allowed her mind to dally with thoughts of the comforting warmth, which usually lay beside her. Even though she secretly longed for the timid displays of affection Jason had exhibited early in their marriage, she continued to reject all such advances as being *his* means to *his* end. Ironically, although some such forays did lead to passion, had she been less inwardly focused, she would have realized that most incidents merely reflected Jason's longing for a loving relationship.

Almost from the beginning, it had been disturbingly clear that Jason's businesslike approach to marriage had occasioned few, if any, of the desired results. It had produced no children, little compatibility, and love appeared nonexistent. Whether the latter represented cause or effect is not truly known. Perhaps, the problem lay in the fact that neither had considered love as a necessary part of the merger. That they shared a common respect was obvious; but the inability of either to understand the other's most basic needs, whether by lack of proficiency or desire, did little to enhance their union.

To Ida, it seemed her life was imploding; the world was crashing in about her, and the alternatives offered little hope. She could run, in the vain hope that all would not be lost, or hang on and pray for a miracle. In truth, no real choice existed, for divorce was unthinkable.

She twisted uncomfortably. Outwardly, her body had warmed; but there was no comforting quilt for the inner chill. In seeking other venues of thought, her mind settled on the morrow, and memories of another Sunday began to dispel the cold:

Morning had come with that rare beauty which sets one day apart from all others. Dawning clear and cold, it began as the sun burst upon a world of diffused grays and whites with a brilliance seen only when the clouds have fled its flaming lances. The morning vapors, offering no resistance to sight or sound, melted away; and, before the day was yet an hour old, weeping icicles had pockmarked the glistening frost. From the crystal white of shingled peaks, fence rails and leafless branches, the warmth of waking morning rose in translucent sliver clouds. With less haste than the fleeting frost, the mercury had begun its lazy climb. By mid-afternoon it would

reach the half-century mark. There, in the sun's retracted arc, it would hover timidly until a wandering breeze and darkening sky led it back toward its nighttime low.

Jason had risen before the dawn. Sunday was a special time for him; affording needed rest; it was also an enjoyed change of schedule. Hilly, the Carlson's only *on-site* hired hand, usually left Saturday following morning chores. The Carlsons had always afforded him the use of a draft horse, and the spring wagon, but they were unaware of where the old man went. Knowing that Hilly had no family, and certain he had no home other than his room in the barn, Jason felt there must be a good friend, possibly a lady, close by.

The weekend work was kept at a minimum, and Jason's early start allowed him to finish with ample time to enjoy a leisurely breakfast with Ida. After breakfast, one with which Ida always took special care, they busied themselves getting ready for church.

Though the Carlsons shared no deep, personal relationship with their Maker, both were committed to the church, its teaching, and the premise that from whence they had come, they would, someday, return.

Following the sermon, which they felt had met their needs; they began their homeward trek. Dolly, being in fine spirits, treated them to an exhilarating drive. They spent the early afternoon reading, and catching up on personal correspondence. By four, they were enjoying a light, though somewhat special, meal. Ida had prepared one of Jason's favorite omelets, and for dessert an Apple Brown Betty with heavy cream. When they had finished, Jason surprised Ida by clearing away the dishes, and washing while she dried.

As the chill subsided, webs of drowsiness wove themselves into and about Ida's mind. In this close proximity to sleep, she attempted to separate the pleasures of that day from what had followed:

Jason's enjoyment of Sunday had always been hers, too. Whether it was the change of routine, the more relaxed atmosphere, or simply the aura of the Sabbath, she was never sure. That they were more in tune had seemed obvious to both.

While putting the kitchen in order, Ida had brewed a fresh pot of coffee, and they had lingered over their cups for a considerable time. In thinking back, it seemed that they had returned to those first weeks of their marriage. A time when each had tried, *really* tried to do what they felt would please the other.

As the evening deepened, Ida had become wary of Jason's bedroom intentions. Seeing herself as quite adept at reading his thoughts, and unable to see their correlation with her own, she was already formulating her avoidance technique. Later, as Jason became more proficient at reading those subtle clues, Ida's need to disguise them would become more imperative. That night, however, she had been certain that the peculiar stirrings within her were a warning of Jason's intent. When he had suggested a few hands of Cribbage, she had declined, claiming fatigue and an approaching headache.

Ida had extinguished the lamp, and been in bed for some time, when Jason entered the room. She heard him close the window, and draw the drape. "Her animosity was instantaneous. Even in winter, her need of fresh air demanded the window open an inch or two. "Be a bit close with that shut." She muttered.

Jason had made no comment, but Ida heard him lift the lamp chimney, and fumble about in the matchbox. There was quick flash; and, as he replaced the chimney, the room filled with a soft glow.

Turning his back to her, he began to undress. "Won't make any difference, for a little while." He said softly.

As Ida watched, a shiver of expectancy trickled down her spine. Tonight, Jason would not be turned away. Shirt, trousers, shoes and socks were gone. What remained was that utterly disgusting piece of male attire: long flannel underwear. Ida tried very hard to see humor in the spectacle, to laugh at the baggy flap; but no sound came forth. Where the dull material stretched taut across the great shoulders, tiny separations appeared, and she could see the cream white skin. The huge biceps, capable of crushing the life from her, could not be laughed at.

Had she been asked, Ida could not have put into words what she wanted of her husband. In the early clumsiness of their marriage, her desire for children had overcome her natural inhibitions. As they became more adept at making love, and more in tune with one another, Ida found the heightened eroticism most pleasurable. Once it became obvious that their union would not produce children, however, she saw their continued efforts, in particular, her enjoyment, as *carnal lust*. With this revelation the dictates of her body, and those born of her narrow point of view became diametrically opposed entities whose battles still threatened to destroy their host.

Recalling her anger and frustration in seeking to put aside her own desires and, somehow, dissuade Jason, Ida shuddered at the utter hopelessness of the situation. Its complexities were well beyond her scope of understanding.

In recalling that night, and her actions, her inherent shame was tinged with anger, and a shudder passed through her body.

With a coarse laugh, she had thrown aside the bedclothes, and leaped to her knees. "All right," she hissed. "You want me? Here..." With a violent motion she drew her gown up about her shoulders and thrust her breasts forward. "Just like one of them whores you men are always runnin' after! Only thing is—I it won't cost you nothin' 'cause I'm your wife!"

There had been other words, even more depraved, but she had lacked the courage to use them. Still, she was certain that Jason would find her vulgar display more than he could stomach. The result was a bitter pill.

Jason had neither moved nor spoken during her outburst, but continued to undress. As the ugly garment fell about his ankles he stepped out of it and turned to face her.

The perverted ferocity of the moment was gone. Jason stood in stunned silence. Nothing in the modesty of their marriage had prepared either of them for this. He took a hesitant step toward the bed. "Id'— you- you're... Oh, myyy..." Coming in a lingering sigh, the word ended as a whispered breath.

Staring up at him, her eyes mirroring the revulsion her actions had triggered, and any remaining bravado departed. Naked, and ashamed, Ida drew the gown down about her body, and wept bitter, remorseful tears.

Jason stood spellbound, his hands clenching and opening slowly at his sides. Then, as they gradually relaxed, his expression became one of pity, and huge tears filled his eyes. "Oh, Id'," he whispered. "I'm so sorry. Forgive me, please— please!" With a flowing movement, he

retrieved his nightshirt from the closet, and left the room. Moments later, Ida had heard the squeak of the spare bed; and, in cold, hateful loneliness, cried herself to sleep.

The tears of that night, Ida had shed for valid, though strangely diverse reasons. Now, those clinging damp upon her cheeks, had found their beginnings in much the same manner, and left her with the same bleak, unchanging outlook. Through her soft sobs, she uttered a quiet prayer: "Dear Lord, help us, please!"

"Mama?"

The call, so soft that Ida had scarcely heard it, had come from the doorway.

"Rowena? What's wrong, dear?"

"Why are you crying, Mama? Do you miss papa?"

Ida dabbed at her eyes with the pillowcase, and supported herself on one elbow. Moonlight, cascading through the hall window, silhouetted the tiny figure framed in the doorway.

"Oh, Rowena, mama's so sorry. Did I wake you up?"

There was a barely noticeable shake of the little head. "No'm, I don't think I could sleep good."

Ida was well aware of her daughter's wakefulness, and its cause. "Well, do you suppose you could sleep better in here with me?"

There was no answer beyond the flurry of bare feet across the floor, and the undulation of the bed as a little body burrowed beneath the covers to cuddle warmly next to hers.

Ida fluffed the pillow, and rearranged the blankets. "There, I'll bet we both sleep good, now. What do you think?"

"Yes-mm-hmm— Mama?"

"Yes, dear."

"Why were you crying?"

Of the number of valid reasons available, Ida felt there was only one to offer her daughter. "I guess I must have been lonesome. I do miss your papa."

Ida felt, rather than saw, the nod of affirmation. "Mm-hmm, me too."

Ida reached across to pat the small head, and found a damp cheek. "Here, now, what's this? You been cryin', too?"

Again the nod. "Yes-mm-hmm."

"Was it because you miss papa?"

For several seconds the diminutive voice fell still, then, "I don't know. I heard you crying and..."

A soft sigh, twice punctuated by overlapping sobs, ended her statement.

Ida leaned across, and brushed the soft cheek with her lips. "There, there, dear; it's all right."

Rowena shuddered as she spoke. "But me don't like to cry."

Ida, fully ready to correct the phrasing, was treated to a sudden, disturbing education concerning one's priorities. Quickly, she redirected her thoughts. "Well— I don't think anyone really likes to cry, but there are different kinds of crying. When we're hurt, like when someone falls and skins a knee, then we cry cause we can't help it. But when it stops hurting we stop crying; and that's how it should be. Some folks, though, make believe cry, so that other folks will feel sorry for them. That's wrong. Then there are the ones who cry because they feel sorry for themselves... Um, just like I was doing when you came in. I miss your papa, and I was feeling sorry for me. The nicest tears, though, are the ones you cry for someone else, like you did for me. They are the nicest presents anyone has to give, 'cause they say— they say, I love you..."

Ida paused, truly surprised by her completely natural use of the phrase; and, caught up in the projection of that thought, found herself wondering if she had ever used it before.

"Um, can you understand that, dear?"

In the continued quiet, she leaned closer to the child beside her. Rowena," she whispered. Then, catching the gentle rhythmic sound of her daughter's peaceful sleep, she breathed quietly: "No I don't reckon you can, but someday, my precious one, the good Lord willin', you will understand— a heap more'n I do!"

Ida closed her eyes, reaching out to the lovely, quiet void floating just beyond. Then, as she watched from afar, her own lips whispered softly, "Thank you, Lord, for us knowin' that you understand, even if we don't."

CHAPTER SEVEN

1896

For most, in town of Garwood and the surrounding area, the first Monday in September dawned bright and clear. But just outside of town, in the province of Rowena Carlson, there was no light. She had watched the night slip away, but the rising sun brought no change to her life. Since the day her mother had taken her to register for class, a dark cloud had descended upon her.

"Rowena."

The sound, filtering up from the kitchen, was neither harsh nor loud, but it sent a shiver through the child, and she pulled the covers over her head. "No," she whimpered. "No, I don't wanna go!" The words were fragmented by her sobs.

"Rowena!"

Ida stepped to the foot of the stairs, and called a third time. The tone, soft and gentle, gave no indication of impatience; even though Ida knew her first call had been heard. Normally, Rowena was the second out of bed. She would follow Ida to the kitchen; and, while seeing to her chores, babble happily about the complexities of pre-school life. For some time Ida had known, and feared, that this morning it would not be so.

School had been a subject over which Jason and Ida had clashed on several occasions. Finding the two diametrically opposed was not surprising, but their manner of opposition was. With church and Sunday school, where Ida had seen much of Rowena's fear as an affectation, Jason hadn't. In the child's reaction to public school, however, Ida sensed a difference. Rowena had begun to withdraw, and Ida feared she would return to the cocoon from which she had just recently begun to emerge. When it was learned that Jason would be away during the first days of school, Ida's own depression deepened significantly. They had argued, but Jason, ignoring or forgetting Rowena's initial reaction to church and Sunday school, had maintained she would be as happy in regular classes as she was in the latter.

Ida had made her final plea on the night prior to Jason's departure:

"Jason, I think the child is truly frightened, and you know..." Her hesitation reflected a reluctance to openly address something she could hardly admit to herself. "You know she's—she's more comfortable with you."

Having long been aware of this, but oblivious to Ida's perception of it, Jason was taken aback. That the acknowledgment may have represented an olive branch went unnoticed, and the business trip took precedence.

A certain degree of male chauvinism had figured in Jason's decision; after all, he had attended school, and seen his sisters adjust to the same regimen with no ill effects. Such a *trivial* matter, particularly one better left as *woman's work*, should not interfere with long established business practices.

"Nonsense, Id', the child turns to you for everything. She just comes to me 'cause she knows I'm an easy mark. You won't have no trouble."

For the first time, in a long time, Ida sensed her cause to be futile, but giving up was beyond her. Marshaling her thoughts, she was about to speak when Jason continued:

"No!" He said confidently. "I've explained it to Ween, and she understands. She knows it's only for a little while, and that one of us'll be there to bring her home. All kids are scared the first day or two, but young'ns adjust. Ween will, too!"

With the final words delivered as an ultimatum, it is doubtful that either realized that there had been concessions made, or that they had gained a greater level of understanding. Certainly, it was not immediately evident.

Ida lifted the lid of the double boiler, and gave the pot's contents a violent stirring. The cornmeal mush, to be served as such this morning, would be placed in loaf pans, and stored in the cooler for slicing and frying another morning.

Before America became electrified, and for some time after, coolers were a fairly efficient means of storing perishables where a springhouse was not handy or applicable. The Carlsons, as did many in rural areas, had both. Generally, a cooler consisted of an airshaft, preferably on a kitchen or pantry wall, which extended from cellar to attic. Appearing as an overly tall cupboard, it contained shelves constructed of lattice or wire mesh, which allowed the cooler air from below to be drawn upward about stored food.

"Rowena!"

Ida moved back to the foot of the stairs and waited. There was no response, so she started up. Though not expecting an answer, she called once more from the upstairs landing; then continued on to Rowena's room. At the doorway, she could see her daughter sitting on the edge of the bed. In the red-rimmed eyes, moist cheeks and tragic expression, Ida saw much the same thing Jason had seen at the station that first night; and, in that moment, knew the same pain. The utter dejection, of this forlorn creature, was a burden nearly too great to bear. Certain the child felt she was about to relive the horror of being cast aside, the moment offered Ida heartache beyond any she had known. At the same time, there was fulfillment to a level her dreams had left unexplored.

She would clasp the tiny body close to her bosom, and her words of comfort would come from the years of heartache and longing she had known. She would feel the damp cheek close to hers, taste the tears as she kissed them away, and the lullaby she sang would tell of her deep love.

Fantasy, at any level, can be only that when one lacks the conviction to make it reality. The melody was in Ida's throat as Rowena rushed from the bed to bury herself in the folds of her skirt. There was an instant when her hands were beneath the child's arms; then one slipped around between the shoulders, rubbing gently, and drawing her closer, while the other brushed the forehead free of hair. The words, though quiet and reassuring, were not those of her heart, and Ida cursed that which denied her expression of her true feelings.

Hilly had hitched Dolly, and led her around to the front walk. Courteously offering his callused hand, as Ida climbed onto the seat, he ventured, "You sure you don't want me to fetch the little one, Missus? 'Twon't be no trouble. I- I think she kinda takes to me— a wee bit."

Ida nodded, and smiled down at the gentle, wizened little man. "Yes, Hilly, I'm sure she does — which is more'n she does for most — but no thank you. For a few days it'll be better if I go after her. Won't be long, though; then it will be up to you, most of the time, um— that is until she starts walkin'."

It could have been a cough, but to Ida, adept at making just such sounds, it was much more. She glanced down at the squat figure. "Something bothering you, Hilly?"

He shuffled awkwardly. "Beggin' your pardon, Ma'm, but- uh, you gonna let that little tike walk to school—alone."

Ida had never given much thought to the relationship she shared with Timothy Granger Hillsbern. He had greeted them when she and Jason returned from their honeymoon; and, beginning with the first meal she had prepared, been at their table, three times a day ever since. With the exception of those days he was off, Hilly was a part of Ida's daily life. Suddenly, she found herself in a situation wherein her actions could dramatically alter what had become a comfortable status quo. In the need to speak to one in her employ, the moment could have evoked harsh words, but to a dear friend expressing a mutual concern, they were replaced by endearing thoughts, a kind smile, and the need to explain.

It is not known if Ida ever sensed the paradox in her ability to restrain anger when dealing with acquaintances, and her inability to do so with loved ones.

"I know it sounds cold hearted," she said, "but I think it's more because of the circumstances. We never had the chance to watch her grow up. To us she's still a baby, but she isn't. She's a strong, intelligent five year old girl."

Although he was beyond making further comment, Hilly's expression showed he wasn't convinced.

Ida considered letting the subject drop, but because of their peculiar kinship she felt it necessary to elaborate.

"You mustn't worry, Hilly. I won't turn her loose until I know she can take care of herself. Land sakes; just look at the Weyfords. They're near a mile farther out than we are, and the Murphys are past them. All their kids come by every mornin'. This mornin', I saw little Jimmy Murphy — he's just Rowena's age — trottin' right along with the rest."

Her pause to draw a breath was really more to observe the effect of her words. There was less apprehension, but total conviction was still lacking.

"Maybe, 'till she's in first grade we'll pick her up. But, Hilly, you did it, I did it and Jason did it. Bet your big brother had to carry a rifle when you was goin' to school."

A slow, toothless grin trickled in and about the thicket of wrinkles etched in the leathery face. He drew himself erect, and cackled slyly. "Yes'm, you be right— only 'twas me toted the rifle; me bein' the oldest. We walked near four miles to the settlement."

Ida was relieved. "Well, there now— see? 'There ain't no need to worry 'bout Rowena, she'll be with a whole passel of young'ns— goin' and... Well, I'd best be on my way, we can't have her comin' out of school, and me not there."

Hilly's smile widened. "No'm, we sure can't!" He slapped Dolly's rump. "Git along, girl!"

There were no other rigs in front of the schoolhouse when Ida arrived, nor had she expected any. There were, however, several horses, and a mule, hobbled in an adjacent field, for a number of the children rode farm animals to and from school.

Ida could think of only one other child who had ever been accompanied, let alone, delivered in a buggy. That exception had been the Kramer's boy, Anthony. The butler had driven him to and from everyday until the boy's father shipped him off to some fancy boarding school.

Wonder what ever happened to that boy. Ida mused. Haven't seen hide nor hair of him since he left. Poor child, bein' sent off that way, without no one to love him, just so's his folks could traipse 'round the world on a big boat.

Ida's thoughts, and the noontime stillness, were shattered by the exuberant shouts of the exiting children. As they poured from the building, their feet assaulted the wooden porch with such ferocity that even the docile Dolly flinched. The little ones first, out across the porch, and down the stairs. Most of the faces were familiar; and leading the pack was Jimmy Murphy. Moving less enthusiastically came the older children, some of whom she was hard put to identify. *They grow so fast!*

As the older children began grouping by gender and grade level to eat their lunches, the kindergartners trooped for the gate and freedom. Although confident Rowena could not have emerged unnoticed, Ida raised a hand to shield her eyes, and searched anew for the flaming hair. In the residue of what morning had offered, and with the sense of being under intense scrutiny, she felt her actions were mandatory. Failing to do so, she thought, would have marked her as being indifferent.

The morning had been distressing. Carrying the red eyed, sobbing child into the classroom was heart wrenching! Her inability to calm Rowena had been embarrassing; but to leave her, begging and screaming for Ida to save her, was an experience Ida prayed she would not be forced to relive.

Mrs. Iverson had assured her that everything would be all right, and that they would get in touch if Rowena had any real difficulty settling in. This did little to relieve Ida's anxiety, as Rowena's screams followed her to the buggy. Now, with the little ones gone, Ida was faced with imaginings that were frightening, even by her standards.

It was obvious that Rowena, having found the happiness in school that her home lacked, was refusing to leave. Equally as disturbing, and ridiculous, was the delusional conjecture that the adoption authorities had been summoned because Rowena's condition was attributed to maladjustment, or worse— mistreatment. To Ida, the latter seemed most likely, and her thoughts were involved with words of defense, when the door burst open and a lone figure rushed out. Dashing across the yard, copper hair glowing in the sun, she screamed: "Mama, MAMA, look!" A small hand, held high, was waving a sheet of paper. "I did a picture of Dolly!"

Much has been written about the thought processes of the very young, most of it by highly educated adults. Unfortunately, the accuracy of any Ph.D.'s recollection of his or her childhood thoughts must be viewed with some degree of skepticism. And, again unfortunately, most first and second graders lack the ability to accurately document their actions, much less, their thoughts. In light of this, we leave unexplored those imponderable impulses that controlled the contradictory action and reactions of Rowena May Carlson during the time she spent in school, particularly, those first few weeks.

The enthusiasm with which Rowena recounted her first day was a source of relief for Ida. Even as bedtime brought shadows of apprehension, her peace of mind had not been seriously threatened. However, when the following morning brought a repeat of the previous day, she

began to worry about the long-range prospects. Fear, fueled by her lack of understanding, supplied images of a sobbing teenager being transported to school and escorted to class. These visions, and those of the reproach in Rowena's eyes, brought Ida to tears, and very nearly panic.

As before, Rowena came bounding from class. Her bubbling descriptions of the day's activities, and the pride with which another picture was exhibited, offered Ida a second reprieve, albeit somewhat guarded. That afternoon, Rowena played as she normally did, and performed her chores with the usual amount of complaining; she even ate a reasonably good supper. It was not until the dishes were finished, and bedtime had become an inescapable reality, that Ida detected a change in her mood. It was as though a cloud had descended about her, and Ida's dread of the following morning began to intensify.

Rowena woke clear-eyed, and apparently resigned to her fate. It took only one stern admonition to get her from the buggy, and into school, and Ida felt that, perhaps, they had turned a corner.

Actually, Rowena's attitude of that Wednesday set the tone for many years to come. For, although she would soon outgrow the need to be *carried* to and from, her unexplained dread of school would never be completely conquered.

The select few, who might have recognized and understood such a phobia, were not prone to share their knowledge with the masses of Ida's generation, or several following it. Even lacking such *professional* expertise, it was obvious, to those close to her, that fear of the *unknown* played a dominant role in Rowena Carlson's life. Not limited to school, it haunted her childhood, and continued as a formidable foe well into her adult life.

Unable to ignore the parallels in her own life, Ida was certain that Rowena's fears, though unfounded, were very real. She began to question her role as a mother—and a wife. The far reaching ramifications of this, being too vast for her to deal with, left her to struggle through each day, praying that tomorrow would be better.

Certain that Rowena would see sympathy as a weakening of her resolve, Ida remained as aloof as possible. The cost, in terms of immediate heartache, and future self-reproach, was enormous. Although ignorance is our birthright, and is, at times, avoidable, it is too often seen as stupidity. It was in this manner that Ida would recall with regret those early days of Rowena's schooling.

With Jason's return scheduled for late Thursday night, Friday morning had all the elements of a disaster. By Jason's own admission, and by what she had experienced this week, Ida knew Rowena would not have gone to school if Jason had been there. Now, with no more than a questionable beachhead established, he would join the fray with a totally different battle plan.

For Rowena, Thursday evening was the rolling away of the stone; the chaining of Satan; Thanksgiving, Christmas, and all else good and desirable in a child's world. Her joy was boundless. Her beloved papa was coming home. Ida, in lieu of her daughter's jubilation, found regular bedtime of rather low priority. Allowing the child to stay up for Jason's homecoming seemed a most natural abeyance in her regular routine.

Jason arrived shortly before nine o'clock, but it was nearing eleven before enough of Rowena's energy had been expended to make sleep possible.

Following the extended absence of a loved one, one would expect his or her return to be looked on as something special. For the offspring there was the simple joy of having papa home, of hearing his voice, and being whisked into his arms. Rowena felt she had an added reason for rejoicing, for it was quite probable that her papa would not force her to attend school. All concerned knew a sense of fulfillment in the re-establishment of the family, which for a time had been less than whole. A loving father and husband, particularly one for whom fidelity was an unbreakable code, would find numerous joys to contemplate. Not the least of these was the anticipation of being eagerly greeted by his child, and warmly embraced by a loving wife. More specifically, an embrace in which the words, *I love you*, might be spoken and echoed. For a wife tired of being the only parent, there would be relief. She would find a sense of security in the presence of her protector, and the comforting joy of mutual love shared in a gentle kiss and fond embrace. In the freedom of the unrestrained reaffirmation of their love, most husbands and wives would sense the subtle promise of a more intimate expression of that love— later.

Such norms were not a part of the life Ida and Jason shared. Midnight found them glaring at one another across the kitchen table. Following her brief description of Rowena's first days of school, Ida had suggested that Jason be absent each morning, for however long it might take the child to realize that he was not going to be her savior. Not surprisingly, Jason's reaction was one of strong disapproval.

Their discussion — an overly kind description of what transpired — had been liberally interspersed with extended periods of cold silence. Regularly, both parties had threatened to leave the bargaining table. Finally, Jason stood, his face flushed and contoured with anger.

"Idee, this is ridiculous! First you were after me to stay because you thought the child had a real fear of school! Now— now that you've proved your point, you want me to leave again. I just don..."

"Not **leave**, Jason, just not be here in the mornings, until she's left for school. You can pick her up at noon— she'll love that! Please!"

"Nonsense! The child just needs a little love and understanding. She'll be all ri..."

"NO! She has that now! What she'll get from you will be sympathy, and *that* she doesn't need— least ways, not right now. There's something about school that really frightens her— but she's makin' do."

Their conversation had deteriorated to an exchange of little more than snarled phrases.

Jason snorted. "And she'll *'make do'* a lot better if I'm there to help her."

Ida shook her head vehemently. "No, Jason! You haven't seen how she is. You couldn't stand up to it, you won't be able to send her off lookin' that way..."

Ida's frustration was complete. Her remark, undermining Jason's ego, had infuriated him, and she knew the *discussion* was over.

Jason leaped to his feet. "Well," he hissed. "We'll see about that! We'll talk about this in the morning!"

He whirled, and headed for the door.

"No- no we won't," Ida cried. "You'll do just what you want to do! No matter what— no matter what!"

There was a tremor in her voice, and the final words came as exasperated acceptance of something she had no control of. Then she banged the table with her fist. "Oh, all right! All right! Go on, run off to bed alone, like you always do— Lord knows I- I'm used to it!"

Jason paused in the doorway. "Whether we're there together or not, don't make much difference, does it, Id'?"

For a moment, Ida was silent; then she stood rigidly erect. "Just what is that supposed to mean?"

As he stepped through the doorway his words drifted back to her: "Id', if you don't know; if you truly don't know— it don't make no difference!"

The knife went deep. She did know; and the pain was too much to bear. "Oh, Jason," her voice spoke eloquently of her agony, "you shouldn't've said that!"

The sound of his step on the stairs floated back to her, and she slumped onto a chair, burying her face in her hands. "I wish— I wish you wouldn't leave me this way. I- I wish we..." In the absence of a definable objective her quiet sobs placed a period where none should have been.

Occasionally, as one nurses the wounds, and senses the pain of angry words, either spoken or heard, in a flash of dispassionate retrospect they see in themselves that which they detest in others. In such times Ida and Jason were often brought face to face with their respective guilt, but rarely in mutual assessment. Seated dejectedly at the kitchen table, Ida knew. On the darkened stairs in the heat of his anger, Jason knew; but the few feet separating them was a wildly turbulent, uncharted sea; and, unable to face such a voyage alone, they had yet to realize that together, they could.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEPTEMBER 1896 - OCTOBER 1898

Jason had been in bed when Ida finally retired. They had not spoken, but when she woke at dawn his side of the bed was cold. Lighting the lamp, she glanced at the chair where he always left his clothes; it was empty. Snatching up the lamp, she hurried to Rowena's room. Finding the child still safely in bed, emotions of anger, relief and guilt battled for supremacy. As she recalled their bitter words of the previous night, the latter was victorious. Again, Ida offered the simple prayer. "Lord, please, help us!"

Aside from Sunday, the days varied little for Ida. Rising at dawn or before, she went immediately to the kitchen and, summer or winter, brought new life to the smoldering embers in the great cook stove. After making sure that the boiler was full she would start a pot of coffee. In cooler months, she fueled and lit, at least, one of the two other space heaters, the parlor fireplace or the great-room wood stove. After dressing, she collected and emptied the chamber pots; and, while at the outhouse, took care of whatever nature required of her. After cleaning the pots, she returned them to their respective places (using one after that was strictly prohibited, unless illness made it necessary) and took a moment or two to wash her hands and face. Finally, she would see to her hair by brushing and, usually, braiding it.

A hurried trip to the hen house, quite often, made necessary a second washing of the hands, but work roughened skin was not something farm women worried about. With the clutch safely stored in the cooler, and the coffeepot delivering its delightful morning summons, Ida turned her attention to the preparation of breakfast.

One of the variables in Ida's schedule came with harvest. During those weeks, she prepared two huge meals a day. Jason kept on-site hands at the stock ranch, but they had their own cookhouse and cook, and were not involved with harvest. Viewing harvest implements and teams as an unnecessary expense, Jason had long contracted with a man who, with his machinery, teams and crew, traveled about the country harvesting nature's yield. He and his men, Ida fed three times a day, but supper was generally something light, usually leftovers from the noonday meal. The men that were hired locally rarely received more than the midday meal.

The amount of food prepared and consumed during this season staggers the imagination. In looking back, even those ladies, in whose lives this ritual was an integral part, find it hard to believe that so much was accomplished with so little.

A housekeeper with no equal, Ida excelled in the *mechanics* of marriage. Long before she knew of Rowena's existence, she had made up her mind that any daughter of hers would be thoroughly schooled in the care of home and husband.

In all things material Ida was a consummate teacher. Her deficiency in other areas, however, created huge gaps in Rowena's education. Later, in viewing what that lacking had meant to her mother's marriage, Rowena resolved that unless hers could be whole, she would not marry. In time, the prophetic accuracy of her determination would leave her with an inexorable sense of guilt.

Rowena's education had begun on her first day in the Carlson home with instructions in the art of bed making, and the proper care of her clothes. She accompanied Ida on her sanitation rounds, and was promised that this duty would soon be hers. Shortly after her arrival, and with the aid of a stool, she was introduced to the task of washing dishes. Because breakfast was served on heavy earthen wear, which all but defied breakage, it seemed the safest starting point for a duty that was to become, exclusively, hers.

The pump at the Carlson's kitchen sink was a true luxury. However, any water required to be hot was so transformed by means of the great cook stove's reservoir or the teakettle. For larger amounts there was a huge cauldron, which, in warmer months, was kept beneath a tree by the back porch. Adjacent to that voluminous *kettle* stood a sturdy table supporting several tubs, and a washboard capable of equally vicious treatment of clothing and knuckles. Combined with scalding hot water, unbelievably strong soap, and several hours of backbreaking labor, these items could render clean, the mountains of dirty laundry produced by those involved with farm life.

Although wash day always fell on Monday, weather conditions were of constant concern. Once winter's chill was such as to make it mandatory, the laundry was done in the kitchen or cellar. Fortunately, even though cleanliness was quoted as being next to that of Godliness, personal hygiene had not yet been elevated to its present day level. It takes little imagination to visualize the effort involved with indoor drying of laundry for a family of three. With that being a minimal number for the times, consider if all members required a complete change of clothing daily. Add to this the present day habit of daily bathing; contemplate the time and effort involved with just heating water, and one can picture life as a frenzied wash-a-thon.

In the great boiler Ida also rendered lard, and made soap. These tasks, both being far more complicated than their mention reveals, were accomplished as part of her routine, as was feeding the chickens, and gathering eggs. Although Ida separated cream and churned butter, she did not milk or feed livestock, those were some of Hilly's tasks. Planting, tending and harvesting the vegetable garden were chores Ida shared with Hilly, but preserving what was produced, was her responsibility. Nearly all fresh produce that was not consumed immediately was canned, dried or preserved in some way. Although Ida did have the authority to enlist Hilly's aid at any time, that occasion rarely presented itself.

A sound from above brought Ida's attention to her daughter, bright eyed and smiling, bounding down the stairs.

"The pots weren't dirty, Mama."

"I don't wonder," Ida muttered. "Considerin' the hour we went to bed."

She surveyed her daughter's attire, and smiled. "Well, look at you, all dressed!"

The child smiled shyly. "I didn't do my shoes very good." She waved the offending items. "I tried to do my stockings, but my *garders* are lost."

"Your garters are lost?" Ida feigned a troubled frown. "Now, where do you suppose they could have gone?"

She moved toward her daughter. "Why don't you sit right here," she said, pulling a chair away from the table, "and we'll see if we can find them."

As she rolled the stocking up the child's leg, deft fingers searched beneath the skirt for the missing garter.

"Ah-ha! I found one. It was hiding under your bloomers. Do you think you can snap it while I look for the other one?"

As Rowena struggled with the errant fastener, Ida retrieved its mate and snapped it into place.

"There, mine's all done. How about yours?"

The small face twisted in fierce concentration, then burst into a broad grin. "I did it. I did it!"

On her trip to the hen house, Ida had ascertained that Jason was not on the premises. Convinced that Rowena's gaiety was the result of knowing her father would not force her to go to school, Ida was beset by discomfiting, and irrational, thoughts. In the pain of seeing herself on the outside, it was relatively simple for her to cast Rowena as Jason's conspirator in some diabolical plan to humiliate and hurt her.

Well, Miss Smarty Pants, you're in for a rude awakening. Your dear papa isn't going to save you.

Retribution was simple: Let the child go on thinking her father will rescue her. *Go ahead; let her set the table for the usual four, until the truth finally dawns on her.* How fitting, how poignant, how sad— how despicable!

"Here, Rowena," Ida placed a setting for three on the drain board. "Papa had to leave early this morning, so don't set a place for him."

The child's tragic expression, a mere token of what it would have been, treated Ida to a rather disgusting picture of herself. She knelt and brushed away a tear. "Here, now," she said softly. "Papa promised he'd pick you up after school."

Her words brought a marked change, but threatening tears deepened Ida's sense of shame. She sought to further console the child: "Do you know what today is?"

The gaiety of her inflection fell on deaf ears, and Rowena was capable of only a soulful, negative shake.

"It's Friday, and—" Rowena's lack of interest, in the day of the week, was clearly evident, and Ida hastened to add: "Friday is the last day of the school week, and that means there's no more school for two whole days."

What the promise of seeing her papa at the close of school had started, the heralding of freedom finished. "Oh, Mama— true?"

"Bible true, little one."

Bacon, sizzling in the huge cast iron skillet, drew Ida away. "Bacon's almost done, run call Hilly, would you please?"

No second urging was necessary; and, as Rowena disappeared from the back porch, Ida wished mightily that her daughter might come to view each day as Friday.

It took a full week of Jason's early departures before Ida felt Rowena established enough to have him in attendance when she left for school. The *discussions*, required for this to become a mutual agreement, were heated and numerous, but their worth went well beyond what their tenor might have indicated. In seeking the good of their daughter, both were made aware that the other had valid concerns, and was capable of compromise, even considerate, selfless thoughts and actions. This cognizance offered a base, albeit fragile, on which to lay a foundation, if there had been incentive to do so.

* * 1899 * *

By the time Rowena had entered second grade, her high/low approach to school had become more of a day-to-day despondency, which by Thursday evening had usually run its course. She was walking to and from with reasonable regularity, and both she and her parents had come to accept, at different levels, the circumstances surrounding school.

October's page lacked but three X's, and November, with its day of thanks and feasting, loomed large and close. Early Tuesday morning, Ida had presented Jason with a list of those staple items she felt him capable of purchasing with no more than a minimal threat to the integrity of her budget. His own list had been ready for several days, but it was still nearly ten thirty before he finished hitching one of the workhorses to the wagon, and prepared to leave.

"If I'd known you was goin' t'be this late," Ida fumed, "I'd've fixed you a lunch."

"No need." Jason said, settling onto the seat. "I'd planned on havin' a bite in town."

"Save a heap of money if you didn't. Probably cost you twenty-five— thirty cents."

"More like fifteen, but no matter, tain't no great expense, an' it'll give me a chance to catch up on what been goin' on."

"Harumph!" Ida's generic verbalization covered everything from *kiss my hind side*, to *you ain't foolin' me— even a little bit*. Delivered with a particular emphasis, its meaning that morning probably covered a little of both.

The source of Ida's irritation lay, not in Jason's actions, but in knowing the reason for them; and being aware that she would have done the same, only deepened her anger. She knew that his late departure and "bite in town" were part of a plan that would find him *dropping by* school at the time Rowena was leaving. From experience, she had been certain that he would take his noonday meal in town and, knowing it was impossible for him to be wasteful, had considered preparing a lunch to give him at the last moment.

Ida's decision against such a plan was the result of a peculiar rationale, which saw the act as revealing her foreknowledge of his plans, and thus exposing the devious nature of her own. So, with no good-bye kiss, no words of endearment, they parted; each feeling resentment, hurt and guilt, but with the vindication of knowing that the other was guilty of the first affront.

Shortly before four in the afternoon, a sound from the road brought Ida to the front window. At the end of the drive she saw their wagon. With Jason and Rowena on the seat, the box was covered with Murphy and Weyford children. With a tumultuous clamor, they began to disembark. For a few moments, the wagon disappeared in a cloud of flaying arms, legs and vaulting bodies. Then, with the settling dust, Rowena waved wildly, as the troops trudged off down the road, and the wagon drew into the drive.

It was later, Jason had laid a small fire in the parlor fireplace; its cheery warmth made less ominous the close proximity of winter. Sitting at one side, working by firelight, Ida was counting stitches, the beginning of another sweater, one of several she would complete before Christmas. Across from her, beside the lamp, Jason sat reading the quarterly published by the Cattlemen's Association.

Starting with their first, Jason had divorced himself of all Christmas duties, beyond the task of supplying a tree; and, when he remembered, buying a present for Ida. It was not a situation Ida reveled in, but neither was it unexpected. All the knitting, crocheting and sewing started early in the year, and was usually finished by the time December's page was exposed. Shortly after the tenth, days, and often nights, were devoted to cooking and baking. For anyone aware of the effort involved in beating fudge to its proper consistency, twenty-odd batches of that confection would represent an impossible task, but this was only part of the wonders wrought in Ida Carlson's kitchen.

When she had finished casting on, Ida lay her work aside, and looked across at her husband. Since arriving home, his preoccupation had been most obvious. "Did you hear anything interesting while you were in town?"

Jason folded back the page, placed the periodical on the table and shook his head slowly.

The movement, Ida perceived, was not intended as a negative response, and she waited.

"Dooley Amos died."

Dooley Amos — it was thought by many to be a reversal of his true name — was Garwood's only black citizen. He had been old the day he arrived, and had changed little in the ensuing twenty-some years. His appearance, a week after a fire at the town dump had threatened the crops, and buildings, of surrounding farms, could have been coincidental. Of a certainty, the fire had placed a sudden urgency on what the townsfolk had known for some time: Garwood needed a dump master: A man who would separate the accumulation, burn the combustibles regularly, and live on the premises to keep them neat at all times. Lacking money or promise of shelter, Dooley was the perfect *volunteer* for the job. With his acceptance of the town's gracious offer, a lasting association had been formed.

Ironically, if Dooley had arrived a week prior to the fire, his color and financial status would have made him a vagrant. Although state or county governments established the vagrancy laws, they were, for the most part, *adapted* to fit a township's need. If a work gang was needed for a particularly hazardous or difficult job, a watchful sheriff could round up ten or twenty *vagrants* in a very short time. The length of sentence was usually thirty days. However, when that time had elapsed if there remained a need for laborers, the prisoner, his financial status having undergone no change, need only step to the street to be incarcerated for another thirty days. Although the ultimate decision of guilt, innocence, and eligibility of release, was that of the presiding judge, in dire need, even that formality could be overlooked.

Although Garwood was not a hot bed of racial hatred, it fell somewhat short of being the seat of brotherly love. Not surprisingly, because no one ever accused Dooley Amos of being stupid, many saw the fire, and timing of his arrival, as more than merely providential.

Dooley Amos? The name hovered in the hazy portions of Ida's mind, but refused to come forward. She looked questioningly at her husband.

"The old colored man that took care of the dump." Jason offered.

The image was still vague, for Ida had seen him only once or twice, but the lonely picture he presented, she remembered vividly.

She dropped her eyes for a moment. "Was he sick very long?"

"Wasn't sick at all, far as anyone knows. He just keeled over. Hiram Oakes and Lester Naughton were at the dump with a load of junk. They saw old Dooley workin' on a pile of trash; they figured he's gettin' ready to burn it. He waved and hollered; they waved back, and got to workin' on their load. A while later, they thought they heard Dooley say somethin'— they looked over in time to see him fall. He was dead by the time they got to him."

Because, for Ida, the pain of loneliness was particularly cruel, the ache in her heart for Dooley was intense. During the portion of his life, she had been aware of, he had known only solitude. The thought bought her close to tears.

It would be understandable if one were to perceive an odd parallel in a comparison of Ida's sense of aloneness, among those she loved, and Dooley's apparent contentment in living, as he did, in almost total isolation.

"Did someone get in touch with his kin?"

Jason, weaving the fingers of his hands together, held the composite unit up before his face and sighed. "That's the problem..."

Gradually, the fingers relaxed, and he allowed the hands to settle on the arms of the chair. "The sheriff went out to Dooley's shack, after Burt Honnicut picked him up, but he couldn't find anything."

Nothing?"

"Well, nothing that gave 'em any idea where he come from, nothing naming any relatives; nothing much at all. There was a change of clothes, and that old coat, he always wore, some blankets, a few towels, five or six traps, and an old rifle."

Ida shook her head sadly. "How old was he?"

Jason shrugged. "No one knows, but he had to have been seventy, or better."

"An..." Ida drew a deep sigh. "And that was all he had to show for his life?" No strong box, nothin' like that?"

"Nope. Oh, I 'spose there might be a coffee can buried somewhere, but ain't nobody gonna look for it."

"Bet he had a Bible." Ida mused quietly.

Jason glanced up. "Huh?"

"I said: I'll bet he had a Bible."

"Oh, sure he did— didn't I mention 'em? He had two; one printed in a foreign language, German, I think."

"Well, wasn't there some writin' in one of 'em? Ain't nobody's Bible that don't have dates and records in it."

"These didn't. Oh, they was both marked up pretty good, but nothin' 'cept scripture references— and such as that."

"You mean he read 'em both?"

"Peers as though."

"My stars, the... When's the funeral to be?"

Jason avoided her gaze. "Idee— you know better'n that! Ain't gonna be no funeral— not here in Garwood. No colored man's gonna get buried here. They shipped him off to Des Moines. There's a place for folks like him up there."

"Folks like him! The man had **two** Bibles, Jason, he was one of God's children— just as much as any of us!"

" 'Course he was, Idee." Jason sighed softly. "An' I reckon the Lord will see to him just like anybody else; but we can't do much more than be thankful for that."

"Thankful!" Ida snorted. "We'd best be thankful that the Lord don't *see* to us! Wouldn't 'sprise me none if he destroyed the whole town!" She cast her eyes heavenward. "Lord have mercy!"

Quite suddenly, Ida left her chair, and walked to the door, where she stood facing away from her husband. Certain that she was crying, Jason felt moved to comfort her, but memories of the times he'd been rebuffed stayed him, and good intentions were lost somewhere between hurt and anger.

Ida cleared her throat; and, still with her back to him, spoke quietly. "Well, at least, we can request a prayer for him, come Sunday meetin'."

Jason nodded. "Yes, it's only fittin', and I will if—" He sighed, again. "If you think it's worth havin' folks whisperin' behind your back, havin' the other kids callin' your daughter a 'nigger lover'."

"JASON!" She whirled, eyes flashing angrily, as she moved into the circle of light. "Don't say that! It's— it's..."

"True." Jason interjected, hopelessly.

Ida slumped. Even before he had spoken, she had known. She settled slowly into her chair. "Yes..." A shudder shook her shoulders. "Oh, dear Lord in heaven, forgive us— it's true!"

CHAPTER NINE

NOVEMBER 1898

It is difficult to imagine circumstances whereby the death of a Negro dump master could become one of the most important events in the life of a child, a child who knew nothing of him. But they did exist. Set in place perhaps with Dooley's *coincidental* arrival in Garwood, they had lain dormant, waiting. More recently, if a horse had not gone lame, and left a family stranded; if the head of that family had not been seeking assistance; and if these incidents had not coincided with Dooley's demise, Rowena's life may have continued in the pattern set by her mother's death.

He was a sturdy man, slightly above average height, but the sombrero and dark skin set him aside from the ordinary wanderer. Ira Havley had seen him on the road just south of town, as he was riding in. Now, he stood in front of the livery stable, staring intently at the sign above the entry gate. As Ira stepped from the barn, the man came forward, hat in hand.

"Excuse me, Sir, but I find myself in need of assistance."

Ira, not certain he had understood the man's meaning, shrugged. "Yeah?"

"You see, Sir, we are traveling, my family and I. Yesterday, our horse, noble steed that he is, became lame. I have found the source of the problem, and cared for it, but the infection is such that I cannot ask the animal to pull our wagon farther. I am trained in the manner of livestock, and would be honored to work for you, for as long as you deemed necessary, in exchange for the use of a horse with which to pull our wagon to town."

He paused, momentarily. But, seeing that his plea seemed ineffectual, he continued. "It is of considerable importance that I bring my family to your city. My wife is heavy with child. I must find shelter, and purchase food for the little ones."

A skeptical frown crossed Ira's face. "Hold on, there, mister. If you can't pay for a horse, how you gonna buy food?"

"Oh, please, forgive me, Sir. I did not mean to imply that we had no money."

For the first time, since initiating the conversation, his eyes avoided those of his prospective benefactor, and he fingered the sombrero nervously. Then his gaze returned to capture that of Havley with resolute honesty.

"We are poor, Sir, but we do not beg!"

Ira's acquired suspicion of strangers, and his inherited distrust of those whose skin color differed from his, could not refute the honesty he read in the man's face. "Your missus, she expectin' soon?"

The man nodded seriously. "Her time is very close, Sir."

Havley wheeled and, with a motion for the man to follow, headed for the corral. "C'mon, I got a horse you can use."

"*Madre de Dios, gracias!*" The man murmured, and hurried after Ira. "Many thanks, Sir, many thanks!"

Ira handed the halter rope to the stranger. "I call him, Bo. Ain't much to look at, but he's strong, willin'— and gentle as they come."

The man rubbed a hand over the broad chest; and, in a glance, appraised what surroundings and age could not disguise.

"Ah," he breathed. "A true aristocrat, one of fine stock. I shall treat him as such, an..."

He stopped, embarrassment clearly evident in his expression. "Oh, good Sir, a thousand pardons; my rudeness is unforgivable." Hesitantly, he offered his hand. "I am Carlos Montegro Roblès, eternally in your debt."

Havley accepted the hand with only minor misgivings. "Ira Havley. Pleasure to meet you Mister Roblès." Havley was pleased by the ease with which the name fell from his tongue, and by the firm manner in which his hand was grasped. Once the name had appeared in print, the proper, *Roblace*, would be replaced by the English corruption: *Robuls*. "You have an eye for horse flesh."

"Ah, Mister Havley, Sir, the pleasure is mine. I am honored."

Ira stepped back uncomfortably. "Well—" He kicked at a bit of dried horse dung. "I got work to do, an' you probably have quite a way to go."

Carlos nodded. "Yes, I started at first light."

Now, it was Ira who sensed embarrassment. "Uh, if I'd known, I'd have offered you a ride to town. I- I'm sorry."

It was a feeble attempt, and Ira was ashamed of the lie. Had Carlos been white, the ride would have been offered as a matter of course.

"It is nothing, Sir, you had no way of knowing."

The kind words only served to increase Ira's discomfort. "Well— it's nice of you to say," he mumbled, "but... Anyway, you'll make better time goin' back. Ole Bo ain't gaited, but he moves right along, an' he's a comfortable ride."

Carlos' surprise was obvious. "Then it is your suggestion that I ride the animal?"

Ira shook his head dumbly. "He's a horse. Was you plannin' to lead him?"

"Mister Havley, Sir, I sought only an animal to draw our wagon. Never would I have presumed to ride him. It would insult your generosity."

Ira, still shaking his head, grinned. "And you would have walked all the way back to your wagon? You are a strange one!"

Carlos stood quietly, for several seconds, considering the statement and his reply. Then he smiled warmly and nodded. "Yes. Yes it is true. I am strange to you, as you are to me, but more in the way that our mothers and countries have taught us than in the manner of men. Your concern for your family would be as mine, as that of any man in this world, but— we are different..." He sighed thoughtfully. "Perhaps— perhaps this will not always be so. I for one pray that it will not!"

Ira Havley was not prepared for what he had heard, but he understood, and felt himself equally committed to the premise, although with little, if any, comprehension of its scope.

"Are you Spanish, Mister Roblès?"

"Mexican, Sir. I was born in Mexico, but I came to your country to study agriculture and animal husbandry. Then I returned to my homeland to apply my skills."

Again, the unexpected caught Ira off guard. Mexican, nigger, chink and Hebe were names for those he lumped together as those he'd rather not share space with; but here was a man, a well educated, articulate man, referring to himself as one of *those*. There was a moment of anger, in which Ira felt he had been duped. It subsided quickly as he realized that the Mexican before him, was the same Spaniard he had been ready to accept moments before.

Emerging from his stupor of conflicting thoughts, Ira found himself staring at his embarrassed companion. Hoping that his expression might be taken for one of deep thought, he shrugged. "But you left again?"

Sadness showed in the ruggedly handsome face. "Yes, unfortunately, the leaders of my country saw no advantage in bettering the lives of those of such little consequence, those who toil with their hands."

The sad smile remained in place as he gazed into the distance. "Perhaps, someday, I will return to an *agricultural* revolution. People will be interested in planting and growing, instead of war and killing."

He put a half hitch around Bo's nose just above the nostrils, and donned his sombrero. Drawing the cinch snug beneath his chin, he grasped a goodly portion of Bo's mane, and swung easily onto the broad back. Leaning forward, he rubbed a spot behind the horse's ears and spoke softly: "Come, my noble friend, let us go."

Turning toward Ira, he spoke with deep sincerity. "I pray you will never face this situation, but if you should, I ask God to remember your kindness of this day. *Adios*."

The long, afternoon shadows had spent their final moments clinging tenaciously about the hills and trees. Now, submitting to the night, they awaited softer definition in the light of a reluctant moon.

Ira Havley felt comfortably warmed by the knowledge that his concern for the Roblès family was not whether they would return, but what might have happened to detain them so long. By seven he was ready to saddle a horse and ride out, but the late return of a rented surrey had kept him busy until after seven-thirty.

Ira first heard it as he hurried toward the tack room, but too faintly for his mind to find an identifying comparison; however, as he tossed a saddle blanket over his arm, the sound came again, and there was no question as to its source. Somewhere, out in the darkness, perhaps, beyond the grove, a horse and wagon were moving up the road. Draping the blanket over a stall door, he hurried to the front gate.

The street lamp in front of Havley's Livery was the last light at the edge of town. With the moon still maintaining its anonymity, below the horizon, the road disappeared as it eased out of the circle of light, and into the shadows of a small grove just south of town.

As Ira listened, anxious to be convinced that the hoof beats were indeed Bo's, a child's voice lifted in song. The crystal clear soprano moved alone along the simple melody until a second deeper feminine voice picked up the counter melody, and the two wove the gentle air into

lovely two-part harmony. Finally, with the addition of a rich masculine baritone, the strains became more hauntingly beautiful than anything Ira had ever heard.

The thin slice of yellow moon, spilling over the eastern horizon, did little to light the road; but, suddenly, a faint glimmer appeared. It winked and dipped in the darkness, then disappeared to return, seconds later, brighter than before. Mingled with the singing, and creaking of the wagon was another sound: a soft nasal whinny. Bo was home, and he knew it.

Across the street, the office door of Roger Maltby's feed yard burst open as Roger and his son, Chris, stepped out into the night. Their hushed conversation did not reach Ira in its entirety until Roger lifted his voice. "What the hell is it, Ira?"

Ira smiled to himself. "Sounds like some mighty happy people singin'." He listened quietly for a moment. "Be about as pretty as I ever heard."

With nearly half itself revealed, the moon seemed to climb more swiftly, and soon the road stood out in bold relief. The flickering light, now clearly visible, glowed warmly as it swayed gently in the gloom of the grove. Then, with Bo's bulk assuming recognizable form, the voices took up the melody of a familiar hymn:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..."

There would be times in Ira Havley's life when he would recall this evening, and more fully understand it; but for the moment, his tears, and the multitude of conflicting emotions, were a source of inexplicable distress— and pleasure.

"That one of your rigs, Ira?"

It was Chris Maltby.

"My horse." Ira called.

"They sing right well; they some kind of travlin' show?"

"Don't think so. Just some folks with a lame horse."

There was much more Ira could have said, but nothing he cared to shout into the night within earshot of the Roblès wagon,

They had come into the street lamp's feeble outer glow, Bo and the wagon, with a limping horse bringing up the rear. A lantern, hanging on a pole, swung from side to side casting strange shadows about the wagon and its contents. The silhouette of Carlos' sombrero made him easily identifiable, but the two small forms huddled on the seat beside him, left the whereabouts of Mrs. Roblès in question.

Since emerging from the woods, Bo's pace had quickened noticeably, and he drew up briskly at the front gate.

"Mister Roblès," Ira spoke quietly. "I was worried about you."

Carlos leaned close to the two beside him, and spoke softly in Spanish. Then, setting the brake, he looped the reins about the handle, and leaped to the ground, sombrero in hand. In the fuller light, his joy was obvious, even to Ira.

"Mister Havley, I can say only that God had plans different than ours." The light's gleam reflected on the abundance of straight white teeth. "We are now five!"

Ira gasped. "Lord a'mighty! He said with a wave in the direction from which they had come. "Your missus had the baby out there?"

"Ah, Mister Havley, it was beautiful." His pride was accentuated by the sense of awe and wonder in his voice. "God is truly gracious. In an hour of need he gave us the miracle of life."

Again, Ira was conscious of forces within him, capable of changing the thought patterns of a lifetime. Impulsively he grasped Carlos' hand. With his action came the realization that they were no longer strangers.

"Carlos!" The emotion in his voice was undeniable. "That— that's wonderful! Is- is it a boy or girl?"

Tears welled in the large brown eyes. "A boy, Mister Havley— a fine, strong boy!"

Ira stamped his foot. "Doggies, that's mighty fine, just mighty fine! A- an' your Missus, how is she doin'? Must have been awful hard on her!"

Carlos smiled proudly. "She is a woman of great strength, but God did not put upon her the burden of hardship. The baby came so quickly that we had scarcely enough time to prepare for it. Come," he motioned to the rear of the wagon, "you must meet my wife. We are deeply in your debt, and she wishes to thank you personally."

As Carlos rounded the end of the wagon he spoke rapidly in Spanish, then he turned to Ira. "Mister Havley, may I present my wife, Lorraine?"

Ira's first glimpse of Mrs. Roblès was that of the soft light shimmering on a mass of light, almost blond hair. As the woman rose from the blankets to offer her hand, her cream white skin stood in stark contrast to the darkness about them.

A Mexican and a white woman!

There was nothing in Ira's education that spoke of any fair skinned people of Spanish decent. Somewhere, in the turmoil of his mind, he was vaguely aware that his thoughts, in direct opposition, were a forceful contradiction of those from moments before. Then, in the distance, he heard Carlos' voice:

"*Mi querida*, this is Mister Havley, the kind gentleman whose wonderful steed has brought us safely to town."

Ira accepted the small hand, but his "Pleased t'meet you, Ma'm," was void of feeling.

Looking directly at neither, he dropped the hand and spoke curtly: "You won't find no lodgin' tonight; but you're welcome to use the barn; plenty of clean straw. No reason you shouldn't be comfortable. Privy's just behind the barn. If you make a fire, do it in the open away from the buildin's, and such. I'll let the sheriff know you're here so's he won't bother you."

Without further word, he turned toward the tack room. In minutes, he was astride his mount.

"There's empty stalls in the barn. Couple of them's got fresh feed. If you'd water Bo an' see him in one of them— I'd be obliged."

"I would have it no other way, Mister Havley, but I am the one obligated."

He moved forward as Ira passed through the gate. "I will care for the gate. I am certain your wife wonders about your absence."

Ira glanced down. "Uh, if you're a mind to, you can put your animal in one of the stalls—one that's got feed..."

If there was more to his statement, it was lost as he abruptly wheeled his horse, and rode into the night.

Carlos' smile was without humor. "So, *mi querida*, it is no different here, than elsewhere."

The woman reached out to him. "Shush, my darling, there will be a place." She gathered up the tiny bundle lying beside her. "Here, hold your son, and be grateful for the great wealth we have."

Carlos cradled the infant close to his bosom and smiled. "I am ashamed that I could so easily forget what God gives us."

"Papa?"

From the wagon a small, hesitant voice brought an exclamation from his lips. "*Ay Chihuahua!* The children!"

Handing the baby back to Lorraine, he hurried to the front of the wagon. "Jennifer, Roberto, papa is so sorry; for the moment, I forgot you." With upheld hands he called to them "Come, my little ones, we have a wonderful warm barn to sleep in tonight. You will dream sweet dreams in a soft bed of fresh, clean straw; and tomorrow will be a day of beauty such as you have never seen."

He carried the children to the rear of the wagon. "Here, my pretties, sit with your mama and your new brother, while I guide our *amigo*, *Senior Bo*, around to the back of the barn.

Returning to the front of the wagon, he released the brake, and moved to Bo's head. Patting the animal's great neck, he grasped the reins. "Come, *mi amigo*, but a few feet farther, and there will be food, water, a clean stall and— I promise, a rub that will make you feel as a yearling."

CHAPTER TEN

NOVEMBER 1898

It was nearly eight-thirty when the sound of a rig on the drive, and subsequent knock at the door, brought Jason to his feet with a start. Ida dropped her sewing, and the two exchanged questioning glances.

"Now, who do you suppose..." Ida left the question unfinished, and Jason shrugged, as he stepped into the hall.

Ida listened intently, but with little satisfaction. There was a surprised greeting, but the ensuing conversation was a hushed monotone. When her husband returned, she impaled him with a hard, quizzical gaze. "Well?"

"That was Ira Havley."

Ida nodded. That much she had heard. "And?"

"They're having a meetin' in town, and they want me to come."

"A meeting? At this time of night? Lan' sakes, what for?"

Jason's smile, lacking mirth, was tight. "Seems they's a feller in town that might take Dooley's job at the dump."

Ida's harumph was, as usual, all encompassing. "And it takes a town meetin' to decide that?"

"Yep, reckon it's gonna. This feller's got a family, an' Mayor Ritchie is talkin' 'bout addin' on to that old shack of Dooley's so's they can live there."

Ida's WELL was broadcast with a violent expulsion of air. "They needn't call no meetin' 'bout that. Ain't no man in his right mind would put his family in that miserable old shack, even if it wasn't at the town dump!"

Jason's already grim smile gave in to a frown. "This feller might— he's Mexican, got three young'ns, one of them born just today. No money, lame horse, and his wife..."

Ida stood angrily, her eyes cast heavenward. "Oh, the good Lord help us. They're fixin' to do it again. Where do you 'spose they'll find to bury..."

She stopped, eyes fixed on Jason's. "What about his wife?"

Jason drew a deep sigh. "She— she's a white woman."

* * * * *

A semi-circle of stern faces greeted Jason and Ira, as they entered the back room of Roland Engelston's general store. Mayor Ritchie, standing behind an overturned box, greeted them. "Jason, Ira, glad you could make it."

With a sweep of his arm, he indicated the group. "Reckon you know everybody."

"Evenin', Art," Jason said quietly and, glancing about the room, nodded. "Evenin' gents."

Ira merely nodded his greeting.

"Find yourselves a seat," Ritchie said, pointing to some empty boxes. "Charlie, fetch 'em some of that cider."

The men each grabbed a box. Accepting a mug of cider, Jason sipped it carefully and, with a nod of approval, took his seat.

"Well, Art, what's this all about?"

The Mayor drew himself erect, and looked about the room. "Yep, reckon we're all here. Well, Jason, guess you know the least about this as anybody, so here's how she stands, right now. Ira's got this Mexican down at his place; the man's got three young'ns, no money, and a lame horse. Now, we need a "dump master" bad! Don't think anybody'll argue that— an' it's gonna be downright hard to find anybody that'll work for what old Dooley did. But this feller might be real happy to, uh— if we put it up to him in the right way."

Concurring nods seemed to activate all heads present, but Jason's nod was accompanied by a question: "And just how might that be, Art?"

Well..." The mayor chuckled slightly. "We just explain to him about the vagrancy laws in Garwood, and give him a choice: The work gang or the dump!"

There was some lack of accord among the bobbing heads, but Jason's was the only voice to be heard.

"Hold on, Art. The man's not a vagrant. He's got a horse; even lame, it's worth something— an' a wagon, too..." He turned to Havley. "That right, Ira?"

Havley nodded. "Yep, pretty good rig, too."

"And," Jason continued, "right now he's workin' for Ira..."

"Hold up, Jason." The mayor cautioned. "He ain't workin' for pay. He told him he would work for use of the horse."

He paused, his gaze on Havley.

"He done any work yet, Ira?"

Ira fidgeted, nervously. "Well— no, no not yet, but he will— come morning."

The mayor chuckled. "Uh-huh, *maybe*, if you can find him."

It was obvious that Havley was not comfortable with his role as defender of the *accused*, but he was still unwilling to deny his own convictions.

"Aw, c'mon, Art, if he was gonna run off, why'd he come into town? He already had my horse. He could've taken the other road and been miles from here 'fore I figured out anything was wrong. Anyway, I talked to him. He's— he's honest. I- I'd bet on it."

"Seems you already have," mused the mayor, and his laugh was echoed by most of the men in the room. "Think about it, Ira. How many *honest* Mexicans do you know, let alone, ones that'll work?"

Sending a knowing look about the room, Ritchie allowed it to settle on Ira with a cynical smile. "Can't remember you ever havin' any truck with 'em, before. When'd you get to be a Mex lover?"

Ira's anger flared, and he jumped to his feet. "Ain't no damned Mex lover! I- I don't *like* the man, but..."

What Ira Havley could not openly address was the fact that he did like Carlos Roblès, even though he knew he should hate him for defiling the most coveted of the white man's chattel: his women. He glared defiantly at Ritchie. "But— I think he's honest!"

Amid a chorus of mostly negative responses, Ira sat down, and Jason stood. Although it would soon become clear that he had been invited to add the touch of respectability that Mayor Ritchie felt the situation required, at the time, Jason was uncertain as to why he was there. It was obvious that the remainder of the group, including Ira Havley, had been picked for their outspoken white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant leanings. It was also obvious that despite Ira's surprising stand, this was a *hanging jury*. The fate of Carlos Roblès was sealed.

"Art." Jason focused his attention on the mayor, then allowed his gaze to include the others in the room. "Gentlemen, seems as though you've made up your minds about this feller bein' our dump master— and, although I don't approve of the way you're goin' about it, it don't seem like such a bad idea. Tell ya what, though..." His expression grew deadly serious. "In as much as you've made me a part to it, I think you better put it as an offer of a job, and leave it up to him. Anything less than that I would consider a personal affront!"

The awesome power, both physical and financial, that Jason Carlson represented was something none of these men wished to confront on anything less than friendly terms. The impact of his words was evident.

Jason's expression relaxed into a slow grin. Anyhow, from what Ira told me, ridin' in, this feller'd jump at the chance of a job. Treatin' him like a human bein' can't do nothin' but be a plus in every respect!"

The response, although not totally heartfelt, was positive, and Jason grinned at the mayor.

"Sorry, Art, if that don't fit your plans, but its the only way I'll be a part of it, and— well, like I said, you've already done that."

The mayor nodded. "The point's taken, Jason. Can't see why it wouldn't be better for the town's image, anyway; but it don't leave us with a workable alternative."

Chad Westerly stood. "If *alternative* means findin' another way of *making* this feller take the job, you're right, Art, but that ain't an option. Like Jason says, he ain't a vagrant. Just 'cause Dooley *happened* to be in the right place at the right time, don't mean we couldn't have found someone— if we'd really looked."

Jason's surprise, at Westerly's words, was augmented considerably by the predominantly affirmative response to them.

Mayor Ritchie, not at all pleased, glared ominously. "All right, all right. If you want to mollycoddle this greaser; but if he doesn't want the job, just what are we gonna do with 'im until his horse is ready to travel?"

The shuffling of feet, numerous coughs, and the need of several men to clear their throats greeted his words.

Ritchie, feeling the tide of battle turning, smiled. "Well— that's just what I thought!"

He was about to fire another salvo, when Ira Havley's voice, soft, but resolute, cut him short. "They can stay at the stable. It ain't a fittin' place for a woman and a new baby, but, under the circumstances..."

Mayor Ritchie fumed. Clearly, his *blue ribbon panel* was distinguishing itself in a manner not anticipated by His Honor.

Jason slapped his thigh a resounding whack. "Good for you, Ira, but you're right, ain't no place for a new baby. Idee'n me'll put up the Missus and young'ns until this, what's-his-name, Carlos, has got himself square with you, then, if you don't have work for him, I'll give him a job at the stock farm.

Bleeding heart liberal, if it was an acknowledged phrase, had yet to know exposure in Garwood. Had it, however, the mayor would have given it strong voice.

"Well! If this don't beat all! All right, if that's the way you want it! But don't forget that I warned you! You're gonna turn Garwood into another New York City. They's a jillion niggers and Mexicans out there, just waitin' for us to hang out the, *We Love You*, sign. Your kids'll be goin' to school with 'em; your daughter's be marryin' 'em— but that's all right; that's all right! You go right ahead, don't pay me no mind, let that greasy son-of-a-bitch into your homes, but just remember... When your town's so full of black and brown that you can't see nothin' else— don't come runnin' to me for help! We never had no trouble with Dooley 'cause we kept him in his place. He knew where he belonged, and he knew he'd damn well better stay there!"

He brought his fist down on the box. "I say, put the bastard in his place—**now!** If you do— you won't never have cause to regret it."

They were impassioned words, some falling on sympathetic ears, but the skirmish was over, and the heat of the mayor's speech was not sufficient to inspire a counter-offensive. There was no doubt, though, that within the clouds of combat, and residue of battle lay the harbinger of the battle that was yet to come.

Jason, who had returned to his seat during the mayor's speech, was on his feet again. "It was my understanding that part of this meeting was about building some kind of a house for this feller and his family to live in."

Several voices confirmed his assumption, and the mayor was quick to respond. "No, gentlemen, that's not entirely correct. What I wanted to discuss was addin' to the existing building..."

"BUILDING?" Chad Westerly's explosive exclamation was accompanied by a sarcastic laugh. "That ain't nothin' but an overgrown privy! You'd be better off enlargin' Dooley's root cellar. You ain't gonna get nobody to live in that shack!"

Mayor Ritchie, not at all pleased with the continuing rebellion, countered angrily. "Hell's fire, Chad, Dooley lived in it for near twenty years."

"Barn biscuits, Art!" It was Allan Foster, owner of the lumberyard. "Dooley built that damn shack himself. He weren't no fool, he figured if it was any better, we'd find some way to

charge him rent. I've talked with him— he knew what we were doin'. He just figured it was the best he could expect."

His pause offered the mayor a chance to speak, but Allan's upheld hand silenced him.

"I ain't finished, Art! I gotta admit, I never seen anythin' wrong with Dooley." Again, his hand went up to silence the Mayor's expected response. "But 'fore you can call me a nigger lover, I'm tellin' you I ain't! I don't wanna live with 'em, sleep with 'em— I don't even wanna be near 'em— but I ain't no damn Klansman, either! People is people, whether I— we like 'em or not; and if we want this feller to stay at the dump, we'd damn well better give him a house his family can live in!"

If there was accord, it seemed to hinge on disagreement, but although he had additional thoughts on the matter, Jason decided to wait for input from some of the others; it came quickly.

"Mister Mayor!" Charlie Prescott was on his feet. "I'm inclined to agree, in part, with Allan and Chad, but my cousin was a missionary down in Mexico. She's told me how those people live. A mud hut with a straw roof and dirt floor is a bout as good as it gets down there. I don't know that this feller is gonna appreciate the difference. Hell, Dooley's old place might be a mansion to him."

Both Allan Foster and Jason stood at the same time. Allan nodded at Jason. "Go ahead, Jason, you can probably say it better'n me."

Jason smiled. "Thanks, Allan, but I'd hope there'll be time for everyone to be heard."

Jason knew these men; none of them were stupid. Charlie Prescott, in particular, was very well educated. He had completed most of his premed training before deciding to become a pharmacist. With the extra schooling required for that, and as owner of Garwood's only drug store, he was highly respected. Jason could see no advantage in challenging his statement. Instead, he felt he could appeal to civic pride.

"Reckon I can't find no argument with what Charlie says, but I figure him to be the first to agree that, sooner or later, the whole of this country is gonna be like New York.

A number of voices denied this assumption, but Charlie Prescott's was not one of them.

Jason continued: "Now when that bunch of folks landed up there at Plymouth Rock, they wanted to worship God in their own way..." Pausing, he chuckled softly. "It ain't no secret that they didn't cotton to folks who believed different'n they did, but when it came time to write the Constitution and the Bill of rights, they knew just how to write 'em so's everyone could believe the way they wanted. They also put some pretty strong words in there 'bout everybody bein' created equal, an' I don't recollect that skin color had anything to do with that. Now, if it's the law, which it seems to be, ain't we gonna look a lot better for doin' what's right 'cause we wanted to, 'stead of because we were forced to?"

The premise was not one that any of those present, Jason included, cared to embrace in its entirety, but the promise of Garwood's ability to flaunt its "brotherly love" and patriotic integrity was indulged as being thoroughly acceptable. Even Mayor Ritchie saw it as a means of capitulating without losing face, and he hastened to make himself heard:

"Well said, Jason. It's time to put our personal feelings aside; and start thinkin' about the good of the community."

It was well past midnight when Jason finished brushing the sheen back into Dolly's coat. Swatting her rump, he stepped from the stall, and closed the door. Crossing to the far wall, he lifted the lid of one of its bins, and drove his hands deep into its contents. As he retraced his steps, Dolly's head came over the stall door. Her greeting was a short, nostril fluttering, moan, as Jason pushed his cupped hands beneath her muzzle. Ever so gently the soft lips caressed his palms, then she was munching contentedly, her great, expressive eyes speaking of her love.

It had required considerable discussion to arrive at the acceptable size and type of construction for the dwelling. The final plans, to be drawn free of charge by Allan Foster, would be for a twenty-four by thirty foot unit with no inner partitions. It would be a board and batten structure, with a fairly high, well-peaked roof to facilitate a large sleeping loft at either end. It would be built in such a manner as to allow Dooley's shack to serve as a laundry room and storage area. Finishing of the inside walls would be left the occupants.

Jason had been unsuccessful in his attempt to have water brought inside, even though a well and 1000 gallon storage tank had been installed after the fire. He had not pursued it with any great fervor, for it remained relatively simple to bring it in at a later date.

Lumber had been offered at cost, by Allan, as was hardware from Warren Kupperman's store. Several men, including Jason, offered their labor, and Mayor Ritchie graciously offered enough men from the work gang, to guarantee completion within a week. Jason, Chad Westerly, Roland Engelston and Charlie Prescott agreed to pay seventy-five percent of the cost so that the town could pick up the remainder without calling an open meeting. Finally, with a sense of accomplishment, and camaraderie, cider mugs were raised for the last time, and the meeting was adjourned.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1898 - 1899

"Well?"

Jason started. "Huh?"

He had expected Ida to be awake, but his preoccupation with the meeting allowed him to be startled by her voice from the darkness.

"Sakes alive, Idee; you gave me a turn. I thought you'd be asleep. What was it you was sayin'?"

"You know what I was saying! What did you *gentlemen* decide to do with the Mexican man and his *white* wife?"

The brittle sarcasm, in the final words, Jason knew reflected her utter disgust for those whose narrow perception of normalcy allowed them to prejudge, and segregate, by reason of inherent human differences. There was no doubt that Ida was aware of the direction the meeting had taken.

Certain that his wife was not aware that his feelings were as strong as hers, Jason sought to explain the proceedings in a positive manner:

"Well, Ideeee—" The extension of the last syllable came as he crawled beneath the covers. "I- I—" Twisting about, he searched for a comfortable position. "I think we did right well, all things considered. We..."

"And just what might *all things* be?" Ida's quick retort bristled with animosity.

Jason's smile went unnoticed in the darkness. "Mostly, Art Ritchie, I guess."

"The mayor?"

"Uh-huh. Guess he figured we'd put them folks in Dooley's old shack, and that'd be tha..."

One of Ida's multi-purpose exclamations brought no more than a momentary pause.

"But— weren't many gonna sit still for that. Reckon Art wasn't none to pleased with how things turned out, but..." He chuckled, softly. "He managed to climb on the bandwagon."

Ida's mood seemed to mellow considerably, and she said quietly: "I- I figured you'd be lookin' out for them poor folks."

She had known! Jason's surprise was compounded by what he felt to be honest praise. He managed a stammered, "Tha- th- thank you, Id'."

"No need for thanks." The bite had returned to her tone. "I know you don't think so, but I do have thoughts of my own, and I know how you feel about— about some things. It— it's..."

The ice had melted again, and the soft warmth in her voice revealed a depth of emotion rarely exposed. It deepened as she continued:

"I knew that 'fore we were married. It— it's one of the reasons—" A soft sigh interrupted her. One-of-the-reasons-I-married-you!"

The final words, run together in a hurried jumble, slipped past Jason's defenses. Such a simple declaration left him speechless, and grappling with several disquieting sensations, the most prevalent being shame.

Speaking in hushed tones, Ida continued hesitantly: "I was— I..." Her voice, becoming suddenly brittle, cracked. "I was passed over twice before I met you. Once because of something my great grandmother did, and once..."

Aware that her words were chipping away at the cornerstone of her protective wall, Ida was fearful of where this might lead. The first admission represented no more than a minor chink, but revelation of the second incident could bring the wall crashing down. Coming with such suddenness, she was not at all certain she was prepared to deal with it.

Ida returned to the problem of ancestry as though she had made no mention of anything else. "I made Uncle Charlie promise that he would tell you about..."

Her voice faltered, and her shudder came to Jason by way of their common support.

"Oh— OH, mercy!" A bell of anguish tolled in her voice. "Jason— he did tell you— didn't he?"

"You mean about your great grandmother converting from Judaism?"

Ida breathed a great sigh. "Oooo, he did tell you."

Jason moved closer, so close she could sense his silent nod and, despite her conscious denial, an aching need stirred deep within her. A second sigh found voice, for it was hopeless. The barriers were too firmly established; Jason was beyond trying. They were mired in a perverse, *platonic* relationship, which offered little beyond their resentful, mutual respect, and— Rowena.

The longing, its fulfillment requiring no more than that she reach out, would remain because she could not. Next to her, his warmth comfortingly near, the man she truly loved lay quietly unaware of that love— or her need, and Ida wept.

Instinctively, Jason reached out. In the darkness, in a moment of forgetfulness or desperation, Ida caught his hand, and pressed it to her breast. Conversation, suddenly unimportant, was forsaken, and Jason's arms enfolded her. Snuggling close, Ida's soundless tears became those of joyful release, and time ceased to be.

Slanting low in the western sky, an inquisitive moon peered in at the hallway window. Its pale light painted muted shadows on the bed where they lay. Ida, in her drowsiness, was only vaguely aware of the man in whose arms she had slept.

Gradually, from among the intertwining memories of what the night had held, a forgotten thought emerged. *He never told me about what they decided at the meeting.* As lightning within a cloud, the thought flashed and fled. Then, pressing against the warmth of him, she indulged a fanciful, almost brazen moment, as she thought of waking him. It was but a fleeting bit of whimsy, and she nestled close, listening contentedly to his deep, measured breathing.

A short time later the moon concealed itself behind a silken cloud; and, as it slipped below the horizon, Ida gave herself to sleep.

In the less romantic gray of pre-dawn, Ida's nakedness became a source of concern. Cautiously, she stole from beneath the covers to don nightgown, robe and slippers.

During her morning rounds, Ida tried to reestablish the martyrdom that had always been her armor, but it was nonexistent. Her unshakable assurance that the blame for all their difficulties lay at Jason's feet waned. It was becoming uncomfortably clear that theirs was a shared problem; one in which the bedroom played only a minor role; one which could have been resolved had they tried; one which even yet, might be.

Though startling, the thoughts, and questions, received little attention. It was the beginning of another day and there was much to be done. In this mind-set, though unnoticed, were some of the tenacious roots of their weed garden.

As might be expected, with such a project, three weeks were required to complete the dump master's dwelling. In that time, Ida came to care a great deal for the Roblès family. She was also made painfully aware that Lorraine Roblès, with regard to everything but physical characteristics, was the epitome of what she longed to be. To say that Ida found the children more or less than ordinary would be incorrect, but she could not deny a difference. There was an aura about them, about the whole family. This phenomenon was particularly evident during their combined Thanksgiving Day celebration. Rooted in the Roblès' deep, selfless love and faith, it threatened to engulf any who ventured near. Within the labyrinth of Ida's defense mechanisms it represented a threat to her status quo, and worse, revealed the sham her life represented.

For Rowena, the eldest Roblès child, Jennifer, was the answer to prayer, before the fact. By society's perverse method of categorization, her ethnic origin alone branded her unacceptable, but that was not all: she spoke with a pronounced stammer. Whether or not Rowena was cognizant of the reasons, Jennifer became the cornerstone of her philosophy, the first of many whose cause she would champion.

Fear gave the girls a common enemy; one which they faced with more resolve as each found strength in the other. Rowena's fear of school was pushed aside in her determination to see that Jennifer was spared the same pain. Her inborn ability to put the need of others first was manifest as she assured Jennifer: "Don't worry, Jennifer, I'll take care of you."

The superiority of Jennifer's education was immediately evident, but it is doubtful that either child was aware of it. Jennifer's lovely singing voice placed her in a position enjoyed, and endured, by many before and since. When she sang there was admiration, even envy, from those who at other times questioned her right to exist.

Rowena's introduction to Spanish was as natural as breathing; and, before the Roblès home was finished, she and Jennifer were conversing in mixed phrases. This came as a multiple blessing, for although Jennifer's English was more precise than Rowena's, her speech impediment was less pronounced in her use of Spanish.

It may have been that Rowena was subliminally aware being different; probably more from her own sense of it, because she was adopted, than discernment of how she was perceived. Prior to Jennifer's arrival she had known no close friend, but never having had one it was not a situation that troubled her. In retrospect, she could see, and understand, how her friendship with Jennifer served as additional reason for her exclusion. This, and other, convictions were confirmed when she learned that this exclusion had been linked to events prior to her birth, and always it had remained a condition born of narrow-minded parents, not of innocent children.

Both girls possessed a vague consciousness of being looked on with some disfavor; and it is possible that certain elements of Rowena's school problems may have festered there. But the bond they formed, and the love that followed, created a shield that afforded them the joyful bittersweet of a reasonably normal childhoods.

When completion of the Roblès' home found the families separated, the girls were together as often as their pleadings could bring it about. It was a rare weekend that did not find one of them *staying over*.

* * * * *

By the summer of 1899 both girls were reasonably well adjusted. Jenny's speech impediment was less evident and, while school remained a problem for Rowena, in the security of their friendship, her trepidation was fading.

Lingering as a secret marauder in her subconscious was Rowena's inability to find a comfortable niche for her father's contradictory memory. Surfacing occasionally, when she caught sight of a strange man in town, it spawned stories of her father's visits, of his telling her that he had come to take her away. In her desperate need to erase the frightening images, and enhance those pitifully few happy ones, there lay an awesome power, one that was capable of destroying her.

Although America, at least its rural segments, had yet to enshrine Summer Camp, church or otherwise, church sponsored weekend outings were regularly enjoyed by both youths and adults. Simple affairs, they entailed moving the rudiments of home to the less comfortable, but more exhilarating domain of nature. In the quest of sleep, straw ticks, feather beds or kapok mattresses were exchanged for a piece of canvas spread atop a gathering of leaves, or a layer of straw in the bed of a wagon. Coverings usually consisted of more canvas, a horse blanket or comforter. For those not wishing to sleep exposed to God's heavens, the options were numerous, and varied. From sleeping under a wagon to some type of canopy or tent, there seemed no limit to the "campers" ingenuity. Some more advanced gathering places even boasted rough cooking facilities, and an outhouse.

The outing, Rowena and Jenny had committed to, was one for the Sunday school classes of Pastor Quintain's parish. Being as much a vacation for the adults as the children, it was well chaperoned. Very few of the youngsters would not have, at least, one parent in the party. Both Ida and Jason would accompany Rowena.

Although there were many proclaiming foreknowledge — some by mystical powers, others through scientific evaluation — of the phenomenon we refer to as weather, few predictions of the day were reliable. Aching joints and swollen feet, quite often, more accurately forecast Mother Nature's plans. The prevalence of storm cellars, however, was a fairly accurate indication of what the locals knew to be fact.

Morning of the "outing", save for a few distant clouds on the southwestern horizon, dawned clear and calm. A gentle northwesterly breeze suggested that, whatever the clouds represented, it would not encroach on the day; it was perfect! "The Grove", long a favored spot for camping, lay only a few miles north of town along the banks of a lively creek. With the caravan gathered at the edge of town, they were on their way shortly after dawn.

After setting up camp, and assigning chores, the women began making preparations for the noonday meal. Traditionally, it was a Potluck affair; so, once the fires were built, and the

actual cooking started, groups were formed to participate in games, or whatever activity caught the immediate fancy.

Two of the teachers brought together a group, including Rowena and Jenny, for a nature walk. Although most of the children had already gained a rudimentary knowledge of the flora and fauna of their own immediate surroundings, there was much to be learned in the deeper woods. Empty coffee cans, and the promise of a berry hunt, added a touch of extra excitement for the, already exuberant, young nature lovers.

Encountering, as they had, a cool, dry northwesterly breeze, and because its presence was seen as a pleasant change from the, warmer than usual, humid weather they'd been having, little thought was given to the line of cotton puffs resting low on the southwestern horizon. Once the group had reached the campsite, the rolling terrain, and density of the woods made it impossible to observe more sky than the blue directly above. Had this not been the case, the line of, now towering, cumulonimbus, marching across the plains, would have drastically altered the vacationers' plans.

Having spent the better part of an hour tramping about the woods watching, listening and learning, the teachers called their charges together. Mrs. Hauenstein, the third grade teacher, addressed them:

"All right, children; the berry bushes are just ahead." As she spoke, she began touching heads and pointing. "Lizbeth, over here... No, Martin, on the other side; you'll be with Mrs. Angeloni. I want you in two's, one coffee can for each pair. Glancing about, she spied her children. "Clarisa, Calvin, you two go with Missus Angeloni, and mind you— behave!"

Rowena and Jenny, huddling close, moved around behind Mrs. Hauenstein. It proved a successful stratagem, for they found themselves in her group.

The girls, faithfully adhering to Mrs. Hauenstein's admonition to, "keep me in sight," had stayed close— for awhile. Now, they were on their own. Not to such a degree as to have forsaken the security of hearing their leader's voice, but far enough to feel that they were excitingly, covertly, and wickedly alone.

True to Mrs. Hauenstein's word, berry bushes were plentiful, but their offerings were meager; to a point that Jenny and Rowena's interest was beginning to lag. Suddenly, Jenny squealed with joy. "Ween, **look!**" A quivering finger pointed to a cluster of berry-laden bushes atop a slight rise, just beyond an outcropping of rock.

With a joyous shout, the two rushed forward. Racing ahead, Rowena clambered on a rock, the first step, of what seemed a natural stairway leading to the berries. Leaning forward, she grasped the next jagged edge, and launched herself. For an instant both feet were airborne, as she soared toward her destination. Then, in coming to rest on the rock's face, her right foot settled on a cluster of pebbles. The foot skewed sideways, throwing her off balance. In a frantic effort to find support, her left foot became wedged in a crevice between the rocks. Arms flaying wildly, she pitched to one side, and the captive leg twisted ominously. Upon reaching the limit of its flexibility, the bones parted with a sickening pop, and Rowena crumpled to earth. There was a moment of near silence, then a piercing scream, as she saw the blood soaked stocking stretched taught over shards of protruding bone.

In close-knit communities, such as Garwood, little happens that is not common knowledge. So it was with the church outing. Long planned, and well advertised, there were few

who did not know of it. As the ominous line of thunderheads raced toward town, not even high tech weather tracking instruments could have rendered a more accurate prediction of what was to come: It was going to storm, and it was going to be a *humdinger*! It took no stretch of the imagination to imagine these conditions as being capable of spawning tornadoes.

Although it had been with the blessings of all who knew, it was not by consensus that a rider left town heading toward The Grove, but his arrival at camp brought a flurry of activity. The huge "Come And Get It" triangle was rung in a manner not to be mistaken as a meal call. Horses were rounded up, hitched, and readied for full retreat.

Sounds of the triangle, coinciding with Rowena's scream, startled both teachers. Betty Jean Hauenstein glanced at her counterpart. "Land sakes, Marilyn, what on earth?"

By now, they could hear Jenny's anguished cries, as she came crashing through the bushes. The moment of indecision vanished as Betty Jean turned in the direction of the distressed girl's voice.

"Better gather up the children, Marilyn," she said. "I don't know what all the ruckus is, but we'd best be getti..."

The rest of her statement was precluded by Jenny's arrival. The child, nearly hysterical, rushed into her outstretched arms.

"Oh, Missus Hauenstein— c-c- come q-q-qu ick..."

Betty Jean knelt, drawing the girl close to her. "There, there, dear. Whatever it is, I can't help until you calm down and tell me what happened."

Huge sobs broke Jenny's breathing into great, gasping spasms. "I-I-It's R-Ro-Ro- w-wena..." Her distress and frustration, at being unable to access words, accentuated her stammer.

Again, Betty Jean attempted to calm the storm. "There, there, it's all right, it's all right! Just take a deep breath and tell me what's wrong."

"Ro-Ro- Ro w-w-ena hurt h-h-herself— r-real b-b-bad!"

Betty Jean stood and, glancing at Marilyn, both women lifted their eyes heavenward in silent prayer. In the next moment Betty Jean, sighting her two, called them to her. Clarisa, Calvin, I'm going with Jenny, but you stay with Missus Angeloni.

It was immediately obvious that this was not a popular decree. "But, Mom, I..."

"Calvin!"

The tone of Betty Jean's interjection signaled an end to the discussion, and the children scuttled back to huddle close to Mrs. Angeloni.

Marilyn began counting heads. "I'll gather up the children, while you go see..."

Betty Jean nodded. "All right, but wait here. If for some reason I can't move her, I'll send Jenny back; and, when you get to camp, have them send help."

The two women exchanged worried glances, and Betty Jean grasped Jenny's hand. "Come along, dear; show me where she is."

The would-be rescuers had gone but a short distance when, mingled with the frantic ringing of the triangle, Betty Jean could hear Rowena's wailing. "Praise the Lord!" She breathed. "She's alive!"

Heavy dark clouds had obscured much of the blue above the campsite, and the breeze, no longer gentle or friendly, was moaning among the trees. Changing direction erratically, as the two air masses began to collide, it spoke meaningfully of what it might precede.

Working feverishly, Jason and Carlos had the wagon hitched, and their gear safely stowed. Carlos cast an apprehensive glance in the direction of the —woods. "I hope the children are not at a great distance— and that the triangle was heard!"

Nodding, Jason was about to respond when several women, led by Ida and Lorraine approached. Ida raised her voice above that of the wind. "All the children are accounted for, 'cept for them with Betty Jean and Marilyn, out there." She indicated the woods with a wave. "We figure some of the men best be goin' to look for them!"

Jason shook his head slowly. "Don't think that'd be a good idea. Not knowin' where they went..."

Ida was scornfully adamant. "Mostly, they went lookin' for berries. Ain't berries but one place in them woods. We **all** know where that is. If you won't go, some of us women will!"

Jason and Carlos shared an understanding nod. "All right, Id', but let's wait a mite longer. See if they don't come out."

Unconvinced, Ida nodded her begrudging acceptance, as Jason continued. "What I do think we'd better do, is get them folks that don't have young'ns still in the woods, headed back to town."

A sudden gust of wind and flash of lightning added emphasis to Carlos' nodded agreement.

Judging by the rush of activity around them, the idea of getting back to town was not exclusively Jason's. At the same time, a small, anxious group was gathering where the children had entered the woods.

Carlos glanced in their direction with an expression of nervous expectation. "Perhaps, we might move somewhat closer?"

The suggestion met with unanimous approval, and Lorraine bundled the boys into the wagon with a stern warning to stay there. Carlos grasped the team's reins, and the small band began its short trek.

They had covered about half the distance when a second rider arrived with news that a twister had touched down about thirty-five miles east of Garwood. The shroud of despondency deepened, and several of the men, having had enough of waiting, disappeared into the woods. Jason held fast, a decision he would later regret.

As yet, no rain had fallen, but the seconds separating lightning and thunder grew less with each display. Within the increasing severity of the storm, it may have seemed like an hour, but in less than five minutes the excited squeals of the children could be heard. By then, anxious fathers had forsaken their hushed conversations, and taken to pacing nervously. Distraught

mothers wept and prayed, while the waiting siblings submitted to the aura of fear by falling silent.

As the men, with Marilyn, her charges in tow, burst into view, a joyful whoop burst fourth. There was considerable confusion, as grateful, relieved parents scurried to capture surprised progeny.

Jenny, rushing from the group, threw herself into her parent's arms. Although her relief was obvious, it was apparent that her tears were not those of joy. "Mama, Papa," she sobbed. "Rowena's hurt, real bad!"

Suddenly, acutely aware of his self-centered concern, Carlos glanced in the direction of his friends, and hastened to join them. His arrival coincided with that of Marilyn and Louie Angeloni. She smiled wistfully. "I'm sorry, Ida, Jason, I had to bring the children back. Rowena's got a banged up leg— Betty Jean is staying with her."

Jason stiffened. "Banged up?"

"Broken."

Sensing the contraction of her body, and seeing the fear in Ida's eyes, Jason put his arm about her shoulders. "Now, Id'— it's going to be all right. I'll go and get her. It's probably nothin' serious. You just make sure everything is ready for us to leave, soon's I get back."

He hoped his words, the best he could muster, under the circumstances, had sounded more reassuring to Ida than they had to him.

By now, Lorraine and Jenny were hovering about Ida; and, as her lips formed a silent thank you, for Jason, she managed a strained smile for the others.

"Marilyn," Jason addressed the beleaguered teacher. "Can you tell me where they are?"

An expression of despair crossed her face. "Oh— oh, Jason, I- I don't know, for sure... Jenny came running out of the bushes, an- and she and Betty Jean..." The workings of her mind became almost visible, as she sought to recall the site. Then: "Oh— yes, Jenny said they were at the berry patch up by the big rocks... Oh, Jason," her voice was barely a whisper. "I'm so sorry. I..."

Jason placed a comforting hand on the shaking shoulder. "Don't you worry, Marilyn, I know exactly where you're talkin' about. Be there in no time."

He turned to Louie. "Best be gettin' your family home, Lou, we'll be along d'rectly."

Louie fidgeted, uncomfortably. "You sure you don't want me to go in with you, Jason?"

"Appreciate the offer, Lou, but t'ain't necessary, I'll be a heap happier knowin' you and your family are home safe."

Marilyn was shaking her head. "No, we can't leave, we have to take care of Clarisa and Calvin, 'til Betty Jean gets back.

Jason nodded, and turned to Ida. Taking her hands in his, he looked deep into her eyes, and said, quietly, "Id', honey— it- it's going to be all right." He bent and kissed her cheek. "You say a prayer for us, an' we'll be back here 'fore you know it."

Turning to leave, Jason was aware that Carlos was at his side. Sensing his friend's need to help, he turned quickly. "I know it's askin' an awful lot, but could you stay with the women and children? If— if it was the other way around— I- I don't know that I could do what I'm askin', but... Get your family into one of the other wagons and— try to get Ida to go with them!"

Carlos nodded. "Of course, dear friend, there is need in both places. I will stay, and— I will try."

"Thank you, Carlos, I..."

Lacking adequate words, but certain his friend understood, Jason moved quickly into the woods, his great strides carrying him out of sight in seconds.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SUMMER 1899

Having abandoned the less menacing moans, of an overly exuberant breeze, the wind presented a frenzy of frightening sounds. Amid brilliant flashes of lightning, and deafening peals of thunder, Jason pushed deeper into the woods. The trees, refusing to bow obediently before the storm's onslaught, whipped about him threateningly.

"Rowena! Betty Jean!"

The wind seized his words, and hurled them on before him with such force that Jason wondered if the effort were not in vain. What if they weren't where he thought they were? If Betty Jean answered his call, would he hear her?

"Id', honey— it's going to be all right. You say a prayer for us..." His own words seemed to come on the roaring wind. How long had it been since he had used an endearing term— or had he ever?

The question, disquieting as it was, was only momentary, for Jason had come upon a small clearing. At one side a coffee can, caught by the eddying wind, rolled about aimlessly. He stopped to scoop it up. "Must be close," he mused, "maybe where Jenny come back to 'em... Wonder wh...'

"JASON!" A brief lull in nature's cacophony allowed Betty Jean's strong voice to reach him. "Over here! The path through the aspen."

If she had said more, Jason was unaware of it. He was sprinting, and the wind had resumed its demonic shrieking. At the same moment huge drops began pelting his back, he burst upon the distressed pair. Betty Jean, kneeling beside Rowena, was holding the child in a manner that would indicate she was unable to support herself. Rowena, displaying a surprising degree of composure, seemed reconciled to the situation. Her expression, the tear stained cheeks spoke of her pain, and a time when she had been less in control.

The scene offered Jason another opportunity to consider the strength, and resilience, possessed by this wisp of a child. Some of the thoughts were of pride, but predominately they involved humble awe. Moving closer, his eyes came to rest on the injured leg, and he drew a sharp, soundless breath.

Hurrying to Betty Jean's side, he knelt beside her. His lips formed a question, but the words were lost to the wind's fury, and he pointed at the leg.

Betty Jean shook her head. "Can't get her foot loose," she shouted. "Don't dare pull..."

Jason let a deep sigh slide slowly between his teeth. He nodded and, leaned close to Rowena. Kissing her damp cheek, he shouted in her ear. "Ween, honey, everything's going to be all right, we'll have you out of there in a minute."

She made no effort to speak, but nodded emphatically.

He kissed her again and shouted, "This is going to hurt, no matter how careful I am. Are you my brave girl?"

There was a second nod of affirmation, but the plea in her eyes sent a sliver of ice into Jason's heart. He grimaced as he looked more closely at the damaged leg. There had been considerable bleeding, but it appeared to have subsided. *Probably start again when I move her*, he thought. Jason shook his head. *This isn't going to be easy... Anyway I lift her, it's...*

Moving around Betty Jean, Jason positioned himself on the larger rock, and leaned down to slip his fingers beneath Rowena's shoe. It was compressed to such a degree that the sole was bowed downward, convex in relation to his hand. Had they been daintier, less serviceable shoes, he might have been able to reverse the curvature and pop the foot free, but with so little room to work, such would not be the case.

With a shrug, he stood, and glanced about. Coming through the aspen, he'd seen several smaller dead or dying trees. He might find something he could use to pry against the rocks. With luck he *might* separate them enough to release the foot.

The scarcity of raindrops would have afforded one the option of walking between them had not the wind been driving them at right angles to the earth. Even in this vein, however, they offered little more than an aggravation; but the ever-darkening sky, and rising fury of the wind, offered ample reason for concern.

A second, more thoughtful, observation made it clear that moving rocks was not the solution. As large and deeply embedded as they were, he would need a pole of such dimension as to require several men just to pick it up.

He knelt, again. The shoe's sole, wedged as it was between the rocks, was gripped by their surface imperfections in much the same manner skates clamp to one's shoes. The rocks must move or— or the foot must come out of the shoe!

"Of course, stupid!" Jason muttered, and quickly reached for his pocketknife. Giving Rowena a reassuring smile, he shouted, "Hang on!"

Deftly, he slipped the blade beneath the laces. Rowena tensed, but relaxed almost instantly, as Jason brought the cutting edge upward through the bindings. "There," he breathed. "That was easy." Slipping the flat of the blade down next to her heel, he twisted it slightly and drew it out through the leather.

A furious gust of wind tore a small branch from a tree just behind them. As it careened past, it struck Jason a glancing blow, and he felt a shiver pass through Rowena. Patting her head reassuringly, he put his cheek close to hers. "It's all right, baby!"

Carefully, he cut down across the toe, then along the seam joining upper and sole. As the final cut freed half of the upper, the wind's siren screech became a deafening roar.

The nature of tornadoes, well documented long before Rowena's birth, left those who studied them capable of accurately predicting only one facet of their complex nature: Their unpredictability. Even with today's sophisticated equipment, predicting one's path is a science yet to be perfected.

There was no question in Jason's mind as to what the new sound was; he had heard it too often. Then the shoe fell away; the foot was free and he glanced up at Betty Jean. Moving in unison they stood, bringing the frightened child with them. Above the storm's clamor, Jason was conscious of Rowena's scream, then a terrifying sound, and searing pain. What followed, he was never able to fully recall.

It had roared in on gale force winds to swoop down approximately three miles south of town. In the process of gouging out a mile long, quarter mile wide swath of cornfields, fences and pastureland, in gobbling up a barn; one cow was left unscathed, the other animals were never found. Making an erratic leap, it spared the farmhouse, all of Garwood, and the ragtag band of campers straggling along the creek road.

Paralyzing fear held Ida and Lorraine speechless, as they watched the huge, undulating mass appear above the trees, heading straight for them.

"¡*Madre de Dios!* " The exclamation burst from Carlos' lips as he raced to stand at the head of the team. Holding the reins tight beneath their chins, his voice came on the wind: "Réné, Ida! The children, under the wagon! HURRY!"

In seconds, the women were huddled over the children, beneath the wagon. For a short time, the fearful shrieks of Bobby and Ira could be heard above the storm's tumult. Then all human sounds were lost to nature's terrifying pandemonium. In the eternity that followed — possibly three minutes— prayer offered the only escape. They used it with unrestrained vigor!

Watching the wildly lurching wagon, Carlos realized that ordering the women beneath it could have been a death sentence. Drawing the horse's heads close to his own, he leaned heavily against them and, with great conviction, tendered a prayer of his own.

If, by the sincerity of need, and intensity of supplication, certain prayers represent a signal of greater strength, and higher decibel, there is no question that at that moment the communication center of heaven may well have experienced an overload. Such was the state of those who found themselves uncomfortably close to the demons of hell, those who had appropriated, that day, the form and evil intent of a tornado.

With the roar of a hundred steam locomotives, it ripped into The Grove. *Eternity* ended, but the trade off offered an alternative far more frightening. The women watched as the writhing funnel tore into the woods a hundred yards beyond them, ripping trees from the ground as if they were marsh-grass. To Ida its terrifying fury was retribution for having squandered so much of her life on self-indulgent pity. In the desperation of the moment, those who had been an integral part of that life, Jason, by whom she felt so terribly wronged, and Rowena who she had failed so miserably, were in the company of death, and life without them was unthinkable. With this realization came a sense of emptiness that would encompass eternity. In despair, she sobbed uncontrollably.

It is impossible to chronicle all that flashed through Ida Carlson's mind. All that her life had been, from earliest childhood recollections to the humiliating, horrifying reality of the moment, paraded before her. Its projection to life without her husband and daughter was a death sentence, but one lacking the blessed relief of the hangman's noose, or guillotine's blade.

In the eerie aftermath of the storm's chaos, Lorraine and Jenny closed about Ida, trying to ease her anguish. Finally, as her sobs began to abate, they drew her into the open. There they stood in stunned silence, staring in disbelief at the swath of devastation marking the storm's path.

"Oh, Lorraine," Ida whimpered. "Jason an- and my baby are in there! Lord, help me! What can I do— what can I do?"

Lorraine, arms encircling her weeping friend, had only the slimmest margin of control of her own emotions. She could not imagine Ida in such a state. The epitome of resolute

composure, of uncompromising determination, this forlorn, trembling woman was a stranger to her.

Jenny drew away to crouch beneath the wagon, and coax her brothers into the open. Then, with Ira in her arms, and clutching Bobby's hand, she moved close to Ida and her mother. They were standing so when Carlos, his relief evident, joined them. Somewhere beyond the trees, the funnel lifted; and faded into the mass of clouds that had spawned it. Ida, shivering uncontrollably, glimpsed a distant flash of lightning. As she waited for the lagging thunder, a hesitant ray of sunlight darted between the clouds to touch her shoulders, but the shaking persisted.

Blessing himself, Carlos scooped Bobby into his arms, and lifted his eyes toward the source of his strength. "Heavenly Father, we give you praise and humble thanks for sparing these of yours; and for looking kindly on those we go in search of. Be with us— with all those this terrible storm has touched. Give to all your peace; and grant, as we search, that we may move swiftly and surely. Bless us that we do not fail in our mission. As you have told us we might, this we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen."

During the prayer, Ida had sensed her involvement to be far more intense than she was accustomed to. She was warmly aware that her petition had come from a region of her heart to which she was rarely granted access.

Carlos eased his son to the ground, and placed a comforting hand on Ida's shoulder. "Dear friend," he murmured. "Our loved ones are in God's hands, let us be about finding them, and pray that in doing God's will we shall find even more reason for thanksgiving."

By the time Carlos had unhitched and tethered the team, other wagons, and riders were arriving. Hiram Oakes and his eldest son, astride one of his draft horses, had been the first.

"Sent the Missus, and youngest, home with the wagon and the other horse. Figured she could tell folks what had happened.

"Uh, just what is the situation, Carlos?"

Carlos, moving away from the wagon, spoke softly. "We are all accounted for, with the exception of Betty Jean Hauenstein, Jason and— Rowena. She is injured, but we have no way of knowing how severely."

Hiram nodded. Uh-huh— well, soon's a few more fellas get here; we'll get up a search party. We can fan out, and work along the storm's path." He glanced at the sky. "Ain't but about three hours of daylight left. Be a great help if we'd find 'em 'fore dark."

Carlos nodded adamant affirmation. "Yes, I..."

A desperate cry from the woods interrupted him.

"Help! Somebody, please, help!"

Ida's horse whisper cut the stillness: "Betty Jean!"

In unison, Carlos and Hiram bolted in the direction of the voice. As they ran, Hiram shouted: "Yes, Betty Jean, we hear you! Keep holler'n!"

The two men had gone only a few hundred feet when they caught sight of a figure struggling through the brush, far to their left, in a portion of timber untouched by the storm. "Ah!

Betty Jean," Carlos shouted. "We see you, we are coming!" And to Hiram, he added. "If she was not in the path of the storm, perhaps, the same is true of Jason and Rowena."

The statement was more one of hope than expected fact; and Hiram's noncommittal, "Uh, maybe." did not raise the level of expectation.

Betty Jean Hauenstein, nearly naked, her body covered with cuts and bruises, blood oozing from an angry gash over her eye, dropped dejectedly to her knees, shaking uncontrollably, and weeping hysterically. What remained of her clothing, clung to her only by virtue of its blood soaked condition.

Carlos and Hiram raced forward, tugging at their jackets. As they ran, Carlos called back to those back at the clearing. "Blankets, bring blankets!"

Upon reaching the distraught woman, they drew her gently to her feet, and quickly wrapped their jackets about her. Supporting her between them, Carlos spoke softly, "Come, Betty Jean, it is but a little farther. We will help you."

Obediently, the exhausted woman tried; but, with a scream, she collapsed against the two men.

Hiram glanced down. Her shoeless feet were covered with blood. "Carlos!" he pointed at the bleeding feet.

"*Madre...*" The words died on his tongue as Louie Angeloni, and Dwayne Quintain came crashing through the brush with the blankets.

With a curt nod of thanks, Carlos took one and wrapped it about Betty Jean.

As he did so, Hiram, still supporting her, directed the others to select the heaviest blanket for a sling. "Put it on the ground," he said, "and we'll put her on it."

Gently, they lay the whimpering woman on the blanket. Then, with a man at each corner, they made their way out of the woods, and through the desolation of twisted, uprooted trees, toward the clearing.

Being confronted with another's suffering, what remained of Ida's self pity vanished. As the men approached, she, Lorraine, and Beverly Quintain were moving toward them.

"Réné," Carlos called softly. "She will need to be cared for by you ladies. Water and towels will be of much help."

Very carefully, the men placed their burden on a clear patch of grass, and moved discretely to where other returnees were gathering. As they conversed quietly, Beverly Quintain called to her husband: "Dwayne, you and the men fix some blankets in one of the wagons so that we can get Betty Jean to the doctor."

Two of the ladies left those clustered about Betty Jean; and, motioning their husbands to follow, hurried toward their respective wagons. In a short time, one of the lighter rigs had been fitted to make Betty Jean's journey to town as comfortable as possible.

Kneeling, Ida and Beverly began bathing Betty Jean's feet and legs. Glancing across at Ida, Beverly's lips formed a question: *Did you ever?*"

Ida drew a deep breath, and shook her head sadly. "Never," she whispered. "I don't see how she could have walked at all!"

When they had finished, they wrapped the torn limbs in a clean, moistened towel, and drew a blanket up to where two other ladies were removing the remaining fragments of clothing, and tenderly bathing the upper body.

Noting the ugly bruises, and deep lacerations, one whispered softly: "What on earth could have happened?"

As Lorraine worked to cleanse the hideously battered face, Ida moved to a place just behind her. Lorraine leaned back with an anxious frown. "I wish we could do more, some of these cuts are terribly deep."

Gazing down into the pain-wracked eyes Ida nodded absentmindedly. "Shouldn't take too long to get to the doctor. I..." She had no idea how she would phrase the question, but the need offered no options!

Betty Jean, seeing the pain in Ida's expression, drew a trembling breath. "Oh, Ida..." She choked, cleared her throat, and spoke again. "I- I don't know. We were together... There was a terrible noise, something hit my head, and... When I woke up I didn't know where I was— nothing looked the same; I was in a different part of the woods... I- I just started walking... Oh, Ida, I'm so sorry. I- I should have looked for them— I..."

Again, Ida's self-centered thoughts were supplanted by another's pain. In Betty Jean's anguish she saw her own as secondary, and bent close to the swollen face. "Hush, dear. Hush. We're going to find them. I just thank the Lord that you're safe."

Gratitude is sensed at many levels, but that in the eyes of her friend would be held well above most that Ida would ever receive. She stood, uncertainly, and turned to the group of men standing by. "You can put her in the wagon, now— OH, my stars— Josh!"

Josh, Betty Jean's husband, had stayed in town. Now, in her own distress, Ida could sense what he might be feeling. Fixing the waiting men with her gaze, she said, "Find Josh! Poor man'll be half out of his mind!"

One of the men nodded. "Miz Carlson, we'll sure nuff try to find him, but— well, we been talkin', um, but if the storm hit Garwood, they might need help more'n we do."

There may have been others to whom this thought had come, but Ida was not one of them; and, once again, she felt the sting of guilt for being so self-centered.

Under the circumstances, of course, Ida's thoughts were understandable, and acceptable, and it must be assumed that her pain founds its roots in a deeper, suppressed guilt.

With nods of agreement, several men moved forward; and, with gentleness, rarely exhibited by such hardened men, they placed their burden in the wagon. As Claude Murphy climbed onto the driver's seat, Beverly Quintain scrambled into the box beside Betty Jean. "I think it's best that someone be with her— just in case..." She said quietly; and with a soft slap of the reins, the *ambulance* moved away.

With the exception of one wagon, dispatched to town to see if the storm had struck there, too; the original party had returned, and drawn their various rigs in a half circle near where Betty Jean had exited the woods. Later, when it was learned that Garwood had been spared, the children would be loaded into two wagons, and with sever adults, taken back to town.

Beneath dark clouds, both of nature, and the tragic circumstances, the lingering dampness drew a chilling blanket over what had begun as a carefree day. In an effort to warm both body and spirit, a huge fire was built. The women clustered to one side, while the men began planning their search efforts.

Even with several of the women volunteering, it was obvious that their number was barely enough to cover half the width of the storm's path at a time. It was also obvious that darkness would overtake them. A nighttime search would require a front of greater density, and many more lanterns. Murphy's arrival in town would be instrumental in doubling or tripling the number of searchers, but another rider was dispatched to make sure that those who came brought the extra lanterns needed.

They did not allow themselves to think beyond the devastated area; that was their first priority. If they found nothing there, however, a search of the surrounding area would be necessary, and that would take days.

Marking the boundary of their path with strips of cloth tied to bushes and tree limbs, the first team forged ahead exuberantly, but there were few who did not expect it to be a long night.

With the sun sliding beneath the clouds on the western horizon, the fire became an even more welcome addition, and the aroma of brewing coffee helped to disperse the cloud of depression enveloping those waiting.

The women had begun to prepare hot food, and Ida found some measure of relief in busying herself with that. It was, she knew, no more than a brief reprieve, for there was no escape from the sense of doom that had settled about her.

With enough recruits from town to form a second team, that group was covering the remaining blighted area. As Ida approached the fire with an armload of wood, she could not distinguish the whistles and shouts of the outgoing team from those of the returning group. Having added a few logs to the fire, she was aimlessly poking at the flames when Lorraine approached with two steaming porcelain cups. "Have some coffee, dear. You- you look done in." She handed one of the mugs to Ida.

It required pouring off some of the liquid, and grasping the cup with both hands before Ida could contain the cup's contents.

"Mercy," breathed Lorraine. "You're shaking like a leaf. Ida, you- you *know* that they're all right— don't you?"

Ida shook her head, dejectedly. "No, Lorraine, I don't! I don't know or *believe* anything, right now."

Lorraine smiled understandingly. "Yes, I understand, but you must have faith! They're going to be found, found safe and well. I *know* it!"

Oh, René—" Ida's eyes avoided the open gaze of her friend. "How can you say that? They've been lookin' for hours, with no sign of them. Ween's hurt, maybe even—" A shuddering sigh interrupted her. "W-we don't know how bad... I- I'm scared!"

Carefully, Lorraine took Ida's cup and set the two by the fire. Then she gathered her friend in her arms, and whispered quietly: "I think we should pray."

Ida shook her head. "No!" I been prayin' all afternoon, it ain't done no good."

Lorraine looked into the grieving eyes. "We don't know that. Just because God didn't speak to you, or they aren't here beside you doesn't mean that God didn't hear you. Like any good parent, God hears all our prayers. Sometimes, though, we have to wait for the answer. All that God asks of us is that we trust and love. You do— I know you do... Even if you don't think so, right now!

Relaxing her embrace, she stepped back. "Here," she said, taking Ida's hands in hers. "Pray with me." She knelt; and, very gently, drew Ida down beside her.

"Heavenly Father, we're in need of a little help. Our sis— your daughter needs to know that you are true, that you will not desert her. Lord, grant her the peace of your love. Draw her near, and make to shine upon her the wonder of your glory. This we ask in the name of our Holy Savior. Amen.

It would be years before the peace that descended on Ida would come again, and even then not as a reminder of this night. In the quiet following Lorraine's simple words; in the darkening close of that dreadful day; kneeling by a crackling fire it was there. It was there as an all-encompassing, indescribable feeling of well-being, and the absolute assurance that Jason and Rowena were safe.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SUMMER 1899

Despite Ida's revelation, morning's blazing sunrise did little to dispel the chill that gripped the hearts of those in camp. Not even the smell of sizzling bacon and hot coffee, or the fire's roaring warmth seemed capable of penetrating deep enough to ease the sense of dread that pervaded those who had searched, and those who had waited. Throughout the night the teams had continued their quest, only to return with nothing but words of failure. Finally, around three in the morning, they had given up, and collapsed for an hour or two of much needed rest. Even though they had slept with the ache of defeat, they rose with Sunday's dawn, eager to search again.

Although the outing had been conceived by Pastor Quintain's flock, there were several families from Garwood's other three churches. Once word of the tragedy had reached town, the response had been overwhelming. By sundown, the camp's number had increased four fold, and was bustling with activity. A chuck wagon appeared, and food was being served on an around the clock basis. In attendance, too, were Pastor Silvey, of the Methodist church, Pastor Evers, the Presbyterian minister, and Father Dudley. During the night, the youngest, Silvey and Evers, had been among those searching. In his late sixties, Father Dudley had remained in camp offering spiritual solace and guidance to any who felt the need. Now, with the bulk of the camp gathering for breakfast, the three and Pastor Quintain had climbed into the bed of a wagon, and stood shoulder-to-shoulder facing the gathering.

Someone at the chuck wagon banged on a huge kettle, and Pastor Quintain began to speak. "Friends, it appears that this day of worship is going to be spent doing God's work, but not within the walls of a church building. In just a moment, my colleagues and I are going to lead you in prayer, but first, I would like to thank you for your selfless efforts..." He paused for a moment of reflective thought. "I would *like* to, but I won't, because I know none of you came seeking thanks, and for that I am even more grateful. The scripture tells us not to seek earthly rewards because they only detract from those God has for us. So be it." With an infectious smile, he spread his arms to encompass the camp. "May God's greatest blessing be yours! Now, if Father Dudley will start us off, we will each offer our thanks to God for the good people this land is blessed with."

With head bowed, he waited quietly, and Father Dudley opened the prayer: "Gracious, most Holy God..."

None of those on the wagon felt the necessity of offering overly long, eloquent petitions; and, in a very short time, Pastor Quintain was closing with: "Our Father, which art in heaven..."

The assembly, all with differing conceptions of the relationship they shared with God, joined with heartfelt unity in repeating the precious words that were so much a part of their lives. Even the varying opinions as to whether one is to forgive debts, sins or trespasses, seemed only to emphasize the unimportance of such things, particularly when some, of God's flock, are in need, injured or lost!

In the haste of organizing the earlier search teams, little thought was given to the possible need of transporting injured survivors. Now, however, with the search extending into adjacent farmland, a horse and wagon accompanied the party.

No one had seen the flattened line shack the night before, although they would have passed within a few hundred feet of it. Even now, its scattered remnants, resting against a slight rise, seemed to offer little security for lost or injured survivors.

Claude Murphy, having returned from town, was among the first team to venture onto pastureland. Now, as he approached the crumpled building, a peculiar sound caught his attention. As he paused to listen, a meadowlark flashed from a snag and whirred its fluttering way to the next boundary point of its territory. But the sound, coming again, was not that of a bird, and a shout burst from Claude's lips.

"The shack, the shack!" He launched into a lumbering run. "I hear something!"

From the group a confused voice offered "I don't remember there bein' any building out here. Wh..."

A second voice cut him short. "'Course you don't, that's Herb Cathaway's springhouse. I helped him build it. I 'member that crazy door. We took it off'n an old root cellar. Lookit them leather hinges!"

"Cathaway?" The question was laced with scornful doubt. "Their place is two miles south of town!"

The builder stepped forward and fingered the tattered leather strap on the splintered door. "Yep, no question 'bout it." Gently, he lifted the door and tossed it to one side.

Carlos raised his voice, "**Jason, Rowena!**" There was no response.

A momentary silence fell about the group as, once again, they were reminded of a tornado's volatile nature. Then eager hands began removing pieces of broken building. In a matter of minutes, working as quickly as care would permit, they had moved the pile of rubble from its original resting place to a point several feet distant. But, aside from a deep gouge in the soil where the building's flight had terminated, there was nothing.

Angry eyes fastened on Claude Murphy, and that gentleman was about to defend the quality of his hearing when the sound, not familiar to any, but heard by all, came from beyond the low mound.

As one the group began to move up the gentle incline, but the first to reach its crest stopped in stunned silence. As others came abreast, they found themselves gazing into the eyes of a lone coyote. With no apparent concern beyond that of disdain, he stood motionless, eyeing them coldly. Then, uttering the strange sound they had heard before, he lowered his head, and seemed to paw at the earth. Finally, apparently satisfied with the turn of events, or completely disgusted by the ignorance of humans, he wheeled and trotted out across the pasture to disappear into a shallow draw.

"What the hell!" Exclaimed one of the men, and hastened up the rise. Two long strides took him to the top where he stopped with a gasp, and stood staring in disbelief. "Damn," he whispered, and motioning the others to follow. What they saw brought words of surprise, rejoicing and—a few tears. Sleeping peacefully, in what may have been the coyote's den, lay Rowena Carlson.

As they neared the camp, the men began to sing joyfully. Rowena, her leg secured in a makeshift splint, cuddled in the arms of her *Uncle* Carlos, totally enraptured by the attention being lavished on her.

In camp, sounds of the joyous song meant only one thing, and all were crowding toward the place they felt the group would appear. As the sounds grew louder Ida, unable to suppress her desperate anticipation, rushed into the brush, guided by the sounds of the triumphant searchers. Racing through the rubble, her mind delved wildly among the possibilities: Was it Jason—Rowena? *Oh, Lord, let it be both of them!*

Suddenly, bursting from behind an uprooted tree, she was face to face with the singing men. A few feet behind them the wagon, with Claude Murphy driving, rumbled slowly among the piles of debris and broken trees.

The leading men gave way as Ida raced toward the wagon calling: "Claude, CLAUDE! W- wh..." Her voice failing, she simply rushed on.

"It's Rowena," Murphy called, and reined in, as Ida bolted past the team.

In seconds, Ida was in the wagon, and it was necessary for Carlos to lift a staying hand to slow her headlong lunge. His hand, and the sight of Rowena's bloody leg cooled Ida's exuberance, and she buried her face in her daughter's matted hair, weeping uncontrollably.

Not accompanying Rowena back to town had never entered Ida's mind. It was unthinkable, but the conscious decision to do so had unearthed feelings, both rewarding, and disturbing. Feelings she had either faithfully concealed, or had come to consider as nonexistent. There was euphoria in Ida's realization that her love for her daughter, and husband far exceeded what she perceived herself capable of. Conversely, her elation also revealed that love's pain is often equal to, or greater than, its joys. Frustration, despair and anger would come later, as retrospective musings revealed how that love could have flourished from the beginning.

As they jolted along the path to town, these confusing thoughts, and those of not being there when, or— if Jason was found, fostered self-reproach of an intensity that found Ida praying for release.

Dr. Isaacs' expression frightened Ida. "Cliff, what is it? You can fix it, can't you?"

The desperation in her plea did not escape the good doctor, and he quickly realigned his facial features to express complete self-assurance. Closing the door to the tiny surgery, he took her hand in his. "Certainly, Ida... I guess, I was thinkin' about how I was gonna do it... Millie's a good nurse, one of the best, but I could use another pair of hands..."

The request was subtle, but Ida had sensed it coming. She shook her head adamantly. "Oh, no, Cliff— I- I could do it for anyone else's child, but not my own."

The doctor nodded, knowingly. "I didn't really think you could, but... I'll send Millie to fetch Ruth Knutsen, she midwives for me pretty regular..." He paused. "She's not at The Grove, is she?"

Ida shook her head.

"Good!" He breathed a relieved sigh. "Fortunately, there's no sign of infection; and that's surprising, considerin' how long as she was out there. Someone did a good job of cleaning around the injured area— uh, where the bones protruded."

Ida shook her head. "Nobody touched it. The men said it was clean when they found her. All they did was tie it... Well, you saw what they did. There was no bleeding visible when they got her to camp— we just left it alone."

Dr. Isaacs frowned. "Well, somebody did, the amount of dried blood, on the rest of her leg, indicates there was considerable bleeding. Are you..." He paused, caught by Ida's expression. "What is it?" He asked softly.

"The coyote," she whispered. "There was a coyote standin' over her— almost as though he was guardin' her, they said."

The doctor's frown was replaced by a smile. "That explains a lot. There isn't much of anything cleaner than a canine's mouth. I hope the farmer that draws a bead on that critter never learns what he's done."

Ida shook her head in disbelief. "When Carlos mentioned it, I- I never gave it much thought... But, now— now that I think of it, there was something strange about how he said it."

Dr. Isaacs nodded, and squeezed her hand reassuringly. "It's gonna take some time, but it's gonna be all right. Worst can happen— later, we might have to send her down to Des Moines to have it reset. Don't think so, though, I've worked on worse than this."

Ida was not aware of having fallen asleep, but when she woke the lights were on in the little waiting room, and darkness shrouded what lay beyond the windows. Although she had wakened with a start, it wasn't until she saw the doctor that she realized why.

She straightened, quickly. "Oh, Cliff, how could I have fallen asleep? How is she"?

The doctor smiled warmly. "She's just fine, and it's good that you did sleep. You're going to need the rest. They're bringing in my next patient: Jason."

Hearing the words, Ida rejoiced in their implication; but, the sudden release, and the shock of being aware that she was no longer a captive of her fears, loosed an avalanche of emotions. All the worry and frustration, the despair, anger and panic of helplessness came crashing down about her. She slumped back in the chair shaking violently, as sobs coursed uncontrolled through her body.

Dr. Isaacs hurried from the room, and returned moments later with a small vile. Kneeling beside the quaking woman, he pulled her hands from her face, and placed the container against her lips. "Drink this," he ordered sharply.

Obediently, Ida gulped the liquid.

The doctor nodded. "There, it'll take a few minutes, but that will calm you. Try to concentrate on breathing regularly— not too deeply; just nice and easy."

Ida leaned forward her quivering hand clutching at his smock. "J-Ja- Jason," she gasped. "Is- is-- is he a- all r-right?"

The doctor nodded. "It was Hiram brought the news. Him an' his boy. They said Jason walked out of the woods just after sunset. Been caught under a tree. That's about all they could tell me, 'cept it looked as though he had a broken arm." He offered an exploratory smile. "Reckon he and Rowena can knit together."

Ida learned later that, although he had been only a few hundred feet from where he had first found Rowena, Jason had lain unconscious for several hours. Coming to, sometime during the night, and hearing no sounds of a search effort, he began his own, one handed, rescue operation. By daybreak exhaustion had overtaken him and he slept until somewhere around the time of Rowena's return to camp. Hearing the men singing, he had called for help, but had been unable to inspire a response, so he decided to conserve his strength, and concentrate on digging. Freeing himself shortly before dusk, he had walked to camp.

The smile, apparently falling well short of its mark, faded quickly; but Ida had noticed it, and was striving to regulate her breathing. Gradually, as the sedative began to play on her senses, her efforts were rewarded and she managed a weak smile. "They're b-b-both safe!"

Dr. Isaacs nodded. "Both safe, and both gonna be as right as rain in no time. And, although she's still a bit groggy, there's a little girl, in the other room, that would sure be happy to see you."

Dr. Isaacs' felt that with regular monitoring serious infection was not a concern. Once the sutures were removed, if all was as it should be, a new cast would be put on, and there was good reason to expect a full recovery. There was an exception to the doctor's positive prognosis. He had more serious concerns about the scar. It had been his experience, particularly with the female gender, that any disfigurement often gave rise to some form of mental distress.

Because, at the moment, none of this was of such significance as to require Ida's immediate attention, after a few minutes of his soothing *bedside manner*, the good doctor led her in to see her daughter.

Apparently, the only lasting evidence of Rowena's traumatic experience would be the scar, and several pairs of tattered bloomers, brought to that state of disrepair in the few days she traveled about the house on her hands and buttocks before her crutches arrived. It was with a sigh of relief that Ida saw her on them in time to start school, even though it entailed transporting her to and from.

Jason found his cast of only minimal impedance. Ending below his elbow, and with most of his hand exposed, it represented more a tool than a hindrance. The residuals, however — nightmares of Rowena being eaten by wild animals, and his own death — were less easily put aside. These continuing nightmares gave him cause to carefully reconsider some of his priorities.

Jason's difficulties, however, though by no means trivial, were minor compared to Ida's. As real and frightening as her dilemma was, her deepest concern was in knowing that much of her quandary was self-induced; and she wasn't equipped to deal it.

That Ida and Jason were able to find some solace in interaction and sharing was as strong a positive as they had known, but to reason that their marriage underwent a grand transformation would be irrational. Slowly, though, as each began to entertain an awareness of the other's feelings, and needs, the blessing became more obvious. It was a gigantic step toward the goal both wanted but it had yet to be fully understood or embraced.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SPRING 1901

During the months of Rowena's recuperation, she and Jenny became even more inseparable. Much of Jenny's self-effacing reserve was pushed aside, as she became the protector, instead of the protected. By the time Rowena was again able to walk to and from school, they had become masters at finding ways by which they could spend more time together.

It was a mile and a half from the Carlson farm to school. On the other side of town, from school to the crossing, it was nearly half that distance, and that much again from there to the dump. Simple arithmetic indicates that Jennifer and Rowena were approximately the same distance from school. Simple, however, seldom enters into the plans of children when an end, by any means, is sought. There were, depending on the weather, and time of year, at least four different routes, which enabled the girls to maximize their time together. One, in particular, required that one of them walk the entire distance to the other's house. It was of trifling consequence that this resulted in the other walking home alone, because it quite often followed that one or the other was allowed to stay over. The variations were nearly limitless, but none included either girl walking, directly from school to home, without the other.

From the beginning, had either realized that their behavior fulfilled Dr. Isaccs' prescription for exercise, their "skullduggery" would have involved far less intrigue.

Upon reaching the crossing, the girls turned, and followed the roadbed in the direction of the dump. For a while, they walked beside the tracks, content to talk quietly about those things dear to the hearts of two, almost nine-year old, girls growing up in a small rural community.

Rowena's limp, never heavily accentuated, had diminished rapidly during their walking regimen. The injured leg did appear to have retained a slight irregularity, but this may have been due to the scar. Its uneven shape, that of a reversed numeral seven, was still a rather angry blemish.

When the conversation had dwindled to the point of being nonexistent, they involved themselves with walking the rails. Using their books as balance weights, they giggled, skipped and swayed their way along for another two hundred or so yards with complete disregard for time. To anyone, truly committed to traveling some distance on foot, this would have seemed a monumental waste of that *precious* commodity. Had they been asked, however, they would have complained only that there was not enough time to allow the indulgence of finding a longer way.

Discovery of an old horseshoe nail, on those days the train happened to be on time, afforded them the option of placing it on the track, and watching as the spinning wheels transformed their rusty bit of scrap into a thing of shining beauty. These treasured "good-luck" charms could be carried in one's pocket or, with some effort, bent to become a treasured ring.

As was often the case, the 4:10 had yet to become a distant echo when even the novelty of balancing books atop ones head had worn thin. Skipping along the ties took precedent, and this developed into a contest to ascertain who could jump the farthest without stepping into the ballast.

While it was well known that stepping on a line or crack in a concrete sidewalk might bring great injury to one's mother; the fate of one treading on the rock of the rail bed was far too dreadful to speak of. Fortunately, for the youth of that era, it was also common knowledge that if you were not observed in such a transgression, the danger was greatly lessened. Moreover, when two engaged in this hazardous pastime, if they took upon themselves a vow of secrecy, the peril became controllable, offering no threat beyond that of wondrous excitement.

The girls stepped from between the tracks, walking on the loose rocks with reckless abandon. The danger and excitement were gone; clearly visible across the barren field was the narrow path, worn smooth by their small feet in the months since winter's passing had afforded them access to it. Equally as visible, some two hundred yards beyond the tracks, was Jenny's home.

Jenny drew a trembling sigh. "Well..." They stood quietly for a moment before she continued: "Ween, what's it like being a- a- ad- adop..." She stamped her foot in disgust. "Wh-what's wrong with m-m-me?"

Since her first frightening weeks in Garwood, whether it was her association with Rowena, the taunts of the other children, or simply growing older, the severity of her stammering had diminished noticeably. But now, in the midst of a simple statement, she found herself unable to form the pivotal word. Normally, only situations of extreme tension caused this.

For some time, thanks to her mother's patient instruction, Jennifer had been aware of, and partially reconciled to, Rowena's situation as an adopted child. But her totally family oriented life had made complete understanding impossible. She had tried, but had been unable to imagine her parents being replaced by strangers. The mere thought wrenched at the foundations of her life, making it impossible for her to comprehend how Rowena had survived.

"Adopted?" Rowena interjected, matter-of-factly. "Uh dop ted. It's easy. You can say it!"

Jenny nodded. "I- I know, I've s-said it l- lots of times." Her face screwed into a dismal frown as she searched for an acceptable synonym.

Anxious to relieve her friend's distress, and accustomed to responding to partial words and phrases, Rowena was about to answer the question when a triumphant smile burst upon Jenny's countenance.

"What's it like to be an orphan?"

Even as the word left her tongue, her smile faded; she pulled her lower lip between her front teeth pensively, and moisture gathered about her huge dark eyes.

As the word scraped on still open wounds, Rowena stiffened; as too clearly she recalled the taunting voice. It was Carrie Littlesby, who lived in a grand house, second only to the Kamer mansion... Carrie whose vicious tongue, and nasty, conniving ways, left her with no real friends... Carrie, whose only acceptance lay in the many parties her mother had catered for her.

Although Rowena wished with all her heart that she could hate this girl, that inability would be another of those imponderables she would later give thanks for. She managed an understanding smile. "It's all right, Jen. I know you didn't mean it the way Carrie did."

Jenny could only stare dejectedly across the field. The memory, so stark and fresh, was inescapable. Even to one who had come to accept, and shrug off, the sneers, and cruel remarks of her peers, the vision had been frightening:

Carrie Her always-perfect curls danced wildly as she tossed her head defiantly, was standing with her hands on her hips, the anger blazing in her green eyes, belying the sweet smile that wreathed her pretty face.

"Rowena *Carlson*! That's not your real name! My daddy says your daddy didn't want you because you're illegitimate, and he gave you to Mister and Missus Carlson so you could work for them. You're nothing but a dirty, little orphan servant girl!"

To an observing adult, the words came in the manner of a child repeating overheard adult phrases, but they had not seemed such to Rowena.

Not really certain of what she expected, Jennifer was startled by Rowena's response: "Liar, liar! My daddy's coming to get me. He told me so! I don't hafta live with mama and papa Carlson. My daddy is coming to get me... He- he loves..."

All else was lost in her sobs, as she turned and rushed away; but it was not the first time Jennifer had heard Rowena refer to her biological father in this manner. On occasion, she alluded to his visiting her, and described at great length being with him. Jenny had accepted these fantasies without comment; and would continue to, for there was, in her guileless love, that which saw them as representing a terrible need.

Much of the instruction Lorraine Roblés lavished on her children pertained to how they should conduct themselves in the company of the townspeople, children and adults alike. Even though Jenny had sensed that the incident with Carrie might have been a time to override her mother's teaching, she did not engage Carrie in a verbal battle; for it was this type of circumstance that rendered words nearly inaccessible.

Later, as was their habit when encountering words they didn't understand, they had consulted the dictionary. The explanation of *orphan* gave them little beyond what they already knew. It was inapplicable anyway, because Rowena's father was still living. For the same reason, however, the definition of illegitimate took some the sting from Carrie's words.

Jenny reached for Rowena's hand. "Oh, Ween I-- I..." A tear trickled down her cheek. "Oh..."

Brushing back a tear of her own, Rowena took the hand. "Don't worry, Jen," she said softly. "It don't make any difference. I know you weren't being mean."

Suddenly, recalling Jenny's original question, she said: "I can't tell how it is... Bein' adopted, I mean. I don't remember much about not bein'. I remember my mother, sometimes—a little bit..." She paused, searching for memories in those shadowy yesterdays. "She used to sing to me..." The wistful expression changed to one of sorrow or fear. "I used to be scared a lot—after she went away. Seemed like everywhere I went it was dark and cold..."

Jenny was not sure she wanted to hear more, but questions remained.

"Were you scared when you came to live with the Carlsons?"

"Not of papa."

"You were scared of your *mother*?"

Rowena nodded slowly. "Sh-she wasn't my mother— then, and..." She studied the earth at her feet.

Jenny's voice was barely audible, the thought being so incredulous. "Are- are you still scared of her?"

Rowena nodded, still staring at the ground. "She never hits me— an' she does lots of nice things for me, but— I-I don't think she loves me." The words had come with difficulty, but then, almost as an afterthought, she said. "Least, she never says so..."

Jenny shuddered. "Oh, Ween— that'd be awful!"

Rowena closed her eyes. The bridge of memory had spanned the years so rapidly as to be frightening. "I- I 'member my true mother holding me, real close. She was so soft— an' smelled so nice. She'd sing 'bout the lilies of the valley, an' call me her bright and shining star... Oh-- Jen, I miss her somethin' awful, I..."

The breath caught in her throat, and the great tears, trembling at the corners of her eyes, waited only for the second sob to cascade down over her cheeks.

Instantly, Jenny's slender arm encircled the trembling shoulders, drawing the lowered head close to her own. Her heart told her what it might be to face life without her mother, and she wept, too.

It was Rowena to whom composure first returned. She shifted the weight of her books, and grasped Jenny's hand. "I'd best be goin'. It's gettin' late and I got chores to do. Mama'll be mad if I'm not there in time to do 'em 'fore supper."

"Mm-hmm," Jenny nodded. "I wish it was Friday, then— maybe, you could stay over."

In taking their leave, their hands remained entwined to that last moment when, with fingertips no longer able to touch, they finally parted.

Several times, as she trekked into the field, Rowena turned to wave. Jenny's last waggle came from the doorway as the path curved behind a clump of scrub bushes, and Rowena was alone.

This was the time she dreaded, but one she accepted as her part of the friendship that meant so much to her. She knew that Jenny experienced the same sadness when the situation was reversed, and each found the cold more bearable for having spared the other.

Rowena hastened her step, her mind on Friday. This was an area where she might have allowed selfishness to creep into their relationship. Even though Ida and Lorraine saw to it that the nights were equally divided, Rowena preferred those with the Roblés family. They were pure delight. In her childish innocence she was only subliminally aware of the reason, but there was a wonderful contentment that hovered about her following her visits. It would be awhile before she recognized it as the blessing of love, and the nearness of God. This *lack*, however, had no effect on her capacity for love. Lorraine and Carlos were second in her heart only to Ida and Jason. At times, it was Lorraine who came closest to filling the void her mother's death had formed. The two boys were as dear, perhaps more so, than if they had been her natural brothers, and what she felt for Jenny was, at times, frightening. In those moments, for no apparent reason, she would imagine Jenny dead. At each such incident the fear and darkness, her mother's death

had produced, returned ten fold. It was a state, of which, she had no understanding, but it was terrifyingly obvious that if it became reality she would die, for there would be no escape.

It is said, with reasonable accuracy, that love is blind. Certainly, a child's love can overlook, see beyond, or flatly ignore almost anything, which might destroy a beloved dream. Thus it was with Rowena's secret longing for her father. The man whom she feared, who had hurt her, and cast her aside, in her dreamlike memories, was somehow different. She had no fear of this man; his voice soothed her soul, and his smile warmed her heart. This man promised to return someday, and she, with all her heart, believed him.

In this same blind trust the Roblés' poverty did not exist. Her Papa Carlson had always demanded that they live frugally, and it seemed perfectly logical that the Roblés family did so for the same reason. After all, it was necessary; there were more of them.

Whether of need, or a strong aversion to waste, hand me down clothes were a way of life for virtually all children of the day. If any life remained in a garment after making its way through one family, it was passed on. What scraps were left would, eventually, wind up as mops, dust rags or in quilts, but rarely in the trash as long as one thread clung to another.

It seemed to Rowena, reaching back to her earliest recollections of life with Mama and Papa Carlson, that hardly a month past without someone dropping by with a package containing used clothing, a jar or two of preserved fruit, and another of jam or jelly. There were always a few words of greeting from the benefactor: "When Martha heard I was comin' this way, she give me these to leave with you. She sent her love to all." Inevitably there was a waiting parcel destined for someone else along the route of this unknown courier.

It wasn't until much later that Rowena realized what an efficient dual-purpose system it really was. Never were messengers sent on their way without being made welcome at the table of the consignee. Rarely was such a visit allowed to end without the host's offer of a night's lodging. This, if the invitation were accepted, would be followed by another bountiful meal to start the next day's travel. Such incidents, appearing as an integral part of life, allowed Rowena to accept as quite natural the numerous packages going to the Roblés home.

In farming communities, lack of ready cash was generally accepted as unavoidable, but rarely did anyone go hungry. For Jenny's family, however, hunger was an ever-present threat and, at times, a reality. These circumstances made available a laborer whose rate of pay was determined solely by the dictates of one's conscience. Most of the tasks offered were those considered unfit for any fair skinned citizen of Garwood, but Carlos accepted graciously, responding with courteous thanks to whatever miserly imbursement was presented.

Such abuses seemed only to strengthen the Roblés family. Certainly, if they ever longed for more, no word of it was ever voiced by a family member.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SUMMER 1901

Choreography, if the word had found a place in her vocabulary, was not on Rowena's mind, as she moved about the kitchen. It was there, however, in each step she took. Moving in perfect harmony she and her mother performed their precise breakfast routine.

As Rowena smoothed wrinkles from the tablecloth, her mother's voice filtered through her web of thought:

"Only three plates this morning, child."

"Yes, Mama."

Her perfunctory reply was indicative of the mood Jason's absences induced.

"How long will papa be gone?"

"He wasn't sure, but near two weeks, I'd guess."

A sad little smile accompanied Rowena's words: "That's an awful long time."

Ida's nod was for Rowena's benefit; but the pensive smile lay in something she only partially understood: their individual concepts of this man. For Ida, the love/hate relationship was a conundrum. With neither sentiment a truly dominant force, the emotional turmoil was disquieting, at times devastating. With the loving union of Carlos and Lorraine constantly before her, her marriage seemed such in name only. To a qualified observer it might have seemed a complex composite. Certainly, as it existed, it was a state in which neither partner would ever find fulfillment.

In the mind of her daughter, a two-week separation from her papa might well represent a lifetime. For Ida, Jason's absences had always been welcome respites. It was the contradiction, which the latter represented, and the thoughts it initiated, that had first lit the smile. His leaving had prompted unfamiliar feelings of emptiness and longing, while thoughts of his return were filled with expectancy and—excitement!

Since *that* night, Ida and Jason had shared *something* heretofore unknown in their relationship. Though only marginally aware of it, Ida found it disturbing. There was a nagging sense that its beginning had been in an act, which she saw as vulgar, and finding this vulgarity highly desirable, only complicated matters.

Viewing sex as something to be shared in love, as the culmination of a much deeper spiritual union, would have eased Ida's distress. Unfortunately, she was unable to see the love in her marriage, and her quandary deepened as each hour brought Jason's arrival nearer.

Although it would be some time before either would understand the complexities of their differences, the seeds had been sown. Germination and growth would not be easy or rapid, for the parched earth hosted only weeds; but God's rain would fall; the weeds would be turned under, and the seeds of understanding would sprout and flourish.

As Rowena began arranging the table setting, she glanced appraisingly at her mother, calculating her progress with the preparation of breakfast. Coffee had been a reality by the time she had arrived in the kitchen. Now, at the back of the stove, the pot, settled, and ready to be served, steamed quietly. By virtue of their time in the great oven, a batch of biscuits was turning golden brown and, snuggled against the coffee pot, a pan of crisp bacon waited. Ida, having drained its grease into a second skillet, was stirring in flour and milk. Soon, the gravy would be bubbling invitingly. Then Rowena would see it into its serving bowl while Ida cracked eggs into the remaining bacon drippings. Finally, one of them, usually Rowena, would call Hilly. Had this been a harvest breakfast, it would have included oat or cornmeal porridge, and flapjacks or scrapple, everything in overabundance.

Ida had carefully schooled her daughter in the skills required to prepare such a meal, and her confidence in Rowena's ability was well founded. Honing those skills, however, would take some time. Bringing the components of such a meal to the table in unison was an art that required a great deal of practice. So Rowena watched, assisted and, with each new task allotted her, became more proficient.

As Rowena placed the gravy on the table, glanced toward the barn. "Mama?"

"Yes, child?"

"The barn door's still shut. I don't think Hilly's awake yet."

"Nonsense." Ida breathed noisily. "Hilly's always awake when there's food cookin'."

She stepped into the screened porch. "HILLY! BREAKFAST'S NEAR READY!"

She returned to the stove with a smile. "He'll be along d'rectly, don't be worrin' yourself 'bout that."

From somewhere in a developing portion of Rowena's mind, came the amusing thought that nearly everyone in the state was aware of what the Carlson's kitchen offered.

As the first egg crackled into the pan, Ida glanced toward the barn. "Guess you better run see what's keepin' him. Might be he's sick, or somethin'."

The bright spots in Rowena's life had been few. Hilly Hillsbern was one of them. Their association was in the nature of those, quite often shared by the very old and very young. Not being kin, guardian or parent, his acceptance of her, in a world where children were to be as inconspicuous as possible, demanded her respect, and admiration. It was impossible for Rowena to think of displeasing Hilly, therefore, she never did. Consequently, she knew only of him that which was gentle and kind. From him, she learned that communication is not always a byproduct of conversation; and that there is much to be learned about oneself, ones companions, and all that life holds, even in the absence of words. With only minimal understanding of its source and nature, she was aware of the deep love she felt for this strange little man, and of his for her.

As she stepped from the porch, Rowena sensed a chill that even the warm, morning sun could not dispel. At the barn door she stopped. With a furtive glance back toward the house, she grasped the handle, which would lift the inner bar from its hanger. On well-oiled hinges, the great door swung silently outward, and she stepped inside. A quick glance told her that Hilly was not about, and Dolly's soft, questioning whinny confirmed her observation. None of the animals had been fed.

"Hilly." She called softly, looking toward the corner of the building where Jason had built small, but comfortable, living quarters. "Are you 'wake yet?" It is doubtful, had he been awake, that Hilly could have heard, and Rowena moved slowly toward the cubicle.

Although she had no idea of what she would find, a peculiar foreboding told her that it would not be Hilly. Hilly, she knew, was gone. She had sensed it in the kitchen, before her mother had called. Further apprehension had come as she left the house. Upon entering the barn, the truth was hers. What she would find in Hilly's room would offer only visual confirmation, and the opportunity to learn if what remained differed from that she had known and loved.

A few early morning flies buzzed nervously about the room, and the odor, Rowena had come to accept as part of old men, was slightly more prevalent than usual. From experience, though, she had come to expect this as part of summer's deepening. On his bunk, much as she had expected, Hilly lay quietly, fully clothed, and appearing much taller than usual. It wasn't necessary for Rowena to closely examine the corpse to ascertain that no life existed. There was a peace about the face she had never seen. The body, always so twisted and stooped in life, lay long and straight. On the face, no longer pinched against the blazing sun, the furrows of age seemed less intense beneath the pallor of death.

For no reason Rowena was conscious of, she moved to the bed, and knelt beside her friend. Silently, she gave thanks that she would someday see him again, and that his transition to that place, one she had no comprehension of, was peaceful and quiet.

As she stood, a fly landed on Hilly's face. Waving it away, she drew the folded blanket from beneath his feet, and covered him. Then, with a soft, "Bye, Hilly," she stepped from the room, and closed the door.

Having waited for what seemed a reasonable length of time, Ida began putting food on the table. She had finished before Rowena's prolonged absence made impression enough to warrant concern. Her hand was on the screen door when Rowena emerged from the barn. It was clear that she was not concerned with thoughts of breakfast. Ida filled her lungs, preparing to bring the girl back to earth, only to have her daughter's expression snatch that breath away.

She stepped quietly from the porch, and hurried forward. "Rowena, what on earth is wrong?"

The girl looked up with, as Ida would describe many times, "...the wisdom of the ages written on her face..." and smiled tenderly.

"Hilly's gone to be with Jesus."

Ida had heard, and understood, but there is that in all of us that denies the simple acceptance of death.

"He- he **what?**"

Rowena shrugged; and, with the guile of a newborn, renewed her smile. "He's dead."

Ida's mind fell victim to a rush of thoughts and emotions, the least devastating not being those of guilt.

"Oh, Rowena, I- I'm so sorry. I-I shouldn't have, I... If I'd known I wouldn't have sent you..."

Evidently, with the "wisdom of the ages" had come understanding far in excess of Rowena's years. The smile, which had begun to fade, returned in full flower. "It's all right, Mama. Hilly's happy now."

"Happy?"

Recalling Hilly's days off, and the manner in which Jason felt he might be spending them, gave Ida cause for serious concern. When she considered certain other character discrepancies regarding his dislike of hot weather, she was faced with strong misgivings, as to just how *happy* he might be at the moment.

Happy?

The question remained unresolved, but as Ida's words began to form, common sense prevailed. "Well, y- yeesss, yes, of course he is."

It would have been far simpler for Ida had she left things as they stood. A few months ago, she might have, but there was something in Rowena's manner, her positive assurance, which she could not dismiss.

She smiled at the girl, and spoke softly: "You're very sure that Hilly's in heaven, aren't you?"

The girl nodded.

"How do you know?"

Once more the fading smile shown anew; and, with the glory of its return, Ida was intensely aware that she and her daughter were not alone. There was an aura about them. Being almost tangible, it moved between them, drawing them into a circle of warmth and light which, starting from within, embraced not only the spirit and soul, but the body, as well.

The sense of well being grew stronger, more encompassing; and, with the echo of her words still hanging on the air, Ida knew, even before her daughter spoke it, the answer was in her eyes:

"Jesus told me so."

Gazing into the heavens, Ida whispered a quiet prayer and, though it would be one cherished for a lifetime, the moment passed, leaving them alone. Alone, but not alone— and forever changed.

"Oh, Mama," breathed Rowena. "That was nice! Wh- what happened?"

Ida could only shake her head. "I- I don't know— for sure, but I think, maybe— Jesus was here."

Ida moved quickly toward the barn. "Reckon I'd best cover him up— 'till Mister Honnicutt can come for him."

"Mama." Rowena spoke hesitantly. "I- I already did it."

Ida spun around to face her daughter. "You did?"

"Yes'm. Shouldn't I of?"

Ida was beside her daughter, gathering her in her arms. "Well, of course— of course you should have. It was the only decent thing to do, but... Well, my sakes— aren't you the one!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ida felt a tinge of guilt, as she guided Dolly into the Roblés yard. Even in the shadow of the town's refuse, the modest home stood as a monument to the indomitable spirit of its inhabitants; its freshly whitewashed exterior shown in stark contrast to its drab setting. The brightly colored patchwork curtains disavowed the myth that poverty and squalor are inseparable. Whitewashed rocks outlined the drive, and paths about the house, and enclosed the lush flower and vegetable gardens. Extending outward around the house, for at least a hundred feet, was an area picked clean of all trash and neatly raked. In an adjacent fenced field, a horse and cow nibbled at the sparse offerings of the earth.

The door burst open and, with shouts of "Auntie Ida, Auntie Ida," the boys, Bobby first, came tumbling out. They surrounded the buggy like a small whirlwind, calling their greetings to Rowena, and waiting. As her feet touched the ground, they pounced on her.

Whisking Ira up on one arm, she draped the other over Bobby's shoulder, as he clung to her side. His crush on her was a secret in his mind only, but because teasing was not tolerated in the Roblés family, he was able to love from afar within the safety of his *private* fantasy.

As Ida and Rowena started toward the house, Lorraine and Jennifer appeared in the doorway. Jenny came forward to hug Ida.

"Good morning, Aunt Ida."

Her effort was rewarded with a pat on the head, and Ida's detached, "Hello, Jennifer, how are you today?" Then Ida's attention turned to Lorraine.

"'Mornin' Lorraine; sorry to barge in on you like this, but something's come up and..."

Glancing down at the girls, who had already paired off, she said, "Why don't you children run along and play?"

Lorraine, quick to comprehend, added: "My land, Ida, don't make excuses it's so seldom that we see you out here.

"Yes, you children run along. Jenny, take Ween around back where your father is. Let her see what he's building. You boys go along with them, but stay out of the way."

She held the door open. "Come on in, there's coffee on the stove."

Entering the house, Ida could only marvel, as she had done many times, at what Lorraine had done with donations, discards, and just plain junk. These observations were never without pain. She knew that much of what had been accomplished represented not just the talents of this remarkable woman, but the love she shared with her family. Had it been otherwise this house at the dump would have been only that. There was additional hurt in knowing such love could be hers, if only..."

Uncomfortable with her thoughts, Ida changed their direction. "What's Carlos building?"

Lorraine smiled. "He's making a swing for the boys, well— Jenny, too, if she's interested."

She set out two mugs, poured the coffee, and seated herself at the table across from Ida. Then, fidgeting nervously: "I'm sorry I don't have anything else to offer, but I haven't baked yet... Then, snapping her fingers, "Oh, yes I do. There's corn bread left from breakfast. Would you care for a piece— with honey?"

Ida was in the midst of declining when the thought struck her. "OH! My stars! I haven't had breakfast..."

Lorraine was out of her chair before Ida had finished speaking. In a few seconds two dishes, butter, honey and corn bread were on the table.

Ida shook her head. "I— I just, pretty much, left things as they were. won't be more'n food for the hogs by the time we..." She caught her breath. "Oh, mercy! That child hasn't had anything to eat, either!"

Lorraine smiled. "Well, there's plenty of cornbread, but I'll bet she's forgotten all about it. Let's wait and see. If she doesn't remember, I'll call Carlos early for lunch, and we'll all have something, then."

Ida's discomfort became suddenly obvious. "Sakes alive! I can't have you do that. When she's a mind to, that child can eat like a threshin' hand. We'd best be on our way. I got things to see to in town, we..."

Lorraine laughed softly, indicating a huge pot simmering happily on the stove. "Nonsense, Ida, I have beans enough for an army. It's mandatory in this family!"

Ida, having finished her cornbread and coffee, stood. "Is it all right if I leave Rowena here for a spell? Like I said, I got things in town that need seein' to."

Lorraine's hand moved hesitantly to touch her friend's arm. "Ida— would I be prying if I asked what the problem is?"

Ida blushed, and dropped back into her chair, a hand covering her mouth. "Oh, my stars..." She drew a deep breath. "I didn't think it had bothered me that much, but look at me; I'm as flustered as an old biddy with two broods."

As quickly as she could, omitting those portions she found embarrassing and impossible to put into words, Ida related the morning's events, finalizing with, "...and I figure the child's been through enough, no need for her to be there when Bert picks up the body."

Lorraine shook her head. "Well, of course not. Poor child! She can stay here as long as she wants."

Ida chuckled. "Don't let her hear that, you'll never get rid of her."

"I shouldn't be too long. I've got to see Bert Honnicutt, send a telegram to Jason, and talk to Wade Ives at the paper. Might be that a small notice will bring some relative... Heaven knows, I don't know of any!"

Lorraine nodded. "He did seem to be pretty much alo..."

Her words were lost in a piercing shriek, followed by a rush of footsteps as Bobby hurtled into the room shouting at near full capacity of his youthful lungs. "*¡Mama, mama, venga a ver, venga a ver, lo que o Papa ha encontrado!*"

Lorraine held up her hand. *Inglès*, my little whirlwind, English."

Si, si, mama—I mean, yes mama... In the ground, in the ground— come see! There is money! Papa has found money— much money!"

Lorraine stood and, with a questioning glance at Ida, said, "What do you suppose?"

Bobby raced to the door, spun around, and rushed back to his mother's side. Grasping her hand in his two he tugged at her impatiently. "Hurry, Mama, HURRY!"

When Ida and Lorraine arrived at the construction site, they found Carlos on his knees in the freshly turned earth, picking through the shattered remains of a Mason jar. On the ground beside him was a folded sheet of paper, and a partially open oilcloth packet. At a safe distance, Rowena and Jennifer stood watching quietly, while an unconcerned Ira dug energetically in a mound of soft earth.

"Carlos?" Lorraine was the first to speak. "What is it?"

Glancing up, Carlos caught sight of Ida, and removed his sombrero. Dropping it to the ground, he picked up the piece of paper, and stood.

"Good morning, Ida. I think you have visited at a most opportune time." He looked about helplessly. "I find myself in a condition of confusion." He handed her the paper.

Unfolding the yellowed sheet, she turned it slowly until the precisely penciled characters were upright and readable. Then she began to read:"

*This is the property of Amos Dooley. It is money
I have saved for the time when I can no longer work. I
am burying it because it has come to me that this need
will not be mine.*

Ida paused, and glanced about the circle of faces. Save an occasional glance in her direction, Rowena and Jennifer, standing hand in hand, remained motionless. Carlos and Lorraine returned her gaze with questioning eyes, and Bobby gave quiet consideration to words he could only begin to understand:

*Because there are several gentlemen in Garwood,
Mr. Jason Carlson and Mr. Allan Foster, in particular,
with whom I have spoken freely, and considered as
friends, I wish to absolve them all from any feelings of
guilt regarding the fate of my remains. I am not
ignorant of the manner in which white people deal with
the deceased of my race.*

*In burying these words I realize that I mock that
which I would have believed of me, but I must plead lack
of faith, for God has yet to bless me with the freedom of
complete forgiveness.*

*I take comfort in knowing that God, being witness,
jury and judge, overlooks nothing. He will have this money,
and these words, in the hands of whomever He wishes.*

Ida's hands dropped to her sides. "And they shipped him off to Des Moines to be buried in pauper's field—or worse. Dear Lord, forgive us!"

Carlos stepped to her side to put his hand on her shoulder. "For one who knew God as this man did, we should feel no sorrow, but for his persecutors, we *must* ask forgiveness."

Nodding her approval, Lorraine moved to stand beside her husband.

"Carlos is right, Ida. Mister Amos may have denied it, but it's obvious he had faith far beyond what most of us have."

Ida managed a smile, as she nodded. "I 'spose, but all those years in that horrible shack alone..."

"Oh, no, Ida," Carlos' voice deepened with emotion. "Mister Dooley was never alone, he..."

"PAPA!"

There was a flurry of movement, and Bobby, unable to restrain himself any longer, jumped before his father with the oilcloth packet in his outstretched hand. "Money, Papa, much money!"

Carlos took the packet, and cuffed the boy playfully on the head. "Yes, yes, my little jumping rabbit, much money!"

He turned to Ida, an expression of confused concern on his face. "What are we to do with it?"

Ida took the packet, held it for a moment, and thrust it back. "Peers to me, the good Lord has put it in—'...in the hands of whomever he wishes.'"

Carlos stared at the wrappings. "You think we should keep it?"

"I **know** you should keep it! Ain't no other place for it. The note is mighty positive about that!"

The troubled man looked to his wife. "This is your thought, *querida*?"

Lorraine brushed back a tear, and nodded. "Yes, dear, I believe it is God's will."

A slow smile spread across the handsome face. "Then let us give thanks for our good fortune."

Blessing himself, Carlos lifted his eyes heavenward. "Our Heavenly Father, provider of our needs, we thank thee for thy goodness, and humbly ask for the wisdom to use it to thy glory. In your Holy name, Amen."

Ida, strangely uncomfortable in the midst of such open worship, added her amen, but kept her head bowed to avoid eye contact with those present.

"Well—" the laugh in Carlos' voice relieved Ida's uneasiness. "Shall we now *count* our blessings?"

Rushing to his side, the girls cried in unison, "Oh, yes, yes!"

"Count it, Papa, please!" Jennifer squealed.

Very slowly, Carlos drew the wrapping aside and, folding it carefully, stuffed it in his pocket. Straightening the roll of bills, he ruffled their edges several times. Having been packed tightly in the jar, the bundle seemed to grow as he fingered it thoughtfully. Its bulk, however, was misleading for it consisted primarily of ones, some fives and very few, tens.

By the time Carlos had intoned, "two hundred", the children, having little conception of value, but thoroughly impressed by volume, were beside themselves. When it became obvious that the end was near, the girls began to count with him.

"Two hundred eight-one, two hundred eight-two, two hundred eight-three..."

As the final bill fell into place even Ida joined in as they all called out: "Two hundred eighty-four!"

The children's screams startled even the grazing animals. Ida glanced sternly at her daughter, fully intending to rebuke her; but the sheer delight in the child's expression stayed her, and she concentrated on the more pressing matter, their original reason for being at the Roblès home.

Lorraine Roblès, seemingly transfixed, gazed first at the money, then into her husband's eyes. Finally, with a shriek of joy, she grabbed the bills, jammed them into her apron pocket, and fell into his arms. "Oh, Carlos. The children will have new shoes, we will buy meat, we..." Burying her head against his shoulder, she wept without restraint.

The children gathered anxiously about their mother, but Ida gently guided Bobby and Jennifer toward the house. "Come along you two, your mama's just fine. She's cryin' 'cause she's so very happy." Motioning toward Ira, she whispered to Rowena: "Bring him with you."

Because Hilly's death was first noted on a Saturday morning, it was hoped that his friend, in being denied that gentleman's company, might step forward to question his absence. In proving to be an inaccurate assumption this left a number of awkward details for the Carlsons to deal with.

Some time later, a distant relation filled in most of the blanks. Having come across the brief account, Ida had forwarded to the Des Moines paper, this many times removed cousin indicated that Timothy's particular branch of the Hillsbern tree had been, among other things, neither successful nor *legally* prolific. This individual was grateful to add that because there were no legal heirs, the remaining Hillsbern *nobility* would be spared the embarrassment of *dealing* with Timothy's progeny.

With Ida's scathing letter of reply, and Jason's clandestine burning of it, peace and tranquility had, once again, engulfed the Carlson household.

Receipt of Ida's telegram had lifted a great weight from Jason's mind. Since the installation of Carlos as dump master, Jason had been burdened with overriding guilt for the degrading circumstances under which the family was forced to live. As discreetly as was possible, he and Ida had seen to it that Carlos worked at the stock farm as often as Jason could

arrange it; eventually, though, charity will out, no matter how elaborate the disguise. Hilly's passing offered a viable means of offering Carlos a better income, if not a decent home for his family.

Jason felt no shame for his relief. Hilly's life had been long, full, and of his own choosing. These final years had found him in nearly constant pain, and he had been the first to know that he was no longer able to carry out his duties as once he had. For Jason, Hilly's death was a blessing, for which he gave thanks

It was decided, with Jason's return to Chicago, that he would take the Roblès' newfound wealth, and leave it with Charlie Ravenhurst's lawyer. That gentleman would then mail a check to Carlos. In so doing the money would become public knowledge, and could be explained as the settlement of an estate. The simple ruse not only eliminated the possibility of controversy, but it contained enough elements of truth to satisfy the consciences of all concerned.

"Jason?"

It was the evening following Hilly's funeral. Jason was leaving in the morning to resume the business trip Hilly's death had interrupted. He and Ida had been discussing what had transpired during his brief absence, when a lull in the conversation found him dozing.

"Uh, wh... My stars, Idee, I dropped off. I'm sorry, what was you sayin'?"

Ida smiled teasingly. "Nothing, really. I was just wakin' you, before you got too comfortable. The six o'clock train is never late, you better get to bed."

Jason nodded sheepishly. "Reckon I should. Been so busy since I got back, what with the funeral and all, could over sleep real easy."

"Mm-hmmm."

Ida's response left the clear impression that hers had become the wandering mind. "How much did Dooley get paid for takin' care of the dump?"

"Three dollars a month— 'till a couple of years 'fore he died. They raised him to three-fifty."

Ida shook her head sadly. "How's anybody 'spose to live on that?"

Jason shrugged. "Reckon it was mighty hard for him, right at first. But Dooley was a resourceful man. He planted corn and potatoes, dug a right fine root cellar, and had himself a vegetable garden every year. He even sold some of what he grew, he was that good at it. And a lot of what folks thought was *junk* Dooley was able to sell. I know for a fact that he traded for them traps, and the rifle. 'Bout the only thing he had to buy was flour'n salt-- and maybe a little sugar. He'd render anything dead that he could lay his hands on, and some of what he shot or trapped. He never done any cannin', but that smoker he built is one of the best I've ever seen. Carlos is still usin' it. The city did give him a pig, from the hog ranch, once in awhile... 'Bout the *only* thing they ever did for him. He'd smoke some, and salt the rest." He shook his head dejectedly. "Always seemed terrible to me to have a man like him just wastin' away."

"More like criminal," snorted Ida. "The man was well educated. Lorraine says she thinks, 'cause of that letter he wrote, that he might've gone to college. She said it was..." She glanced upward, as if searching the ceiling for the illusive word. "...*literary* language."

Jason concurred with a nod. "Not much doubt 'bout that. I talked with him often enough to know that there were few in Garwood to match him."

Ida fixed her husband with a cold stare. "But you let 'em send him off to pauper's field, just the same."

"Oh, Idee," Jason turned his palms up in a gesture of helplessness. "I didn't *let* them. Wouldn't made no difference how much fuss I'd made, nothin' would have changed."

Ida's attitude softened. "I know. It's a curse, Jason, somebody's gotta stand up to it someday, or the Lord's gonna do somethin' awful to us."

A deep, trembling sigh, emphasized Jason's concern for Ida's despondency sense of frustration, and his deep sense of frustration. "You're right, Id', and someday, the Lord willin', someone will."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EARLY FALL 1901

By proclamation, of the kitchen clock, the day was ending. On the western horizon, clinging tenaciously to its final moments, the sun seared the gathering clouds with a swath of glorious color.

Rowena, hands deep in hot soapy water, stared out past the barn, beyond the corral, and into the deepening shadows of the east. There, in the fading glow, earth and sky blended subtly as one. Lifting a plate from the pan, she held it for several seconds before allowing it to slip back into the water.

"Rowena!"

With startling accuracy, her mother's voice found its mark, jolting her back to reality.

"Are you going to fall asleep in the dish pan? My stars, child, I've got better things to do than stand here while you wander 'round in dreamland!"

Rowena grabbed the dish, and thrust it into her mother's waiting hand. It was a rare treat when Ida helped with the dishes, and Rowena, very grateful, had no wish to have it end.

"I swear, child, you act as though you're in some kind of trance. What on earth is wrong?"

Quickly, Rowena retrieved another dish, swished it halfheartedly with her cloth— then paused, her elbows resting on the edge of the pan.

Ida eased the imperiled dish from her daughter's sagging grasp, and spoke quietly: "What's wrong, dear?"

From the beginning of their relationship, Ida had sensed Rowena's need of a confidant. Her effort to fill that exigency, though valiant, had been only marginally successful. Some of life's biological aspects she was unable to speak of openly. Experience had told her how desperate Rowena's need would be, and Ida lived in dread of the day when discussion could not be put off. It was a fearful challenge— one she was not prepared to confront.

In Rowena's early years, Ida's inhibitions offered only minor difficulties. Their discussions, and they were few, rarely dealt with subjects that Ida was uncomfortable with. As time past and Rowena's field of observation enlarged, her curiosity about those *things*, young minds find so confusing, and— fascinating, regularly provoked Ida's generic policy statement: "Young ladies don't talk about smutty things!"

Until Jenny, and the gentle intervention of Lorraine Roblés, Rowena's access to *worldly* knowledge had been limited to the dictionary, and the rudiments provided by farm life. She had deduced that *smutty* embraced a multitude of things, most of which seemed rather nasty, and involved parts of the body she considered private.

Her present dilemma involved a number of words she had heard at school. Lacking access to her greatest source of information, Lorraine Roblés, she had gone to the dictionary.

Two of the words she never found, and the definition of the third left her more confused than ever.

"Mama... Um, uh-- what's a half-breed-greezer-whore?"

The words, spoken with no discernible inflection, triggered an instant reaction in Ida. Without need of visual affirmation, Rowena was aware of the arched brow, the mouth drawn into a narrow line, and the relentless probing of her piercing eyes. It was always so, as though without saying or doing anything she was suddenly guilty of some evil deed. And yet, for all the anger, there was something else, something Rowena could only see as fear. Certain that her mother knew nothing of such an emotion, Rowena was only more troubled, and less inclined to broach a less than tasteful subject. Had this not been so important, she would have lived with her ignorance.

Rowena had been surprised, that morning, to find Bobby waiting at the crossing. Jenny, he told her, had left for school early in order to talk with the teacher before class. It was then that Rowena remembered Jenny's sharing those intentions the preceding afternoon.

Surprise was again hers when she found Jenny still on the school grounds talking to Thad Henessey. A new boy in school, Thad's family had recently moved from Texas. Loud and boisterous, Rowena had found little in the boy to like. He delighted in bullying anyone smaller than himself, particularly the girls. Her feeling, that his stories smacked of, in the kindest sense, an overly developed imagination, further enhanced her lack of enchantment. Obviously older, and larger, than his classmates, there were whispered questions as to why he was still in sixth grade.

As Rowena had approached the two Thad made a gesture by encircling the forefinger of one hand with the thumb and forefinger of the other. She had seen this before, and was vaguely aware that it's meaning qualified as being smutty. Some of Thad's words had escaped her, but she had come within range in time to hear:

"Come on, I know all about you greezers; I know you done it before!"

Jenny had uttered a sharp cry and, taking a short step back, caught Thad a vicious blow across the cheek with the flat of her hand. The startled boy, fists clenched, had seemed ready to strike back, but his bravado faded in the face of Jennifer's defiant anger. Standing firmly, feet slightly apart, her blazing gaze striped away any remnants of the facade; the bully was a coward.

Without warning Rowena's body became indifferent to her bidding; she trembled uncontrollably as Thad backed away screaming a barrage of vile sounding words. His final tirade had seemed to be a summarizing phrase, its words bound to no meaning she was aware of:

"Lousy little-half-breed-greezer whore! You done it, I know you done it! Prob'ly a lotta times!"

Jenny's books had tumbled to the ground as her hands drew into hard knots. She took a step toward the boy, and his retreat accelerated dramatically.

"Jenny!" Rowena's cry came as a pathetic scream, and she fought to keep her breakfast within the confines of her moiling stomach, as her mind hurtled back to another scene of violence.

It was the day after the black wreath had been hung on the front door, and she had been told to stay out of her mother's room. Her father had taken her to Des Moines to a fine big store

full of wonderful treasures, and irresistible smells. They were greeted by a kind lady who, after a few quiet words with Rowena's father, led her to a special part of the store where all the beautiful clothes had been made especially for her. Strangely, amidst all the lovely things what she remembered most vividly was that the lady seemed ready, at any moment, to cry.

Rowena hadn't been too pleased with the colors chosen for her. Everything, from shoes to hat, was very dark; the hat, Rowena thought, was ugly. This discrepancy could not dim her spirits, though, and her heart sang as they left the store.

Rowena had never known kindness from her father. There were no fond recollections of being safe and warm in his huge arms, of being rocked and sung to. Those precious times were given by her mother—and yet there were, in the ethereal assemblage of infant memories, gossamer pictures, faint perceptions of moments when, floating like a feather, she had looked down into those beautiful, laughing black eyes, and known nothing but love. There were vague recollections of an instant of giddy emptiness. Then a breathtaking fall, which ended joyfully as she was caught in those great arms, and drawn against the warmth of him. There she had nestled, safe and secure, sensing the vibrations of his deep voice as he hummed a gay little tune, and whirled about the room to the accompaniment of her mother's lovely laughter.

So precious were these transparent bits of her past that she had wept bitterly as they became more and more difficult to call from hiding. It had been impossible for her to attach them to the man she knew as her father; but that day, as they had left the store with the box containing her new clothes tucked under his arm, she gazed adoringly at the giant walking beside her. Suddenly, in a time of suffering she had yet to be aware of, he had become all the things she had dreamed him to be.

All that remained of the incident, which followed, was that which fear had seared into her brain. There had been terrible anger, violence and blood, but the details were nonexistent. There was a stranger, a man nearly as large as her father. He was shouting loudly as they were about to board the trolley. One of his words had been repeated several times, but it had been lost amid all the others. Her father had lifted her onto the vestibule, and handed the package to the conductor. Then, as he turned to face the stranger, the word had come again, and the man attempted to strike her father. What ensued, never clear in her mind, had suffered even greater distortion with the passage of time. Her father's huge fist... The startled eyes... Blood spurting... The eyes closing, and slipping from sight, as she vomited on the conductor's crisp, clean uniform.

From the place Jenny's anger had taken her, Jenny's sobs had brought Rowena back to the present. They were great trembling sobs, torn from deep within her being; coming so fast that Jenny could scarcely catch her breath. Still unable to move, Rowena watched, as her dearest friend, head bowed, wept the bitter tears of humiliation, poverty and degradation.

With great effort, Jenny had lifted her head. A choking sob burst from Rowena's lips, as the tragic expression revealed her friend's terrible pain. Hot tears spilled past their restraints, and she rushed forward to place her arms about the trembling shoulders. "There, there, Jen, it's all right, it's all right." Her words, the only ones available, were those that had given her comfort in times of sorrow and pain; but that day, in the company of Jenny's misery, they had been sadly lacking.

Normally, raised voices and clenched fists would have brought cries of *fight, fight*; and, in less time than it took to strike the first blow, a ring of bodies would have formed. In the following bedlam, the onlookers would shout encouragement to their favorite gladiator. Usually,

in the time it took a teacher to arrive, a nose had been bloodied or an eye blackened. Occasionally, a grudge was held, but it was a rare occurrence.

That morning there had been no crowd, no shouting. Those who understood found it embarrassing or disgusting, those who didn't were frightened by the level of anger displayed, and the hurt so obvious in Jenny's appearance.

For a few moments there had been no sound, no one moved or spoke. Then the girls, particularly those of Jenny's age or older, began coming forward, some singly, others in groups. With hesitant hugs, or gentle pats on a shoulder, they offered quiet words of consolation.

When she had regained composure enough to speak, Jenny whispered: "Ween—I want to go home."

Rowena nodded, and guided her toward the road. They had taken only a few steps when a hesitant voice stopped them:

"Jenny..."

They turned to find Carrie Littlesby, Jenny's books in her outstretched arms, moving tentatively toward them. "Jenny, I— here... I- I picked up your books."

Reaching for the books, Jenny offered her whispered thanks, and Carrie managed a sad little smile. "You're-- you're welcome... Jenny, I- I'm— I'm sorry— I..." The threat of tears denied her further words, and she hurried away.

As the two watched Carrie leave, they observed a group of the older boys escorting Thad Henessey around behind the outhouse. Their intent, unbeknown at the time, became apparent later: Thad's return to school, after being absent for two days, revealed some rather nasty bruises, and a decided change in attitude.

As they reached the road, Rowena perceived a strange sense of well-being. It troubled her that something so terrible could cause this. It seemed so wrong, but there it was. A door had opened; and, together, she and Jenny were passing through it.

"ROWENA!"

The echo of her mother's voice banging about the room reaffirmed Rowena's return to the real world of the ignored dishpan.

"Where did you hear those words?"

"A- a boy said them, and a lot of others, to Jenny at school, today."

Ida's hand covered her mouth, and she gasped. Shaking her head sadly, she handed Rowena the towel "Here, wipe your hands and sit down— there at the table."

Ida hurried from the room. Returning moments later with the dictionary, she placed it on the table, and drew a chair close to Rowena's. Turning the book so they could both read, she seated herself.

For a considerable length of time, Rowena stared at the huge book, uncomfortably aware of her mother's trenchant perusal. Bitterly, she wished that she had opted to continue on in silent ignorance. Lifting her gaze, she was surprised to sense more than a trace of concern in her mother's eyes. There was a hint of warmth, even understanding suggested by her soft smile.

As their eyes met, the smile faded slightly, and Ida said, "Well, I certainly hope it wasn't any boy from Garwood who said those terrible things!"

Rowena shook her head. "Not really... It- it was Thad Henessey— he- he's from Texas."

Ida nodded righteously. "Might have guessed as much."

She paused, pretending to straighten her apron. "You know, child, we've never had any real mother daughter talks..." She left the thought momentarily airborne. "And—" the word came with a sigh of resignation, "I guess we never will, least ways, not like some girls and their mothers do. Oh, I've told you the important things— 'bout growin' up... Probably not as much as I should, but Lord knows, that was bad enough— an'," she sighed again, "a lot more'n anyone did for me."

The words, offered as an excuse, or in self-defense, spoke not only of bitterness for what had been, regret for what had not, and of a deep sorrow because she was unable to foresee any improvement— ever.

Then, in response to an acute sense of guilt, she added: "You haven't started any of that, yet, have you?"

Rowena shook her head, and wondered if the question indicated she was expected to keep secret her coming of age; and, if so, how?

"Didn't think so, but could be most any day, now."

Bordering on being personal and frank, the conversation, thus far, had surprised Rowena. She and her mother had shared very few intimate moments. The sensation only deepened as Ida continued:

"I'd always hoped that I could tell you all the things you'd need to know, least ways, those—I alwa..." In the absence of adequate words, Ida fell silent.

The *confession* had taken Rowena well beyond mere surprise, but the lack of words left her in awe. Although Ida had never struck Rowena, her ability to be absolutely brutal with her tongue was well known, and Rowena had no recollection of her ever being at a loss for words.

It was Ida's gaze, now, that faltered. She glanced away, avoiding Rowena's questioning scrutiny. As though sensing the child's thoughts, and finding them similar to her own, she stared into the guileless innocence, and shook her head sadly.

"Some of them words you can find in the dictionary —I'll spell 'em out for you — but greaser," she pronounced the word with precise distaste, "probably won't be there."

"Uh, you remember summer last, when we all went up to the Capitol for the big doin's?"

Rowena nodded.

"There was folks from Luther, Jordan, Ogala— all 'round the state. We all had a grand time. The different towns had teams entered in the contests, races and such. Everyone from Luther and Ogala was cheerin' for their team, and hollerin' at the other team, no matter who they was playin'. The folks from Jordan and Garwood were doin' the same thing... It just sorta went round and round."

She glanced pleadingly at the girl. "You see what I'm gettin' at?"

Rowena's hesitant nod belied her state of mind.

"No, of course you don't. Well— let's suppose a team of folks from Jefferson County were playin' against a team from Green County. All the folks from Jefferson, that'd be Garwood, Jordan and the others, the same folks that'd been hollerin' at each other, would be yellin' for *their* team, and yellin' at the folks from Green. Then if our state was to have a team that played against some other state, say Nebraska, all them folks who'd been hollerin' at each other would be hollerin' at the Nebraska folks. You see— folks can be hollerin' *at* one another, one time, and *for* one another, another time."

Words for Ida, particularly important ones, did not come as easily as was assumed by those on the receiving end of some of her more scathing remarks. In this instance they were extremely important, and she cursed her inability to find better analogies, or coordinate thought and speech. She stared down at the table. *Stupid woman! You'll have the child asleep 'fore you get 'round to the point!* Shrugging, she took a deep breath. "Well, this is the way it's suppose to be all the way up. 'Till everyone in the world is cheerin' for everyone else..." Her soft sigh underscored her frustration at being unable to understand what she was trying to explain. "'Cept it don't work that way. Somewhere along the line, it stops bein' a fun game, and folks get to hatin' each other cause they come from different parts of the world. Because most of 'em don't know anything 'bout anyplace but where they live, they don't understand why some folks talk different, and act different— or have skin that's not white."

Rowena's eyes widened as a correlation appeared. "Thad talks different— an' and I don't really like him— but papa Roblés has brown skin, and everyone likes him.

Ida's sardonic smile found its roots in Rowena's innocence. "Well, yes, child, it does seem so, but..." She lay her hands palms up on the table. "What you heard that boy say today tells us that ain't altogether true."

The broadening dawn played about Rowena's countenance, but Ida's smile remained grim.

"We don't have names for folks from Luther, but there are some names for folks from other states, and some of them aren't very nice. Greaser—" again, the revulsion was there as she pronounced the word, "is a name— a bad, nasty one for folks who come from Mexico."

Rowena's interjection was brushed aside, and Ida continued: "Jenny's daddy, Mister Roblés, is from Mexico. He and Jenny's mama met a long time ago, when she was a missionary down there. They fell in love, and got married, just like..." Her brows lifted slightly, and her expression was that of one stumbling upon the answer to a long vexing question. "They— they fell in love, and got married, just like, um— just like your papa'n me."

The words, coming as a declaration, were fostered in the deep longing she had struggled to suppress. Rowena accepted them only as they were intended, but in giving them voice Ida found relief, a sense of elation similar to that found in dawn's end to a fearful night. It was a fleeting juncture, eclipsed by the conflict of the moment, but its shadow lingered, tucked expectantly in a corner of her heart.

Ida looked sternly at Rowena. "Now, don't you go askin' me to explain what I'm going to tell you, 'cause I can't, but as sure as I'm sittin' here, it's true. You may not realize it, but you've already seen some of the trouble it causes:

"Most folks don't see anything wrong with people from different countries gettin' married, as long as their skin is the same color..." She lifted her eyes heavenward. "And if they have the same religion..."

Ida could see the confusion in her daughter's eyes. "I know this isn't makin' much sense, but... Your mother was French, and your father was German. That weren't no problem when they got married, but he was Protestant and she was Catholic; that was a problem. So she changed her religion, and everyone was happy. It usually works that way, unless— unless one of the folks is Jewish..."

Rowena saw the flash of anger, and cringed. "Mama?"

"Oh, it's all right, child. I was... I guess, I was tryin' to cry over spilt milk. Anyhow— Mister and Missus Roblés got married because they loved each other. It didn't make no difference that their skin wasn't the same color. She was a Baptist and he was Catholic, one of them could have changed, but they didn't, 'cause that didn't matter, either— least ways not to them. They were happy being what they were."

The plea in Rowena's eyes precluded Ida's dread of the forbidden question, and her sense of fairness demanded that Rowena be allowed to voice it.

"If Mister and Missus Roblés don't care, what difference does it make to anyone else?"

Tears welled and, in the shame of her ignorance, Ida found an answer: "Well, child— I can't say that I know for sure, but it seems as though folks is afraid of anything they don't understand, or haven't taken time to learn about. And, I think you can understand this part, anything folks is scared of, they sure ain't gonna like!"

In the way she felt about school Rowena could see a parallel, and her world became noticeably less comfortable. In this, and her experiences with prejudice — she recognized the acts, but not the word — she was becoming painfully aware of the hurtful complexities of Jenny's everyday existence.

Unable to gauge the extent of Rowena's revelation, Ida smiled comfortingly. "I know this is a big piece for you to chew, all at once, but I think it will help you. One thing I want you to remember: If a person comes from Germany, they're German. If they're from Mexico, they're Mexican. You don't need any of those other names, so don't you pay them no mind! Mister Roblés is a fine man! He is better educated than most of the men in Garwood, and he works harder—" she looked away for a moment. "And you know what kind of jobs he gets, all the dirty, nasty ones white folks don't want to mess their hands in. He works night and day to keep his family fed and covered— and look what it gets him: People talkin' behind his back, some snot nosed brat sayin' terrible things about his beautiful daughter, and his wife not being able to buy the medicine she needs 'cause they don't have enough money."

Again Ida looked away, and Rowena was surprised to see her mother brush a tear from her cheek. In an evening of revelations, this certainly was not the least, for tears were not part of her mother's life, at least that Rowena had had ever seen.

For several minutes Ida continued to stare at the darkened window. Then, with a flourish, she straightened her apron a second time and said, "Well, I've told you this much, I might as will give you the rest of it. Won't mean much, now, but you'll remember— later on... No matter how crazy you think this all sounds, there's another part, even crazier, and it's important to you:

Everything I've told you— well, most of it, is different for men. A white man can marry a brown woman, and won't nobody make much fuss. Seems as though men make the rules to suit themselves— at least white ones. I don't know if folks in other countries act the same way; but I 'spose they do, folks bein' what they are. I do know there is something awful wrong in this world, and every night I pray that the Lord will find the time to do somethin' about it!"

A change in her mother's demeanor became obvious to Rowena; determination had replaced indecisiveness; and the strength of her conviction was evident in her expression. Already viewed by Rowena as intimidating, this woman represented a true threat; but, strangely, not to her. It was this assurance that gave her the courage to probe more deeply.

"Mama, I looked up *half-breed* in the dictionary, why is it a bad word?"

"It isn't, child, not 'till you use it in a bad way. You remember, I told you that your mama was French and your daddy was German?"

Rowena nodded.

"Well, because of that, you're a half-breed. Half French and half German, but 'cause they was both white, nobody can tell by lookin' at you, so it don't make no difference."

"Is that why it's a bad word for Jenny?"

"It's only bad for Jenny cause they say it so's it sounds like she done somethin' wrong, like it's wrong to be that way— which, even if it was, it ain't her fault. An' the only reason folks talk that way is 'cause they can *see* the difference! You see, it goes right back to what we been talkin' about!"

Rowena nodded, blinking back a tear. "No wonder it hurt Jenny so much... People must say that all the time."

"Well, I would hope not so much here in Garwood, least ways, not now that they've been here awhile. Folks do kinda get used to such things, once they finally realize there ain't nothin' bad comin' from it."

"Mama?"

"Yes, child."

"I couldn't find the other word... Wha- what's a-a whore?"

The tension returned to Ida's face, and the determined confidence seemed to fade.

Rowena knew she had entered the forbidden zone. "I wouldn't've ask if I could have found it, but I- I guess I can't spell it right."

Tight lipped, and frowning, Ida rose from the table, and took a pencil stub from the drawer. On a scrap of paper, torn from her grocery list, she printed two words: PROSTITUTE, WHORE. Holding the paper before Rowena for a few seconds, she said, "You remember how to spell them?"

Rowena nodded.

"Good. You look 'em up in the dictionary; and- and I never want to hear you use either of them. Not ever!"

Ida stepped to the stove, lifted one of the plates, and dropped the paper onto the glowing coals. Then she turned to face Rowena. "NOT EVER!"

Rowena bobbed her head obediently. "Yes'm!"

Ida frowned. "Dish water'll be stone cold. Good thing there ain't many dishes left."

Rowena took her place, and began to wash. The water was still comfortably warm, but it seemed wise to leave the discovery unreported. She wasn't certain that she had understood all her mother had told her; but, if nothing else, it had been a first— a momentous occasion; and the words had burrowed deep into her subconscious. From there, in the years to come, they would become the anchors for her, much broader, philosophy.

Shortly after committing her body to the bed, Rowena realized that sleep would not come easily. Lying quietly in the darkened room; she wondered about the time. The last striking of the clock had found her so deep in thought that its chiming had gone uncounted. Now, waiting for its tolling of the next hour, her mind examined the frightening, and mysteriously provocative images evoked by the definitions of words heretofore unknown to her. Of considerable concern, however, was the fact that some of those definitions had only partially satisfied her need. This she would discuss with Jenny— later.

Rowena had never really understood the reason for Jenny's lack of popularity, or what was behind the unkind remarks made by some of the children. It had been impossible for her to attach certain words to Jenny. Hearing, Mexican, whispered in a nasty manner had never made sense. Now, as she considered her observations, and what her mother had told her, a strange, perverse rationale began to emerge. Without giving a reason for it, it provided a beginning perception of the bias involved in the inane, convoluted thought processes entertained by the bigoted mind.

Unable to attach names to these acts, she found so distasteful, Rowena's innocence had seen Jenny's minor speech impediment as the reason for the cruel words, and acts, she found so senseless. Childish innocence, however, did not offer full absolution for ignoring a wrong, even one she did not understand. This would be a burden Rowena would carry through her maturing years.

Among these thoughts, too grave for a ten-year old mind to cope with, were those, equally crushing, of her biological father. There is no reason to suspect that she would ever have left Ida and Jason, but her desperate need to know, that his love, and need for her, was as great as hers for him, was overwhelming.

Such an attachment, under the circumstances, lies beyond comprehension. She had but two positive recollections of her father. One from the store in Des Moines — that favorable only because she had forced from her mind what had preceded and followed it — the other of those great laughing eyes, and the wonderful peace she knew nestled in his arms. This memory she clutched to her heart, as a hawk might grip its prey; and, she was there, safe and secure in his arms, when sleep found her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LATE FALL 1901

The sun had set without fanfare somewhere beyond a layer of dark clouds, and the early evening breeze bore more than a hint of approaching winter. The logs, in the great fireplace, crackled quietly, and sent dancing flames upward along the blackened stones, offering welcome relief from the encroaching chill.

Still savoring Ida's special *welcome home* meal, Jason sat quietly; content to watch the fingers of light and shadow darting about the room. The soft folds of Ida's hair captured a few errant glints, and they glowed in a manner inviting enough that he allowed himself a moment of fantasy: Her head on his shoulder, his face nestled in those dark, luxuriant strands, and her contented sigh as his lips brushed her ear.

The rattle of Ida's darning gourd shattered the moment, but he smiled appreciatively, as her fingers worked their magic on another, oft repaired, sock.

This part of marriage was as Jason had anticipated, but it ended there. Because he considered the vow to love to be as important as that to honor and obey, it must be assumed that Jason had expected love to be automatic. After all, the mutual love he shared with his parents, and siblings, had required no effort on his part. It was simply *there*. He would be for Ida what his parents had been for him, so why would she not love him? His certainty that, love would come in this manner, left him ill prepared for the reality of his marriage.

Whether Jason would have found the love he sought in any secular relationship, will remain a question unanswered. Having been very aware of the deep devotion his parents shared; and, as yet, unable to recognize those virtues in his marriage, he was left believing that love was lacking.

The love Jason and Rowena shared was that of two having a common need. In the beginning, being simple in nature, it required little of either; but as they, and their love matured, and Jason was exposed to the multifaceted nature of love, something far deeper, and more complex, had emerged.

Ironically, the needs of Jason and Ida differed little from those of he and Rowena, but a common desire to fulfill them seemed beyond their reach. In his ignorance, Jason's marriage was a disappointment. For Ida, for the same reason, it was something closer to a disaster.

Differing dramatically from previous ones, Jason's homecoming had been filled with surprises. Ida's welcoming embrace, in itself startling, had offered a hint of anxious relief. Deeming this a devious ploy, Jason's response had been less than gracious. Later, finding no basis for his suspicions, he was beset by troubling thoughts:

Had he been aware of such overtures in the past, and refused to acknowledge them? Could he have become so engrossed in his own yearning—his self-pity, that he had ignored Ida's need, a need, perhaps, as great, or greater, than his own?

What her embrace had hinted at, Ida's kiss emphasized, and her whispered, I missed you — a confession never before voiced — echoed plaintively; presenting reason enough for his

concern. As evening waned, these searching questions led to greater discomfort, for with them came an increasing awareness that Ida's need, just as his, went well beyond the bedroom, or that of mere companionship.

Following Ida's suggestion that they retire early, Jason, though still troubled, had experienced a sense of expectation rarely provoked by anything in their marriage. Later, confirmation was his in Ida's awkward, but willing, submission. With that, and what followed, another portion of the wall crumbled.

Had the night of Jason's return not involved far more than either he or Ida could have imagined, the following days would have provided them ample time to slip back into their *normal* routine, but they hadn't. There was a difference. Ida knew it; Jason knew it, but they could no more identify it than deny it.

As Rowena studied in the kitchen, Jason glanced across at his wife. "Idee?"

"Hmmm?"

"You be happy?"

The gourd fell noisily into the basket, despite Ida's desperate attempt to catch it. "Wh-what ever would make you ask that?"

He pondered, but only a moment. "Not sure, really, but-- are you?"

She had retrieved the gourd; but, with her trembling fingers refusing to cooperate, she set it aside, again. "Well, of course, I am. What woman wouldn't be? I got everything— anyone could want."

Jason, keenly aware of her barely discernible pause, was certain that it exposed Ida's *everything* as being as incomplete as his.

The darning resumed, but the flying fingers paused ever so slightly, as she asked quietly, "Are you?"

"Uh, no, I— I mean, YES!" It had not been Jason's plan to *answer* questions; the possibility of revealing his own feelings caught him between thoughts. "W- well," he stammered, "mostly I- I am, but— in a way..." His confidence, and original direction seemed, for the moment, nonexistent. Then the cobwebs fell away: "No. No, to be real honest, I'm not..."

It was an opportunity he had not expected, and it beckoned intriguingly, but he allowed the moment pass without pursuing it.

Ida's brows came up sharply, but with no word forthcoming, Jason continued: "I worry some about Ween. It's a long walk to school, and..."

This time Ida did speak: "Fiddle sticks, Jason! That child walks twice as far as need be, just so's to be with Jenny. You ain't thinkin' 'bout havin' her ride Dolly, or me takin' her, are you?"

The bite of sarcasm had been more severe than she had intended; but Jason merely shook his head. "Nooo, no, nothin' like that. Um—"

Ida waited several seconds, then, "Well?"

Jason nodded. "Mm-hmm—I... Idee, you know that I— uh... To keep abreast of things I need to travel, um— quite a bit. It ain't good business to buy stock sight unseen. But— but that ain't how I see my job as a father. A child needs both its parents handy, all the time."

Ida nodded, approvingly. "You're right, but the little time you're away don't make a whit of difference in that."

Again, Jason nodded. "I 'spose not, but— there's more to it 'n that. I figure you come to this marriage knowin' you was to be a farm wife, but I get the feeling you ain't too happy with it."

Jason waited, but although Ida's expression seemed to speak volumes, it was nothing he could put words to, much less, understand.

Ida stuck her needle into the arm of the chair, leaving the thread, with no breeze to lift it, a limp banner. She gazed at him quizzically. "You plannin' to sell this place or the ranch?"

Jason shook his head. "No, but I was thinkin' it'd be nice for you and Ween to live in town."

The tiny light, she thought she had seen, flickered out, and Ida stiffened. "You- you gonna send us to live in town wh- while you stay out here?"

There was no disguising the apprehension in her voice, and Jason was quick to reply. "Oh, Id', I couldn't do that, 'specially since... Oh, no— I- I could never do that!"

His obvious distress rekindled the spark, but his words, and what she read into them, fanned it to a flame. What Ida was unable to say, her expression revealed as tears gathered. But before the first had fallen, Jason was kneeling at her feet, reaching out to her.

Whether startled by his action or victim of habit, Ida recoiled, tucking her hands into her lap.

For an instant Jason's resolve wavered, then remembering the prize they both sought, he whispered softly, "Oh, Id', don't do that. I just want you to be happy, to have the life you deserve. Please!"

Tears filled her eyes, and her hands came forward. Jason clasped them to him and said, "Idee—I- I don't ever want to be away from you again!"

Brushing back the tears, Ida leaned forward, kissed him lightly, and asked, "Then what is it you're wantin' to do?"

Jason drew a deep sigh. "Will McElhaney is gonna sell his butcher shop."

If Ida had heard, Jason saw nothing to indicate it, but he continued: "Will isn't much of a meat cutter; that's why he has Ollie Skidmore and Nate Overmier workin' for him. Nate is fixin' to retire, come the first of the year. With him gone, I could..."

It was Ida's blank expression that stopped him. "Id'— wha..." He stammered aimlessly for a second or two. Then, realizing that she had no idea of what he was talking about, he grinned sheepishly. "Oh, my stars, I- I got ahead of myself." He cleared his throat self-consciously. "I been thinking 'bout, maybe buyin' the place."

Watching the confusion fade, and certain that he had garnered her attention, Jason went on: "With Nate gone, I'd work in the shop. It'd cut way down on overhead. Will never did do

much for the business, bein' gruff like he is; an' the place needs a lot of fixin' up, but— it could be a nice shop. Raising our own beef would be a real plus. It should provide a real good income. Anything extra from the shop, the farm and ranch, could go for our later years, and Rowena's education.

A number of questions clamored to be addressed, but Ida restrained herself. "I never could understand why anyone would trade with Will McElhaney. He's just plain rude, most of the time!"

Jason chuckled. "Well, he sure don't go out of his way to make folks come back... But it ain't just you and Ween I been worryin' about; it's Carlos and Lorraine and the young'ns. I was thinkin', this would be a chance to see that they got away from that- that place at the dump!"

Ida's reaction was enthusiastic. "Oh, Jason, that would be wonderful!" Then, her manner became pensive, and she nodded thoughtfully. "I worry, too; 'specially 'bout Lorraine. She's been in such poor health, lately..."

One of Ida's questions was developing, but the resumption of Jason's narrative left it in its formative stage.

"Carlos' major was animal husbandry, but there ain't much he don't know about agriculture; knows a good deal more'n I do 'bout a lotta things. I figure they could live at the farm; Carlos could run both places. With us bein' close it wouldn't be like he was out there all by hisself; and, if we can make a go of the shop, well..."

Ida smiled knowingly. "Can't see no reason why you couldn't make a go of it. You certainly got the business sense, and I reckon you could sell ice at the South Pole." She paused for a moment, the hint of a smile touching the corners of her mouth. "An', maybe— if it got to be too much of a burden for you, I could help some with the bookkeepin'."

It was a pleasant surprise. Not only did this represent Ida's seal of approval, but it included a much appreciated, overlooked plus. Greatly relieved, he said: "Wh- why, Idee, that'd be wonderful. Would you really be interested in doin' that?"

"Of course, Jason. I ain't never doubted your business ability!"

"Oh, no— I- I mean, would you really do the books? Ain't nothin' I hate worse— an' it galls me to pay Art Saticoy to do something I should be doin' myself! Would you consider doin' all the books for m— us?" I'd- I'd pay you same as Art!"

"Jason!" Her reproach was tinted with pleasure. "I wouldn't take no money. A man don't pay his wife for somethin' she should be doin', anyway... But I'd truly enjoy doin' it. I would have right from the... I've always won... Oh, yes, of course, I'd be pleased to! Wh- why, livin' in town, I'd have so much extra time... It'd be nice havin' somethin' to set my mind to."

Jason released his wife's hands, and settled back on his heels. "What you been wondering about, Idee?"

"Wondering?" Her startled look was that of a child caught in a lie. "I ain't been wonderin' 'bout anything."

Jason smiled softly. "Reckon you were, or you wouldn't've mentioned it. Reckon you have 'cause it's been in your eyes, but— but I was afraid to ask."

The sudden revelation, that he had known—and cared, lifted the conversation to a much higher level, while strengthening Ida's resolve. The words would not come easy, but without fear of ridicule or anger, she found the courage: "It- it always kinda hurt me 'cause you never ask me to do them—right from the start. When I was with Uncle Charlie, I..."

Whether Jason's revelation was of the moment, or if the moment's intensity illuminated a darkened corner of his mind, is of little consequence; it happened. His conscience made him painfully aware of the injustice.

Oh, Id'..."

Whatever was to have followed was lost, as the guilt of his thoughtlessness settled about him. This talented woman, so efficient in Ravenhurst's office, he had shunned. This woman, his *wife*, who knew more about the business of finance than he might ever, he had ignored—pushed aside. This woman, whose principles and competence he had found so desirable, he had forced into stagnation, while he busied himself massaging his ego.

Amid a jumble of uncomplimentary thoughts, Jason found one that afforded some absolution: ignorance. *He had been unaware. It had been unintentional, an oversight. Yes, that's what it was, an oversight—well, wasn't it?*

With only this minimal understanding of the hurt he had caused his wife, Jason found much the same heartache he had sensed at his first encounter with Rowena. There was a compelling need to make amends, to comfort her; to somehow erase what had been, to offer hope and—and love.

Lifting the darning basket aside, he grasped Ida's hands and, moving back slightly, drew her to the floor, and into his arms. With his cheek against her brow, he whispered: "Oh, Id'— I-I'm so sorry. I don't know what I was thinkin'... Can you ever forgive me?"

Ida's fingers found his lips. "Shush," she cautioned quietly. "It's not for you to be sorry. Neither of us climbed this tree alone. What needs seein' to, now, is helpin' each other down!"

The simple wisdom intensified the ache in Jason's heart; he drew her even closer, and it was in that embrace that Rowena found them.

"Papa!" There was a tremor of apprehension. "What's wrong with mama?"

Ida lifted her head. "Nothing, dear; nothing at all. Your papa and I were just talking about maybe moving to town. Do you think you'd like that?"

"Town!" All anxiety vanished. Town, for Rowena, meant being closer to Jenny, and that made *anything* all right. "Oh, yes, **yes**, I would like that. I'd like that very much!"

Later, with Rowena in bed, Ida voiced one of her earlier questions: "You mentioned Ween's education, what were you considering?"

"Well, if you felt it fittin', and Ween was obliged, I was thinkin' of a good college, maybe one of the eastern universities."

Sad memories, of her own thwarted thirst for knowledge, brought tears of joy and relief to Ida's eyes. "Oh, Jason, that would be wonderful—just wonderful!"

Once Ida had put her *official* blessing on the purchase of McElhaney's shop, Jason considered the deal a fact, and made his plans accordingly. When it was learned that the sale was contingent on that of two adjoining buildings, several acres, with a large pond, behind the frontage property, he merely enlarged his plans. Even the intervention of an attorney, on behalf of Osgood Kramer Enterprises, did not deter his assurance. Not surprising, considering the existing culture, and circumstances, Jason prevailed.

It is difficult, in today's world, to envision a man's honor and intentions being of more worth than money. Those were the factors, however, which allowed Jason to under bid his competitors, and come away with the prize. Will McElhaney's retirement in no way lessened his civic pride, and he had no intentions of giving some "big city" outfit a say in the development of *his* town.

With the Carlson's acquisition of a considerable parcel of downtown Garwood, the need of it becoming a profitable endeavor became the foremost concern. With Jason's appointment as president of the Cattlemen's Association, the demands on his time increased, and he hastened his plans to offer Carlos the position of overseer for the farm and ranch. His determination, not necessarily an obligation, to notify Mayor Ritchie of his plan resulted in a hastily called council meeting in the Mayor's office.

"Jason," Mayor Ritchie was speaking. "You're the one that got us to build a house for 'em, now you're gonna steal him out from under us!"

Jason nodded. "Looks that way, Art."

"So, who we 'spose to get to take care of the dump?"

"Art, the town's outgrown that old dump. One man, even one who works as hard as Carlos, can't handle it much longer..."

Mayor Ritchie was quick to interrupt: "Well, that wouldn't be no problem, if he didn't spend so much time out at your place!"

Jason smiled patiently. "Art, you know Carlos does more work than any two other fellers you might find. What little he's worked for me hasn't made that much difference... Well—beyond givin' him a half way decent wage. I don't know, maybe you haven't noticed, but the Roblés family is well liked; 'bout the only thing really holdin' them back is that shack we force 'em to live in!

Jason would not lie, but he found bending the truth perfectly acceptable, in some situations. It helped that the social involvement of the men present was such that his words were not contested. He cleared his throat. "Anyway, Art, the place don't smell none too sweet. If the wind's wrong, the town don't either."

The group responded with confirming nods, and Allan Foster spoke up. "He's right, Art. Aren't many towns our size doin' it this way anymore.

Mayor Ritchie was quietly thoughtful. Then he nodded, slowly. "Yep, reckon you're right, but what are we gonna do about it?"

Charlie Prescott took the floor. "At the County Seat, they got some outfit that buys their scrap iron. 'Course, they got a hog farm for slop garbage, same as us, but for the rest they got a

big pit. They call it: 'Burn and Bury...' He paused, scratching his head. "You know, there's a powerful lot of good scrap iron out at the dump. Were we to separate it, might pay some of the overhead."

The Mayor's smile was slow in coming, as was his affirming nod. "Sounds like something we should look into. But, Jason's steal'n Roblés, now! We ain't gonna get that stuff separated real soon!"

Jason spoke up: "Carlos has been separating, and burnin', for a couple years. If he hadn't, we'd been out of room long time ago. You can sell what's worth anything; the rest can be hauled to the old quarry pit. Be quite a spell fore that's filled, 'specially if you keep burnin' regular. What we really need, though, is more'n one man working the place. You aren't gonna find another Dooley or Carlos real soon, maybe never, but— there's always the work gang!"

For Jason, work gangs, as they existed in Garwood, were disgusting. He saw them as a blight on the wholesomeness of rural life. Born a few years later, being a caring, sensitive man, he might have gone on to be a civil rights activist. In his own time, however, even though history underscores the crying need, his inability to see beyond the immediate, left him incapable of evoking the kind of passionate fervor required to launch that kind of revolution

Again, nods of affirmation followed his words. The Mayor slapped his desk and stood up. "By gonnies, you're right, and that wouldn't cost the town nothin'. All right, Jason, you can have 'im!"

Jason, grateful for the *solution*, nodded his thanks, but wondered if Ritchie planned to turn the prisoners loose without supervision, and what his chances were for reelection.

It had taken a great deal of persuasion to convince Carlos Roblés that they needed someone to take over some of Hilly's work; and both the elder Carlsons had known that, under different circumstances, he would never have accepted their offer. Now, however, Jason's obvious need, and Lorraine's health, made it possible for him to accept the offered position of overseer, graciously.

For Ida, living in an apartment over the shop became acceptable only after Jason's promise that designing their new home would be left to her.

With the smaller living quarters, and lack of farm chores, Ida was introduced to a life of "ease". Even with the additional bookkeeping duties, the luxury of indoor plumbing, electricity and natural gas found her with an occasional moment or two to spare.

Although Ida could have put the housework in Rowena's competent hands, in light of her own situation, and Lorraine's health, she thought it prudent to have the child spend as much time as possible at the farm. The addition of two strong, capable hands would greatly relieve Lorraine's burden, allow Carlos more time for the farm, and eliminate the need of hiring extra help.

For Jenny and Rowena this was a dream come true. They were as sisters, sharing a room, their clothes, and seeing to the needs of their men folk, while doing everything possible to make life comfortable for Lorraine.

Cancer, excluding that of the lungs, and some other forms which seem to be the direct result of our own excesses, was as much the silent, merciless killer in the early nineteen hundreds as it is today. How many cases were misdiagnosed, or went undiagnosed, will never be known,

but Lorraine Roblés' "chronic indigestion" bore a prognosis that treatment, even such as we know today, could not have altered. For Lorraine and her family, the disease's fickle nature was a source of suffering and depression, as well as relief and elation.

Spring blossomed quickly, and summer's subsequent demise was heralded by the turning leaves of fall. Through the intervening months, Lorraine's good days seemed to outnumber the bad ones, even though she continued to lose weight. By Thanksgiving she appeared gaunt, and the end, which no one would speak of, seemed undeniably close. Through the holidays, however, her spirits soared, and the season, including the Roblés/Carlson family gathering, was a truly blessed time.

Throughout the winter Lorraine seemed to hold her own, to the extent of showing slight improvement. With the snow gone, and the thawed earth eager to support new life, spring spread her beauty with quiet dignity. In fallow fields, and along the roads and pathways, mustard plants were beginning to show their infant green, and Lorraine's health had taken a frightening turn. Bouts of nausea and diarrhea confined her to bed for days at a time. Pain became her constant companion, and the medication for it so altered her mental processes that she would take it only when the suffering was more than she could bear.

Beginning with Jenny's confrontation with Thad Hennessey there had been a change in Garwood's feelings toward the Roblés family. Their indomitable spirit, and dedication to each other could not be ignored. It was Lorraine's illness, however, that tipped the scales. Her quiet poise, under such difficult conditions, afforded her the admiration of most Garwood women. When Carlos was put in charge of Carlson Farms Inc., even the most avowed racist was forced to acknowledge, if nothing more, his humanity.

Caring for an ill neighbor was as much a given in rural communities as gathering eggs or milking the cow. There were, however, those rare times when none of the Garwood ladies were available. When this happened Jenny and Rowena would alternate their time in school with that of caring for Lorraine.

It was one of those days, and Rowena was hurrying from school to assist Jenny. Though some plants were above her shoulders, the hollyhock and mustard, blooming along the road, went unnoticed. Heavy hearted, she hastened her step even more, weeping silently as she thought of this woman whom she had come to love so dearly, and the family that was so much a part of her.

Although none of her immediate surroundings lay fallow, a short distance ahead a low hill glowed defiantly in shimmering golden yellow. Coming abreast of the brightly mantled mound, she paused. Gazing at the blaze of color, she recalled the happy hours spent playing among just such sturdy bloomers. The serenity and security offered by these unpretentious plants, lay rooted in her earliest memories. Today, it was there again, and she waited, expectantly.

Lost in her quiet reverie, the realization that she was not alone settled about her gradually. So natural was the sensation that she remained motionless, sharing in silence the beauty of their surroundings. Suddenly, the improbability of the situation struck her. She turned; and, sensing no more than a slight tingle at seeing no one, whispered, "Hello? Who's there?"

Only the song of a meadowlark broke the silence, but the invitation was clear. It came from those memories of her final moments with Hilly, and she stepped from the road to push her way gently through the lush plants.

She had gone only a short distance when the profusion of green and yellow fell away to reveal a small clearing. At her feet lay a carpet of clover. Deep and lush, it beckoned; and, with faith born in the depths of her need, she knelt.

"Dear Jesus, I, I... Oh, this is awful—I can't remember the words pastor Quintain says... Please, Jesus, I know you heard me when I talked to you about Hilly. Now—I... Oh, help me—please!"

The words were lost in a rush of tears, and she slumped forward, a frightened child seeking help of one she knew would be there for her.

As she stepped back into the road, Rowena felt a sense of guilt and apprehension: Guilt, for having slept such a long time. Apprehension, in feeling that something was wrong, and Jenny needed her. Scurrying along her worried way, she was suddenly aware that the elapsed time, if any, had been only scant minutes. The sun's angle and the shadows it cast, as nearly as she could remember, were just as they had been. She had slept, there was no doubt of that, and she had dreamed; but, in the manner of dreams, without the passage of time.

The illusion, so vivid when she had wakened, was fast becoming a hazy memory. She had flown, of that she was certain, but not as a bird. She had been lifted, and then simply floated. There had been two others with her: Hilly and another, one for whom she knew great love, but whose identity was already lost in the haze. Hilly was not as she remembered him. He was young, tall and straight; and, she was certain, no older than she. How could this be, and she still recognize him? From high above the hill of gold, she had gazed down on the sobbing child, and understood. Her hand safely clasped in his, Hilly had led her to a special place, and there she had prayed. Simple words that spoke of sorrow born in the pain of those she loved so deeply. Asking nothing for herself, her words of supplication sought God's peace and love for those so near to her heart. Even with no clear recollection of it, she knew her prayer had been heard. Then, as she had looked, once more, at the miserable child weeping in the clover, she knew, though wishing it different, where she must be.

Upon reaching the farm, Rowena stopped where the pasture fence cornered at the joining of the drive and road. As she teased an ant with the toe of her shoe, a vision of Lorraine Roblés appeared before her: The illusive *other* in her dream. A lovely picture, framed by clouds, she stood smiling down at Rowena, her silken hair dancing at the whim of a heavenly breeze. Never had Rowena seen her thus. Her beauty was breathtaking, and about her shone an aura of peace and happiness beyond anything Rowena could comprehend. "Mama Roblés!" The words tumbled from her lips with a soft sob, and she began to run, certain that Lorraine was gone.

Her foot was on the lower porch step when Jenny burst from the house. In that fleeting moment, Rowena sensed the pain of death in utter confusion. Mama Roblés was dead, but Jenny was smiling. She offered a fractured scream: "Jenny?"

Jenny's arms encircled her, and she was being whirled around the porch. "Mama's better... She's much, much better!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FALL 1902

Occasionally, after winter's dominance has been reaffirmed by a hard freeze, a lazy sun conspires with other of nature's elements to produce an unseasonably warm day. To Jenny and Rowena, a day of Indian summer was a reprieve. In the melancholy associated with the gray days of winter, even with their heavier, fall clothes, there had been little incentive to dawdle on the trip home. Today, though, with the breeze offering no bone-biting chill, they could indulge themselves to the utmost.

With Rowena's limp only a memory, little attention was paid to the slight irregularity of her right leg. The scar, invisible beneath her winter stockings, had lost its angry blush, and was becoming less noticeable as the days ticked by.

Moving easily along the path, their conversation moved in and about those things of sufficient import to hold their interest. When it became evident that Jenny's enthusiasm was less than normal, however, Rowena cast a questioning glance in her direction.

"'Smatter, Jen, you sick?"

Jenny shook her head. "Huh-uh— not sick." She grimaced, and shrugged slightly.

Rowena nodded with a look of sympathetic understanding. "Oh, I just finished last week,"

They walked in silence for a few minutes, before Rowena spoke. "I wonder if that's why they call it the curse?"

Jenny looked quizzically at her friend. "What d'ya mean?"

"Oh, 'cause it hurts, sometimes, and makes you feel— icky!"

"Oh, maybe..." Jenny offered a shrug of indecision. "But— I kinda think it has something to do with Eve and Adam and the apple."

"Do you really think?" Rowena made no attempt to disguise the interest roused by Jenny's statement. "Why?"

"Well, the Lord put a curse on her 'cause she did wrong"

It was a simple, forthright answer, and Rowena nodded. "Uh-huh... So, 'cause of her we all got to...?"

Jenny's nod would have been sufficient to see the matter closed had it not been for a more mystifying aspect of "growing up". "Do boys do it, too, Jen? I know somethin' happens to them. They get pimples, their voices get all funny— an' they aren't quiet as silly, but..."

In an adjacent field, a gelding was relieving its bladder. The girls paused, and watched, each wondering, each sharing a common hunger for knowledge of *things* they knew so little about. They giggled as the animal expelled the last drops, and moved away, its penis dangling listlessly before being withdrawn.

Jenny shook her head. "No. They grow hair— like girls do; under their arms and—" she glanced downward, furtively, "down there. They start growing a beard, and— their *thing* gets bigger."

"OH!" Rowena stiffened, her expression betraying her shock, as she considered what they had just witnessed. "Mercy! How big does it get?"

Again, Jenny shrugged. "Not very, I guess. Just enough so they can give their wives babies."

Rowena was aware that Lorraine Roblés had explained many things to Jenny, things that her mother would never proffer, things that she dare not ask about. At times, when Jenny's greater knowledge became so apparent, Rowena had longed to tap that well of information. The fear of appearing stupid, however, had restrained her. This time, the need was too great.

"How do they do that, Jen?"

It was Jenny's turn to register shock. "Didn't your mama ever tell you?"

Rowena's negative response, and obvious dejection, left Jenny momentarily speechless, almost frightened.

"Oh... Oh, Ween... Mama told me I mustn't talk about it, e-except to my own little girl. I-I..."

"Jenny, puhleez!" There was desperation in her voice. "I just got to know! There's nobody else I can ask. Mama gets mad when I ask questions a-a- about *smutty* things."

Because there had never been anything secretive in their friendship, Jenny had considered Rowena's seeming lack of interest in such things as adherence to her own mother's admonition. Jenny's deception, if it could be called that, had been in assuming her inferiority to be such as to preclude her possessing knowledge greater than her friend. Now, with the realization that she knew something *very important* that Rowena did not, she found an exciting sense of superiority totally foreign to her.

"Well," she murmured, hesitantly, "Mama said every girl should know about it, so I guess if your mama won't tell you—I should!" The final word, spoken with firm resolve, was followed by a frown. "But you gotta promise you won't ever tell that I told you!"

Nodding eagerly, Rowena drew her right index finger over her heart in a crossing motion, and solemnly held that hand aloft. "Hope to die!"

Jenny drew a deep breath. "Well, when a man and woman want a baby the man puts his egg inside the woman. It mixes with her egg, and a baby starts to grow. Just like a chick does inside the shell."

"Oh..." Rowena nodded wisely. Then a frown drew tiny lines across her brow. "How does he get the egg inside her?"

"With his thing."

Again, Rowena nodded. She had observed, from a distance, the breeding of stock animals, and assumed it to be similar to what dogs seemed preoccupied with, but intimate knowledge of the act's mechanics was lacking. Nor did she understand it as altering her conception that, "God put the baby in mommy's stomach." It seemed unnecessary to ask where

the egg entered, there appeared to be a natural correlation, and yet, she needed confirmation. She glanced at her friend, then downward warily. "In there?"

Jenny nodded wisely. "Uh-huh."

A mental image of the gelding's limp appendage fostered another question: "Is a man different than a- a horse?"

"Huh?" Perplexity showed in Jenny's expression. "Oh! You mean their things?"

Rowena nodded apprehensively. "Uh-huh."

"Well, they look pretty much the same; but like I said, a horse's is lots bigger."

Rowena stared vacantly across the fields. "I don't see how that floppy thing gets inside."

Jenny, thoroughly enjoying her position of superiority, a sensation sadly lacking in her young life, was warming to her role of teacher. "It isn't always that way... You remember how, sometimes when you were changing Ira, his little thing would stick straight up?"

Rowena nodded, thoughtfully. "Mm-hmm."

"Well, when a boy pees," she raised her hand with the index finger curled downward, "it's like this. It stays that way most of the time, but when it's time to make a baby—" the finger straightened gradually until it pointed stiffly at Rowena, "it's like this!"

Frowning, Rowena fidgeted uncomfortably. "I wouldn't like that. It must hurt, terrible!"

"Mama says it does, if you're not married, but when you're married, and want babies, it's real nice."

The frown deepened. "I don't think I want to have babies. I know I wouldn't like that part of it."

Jenny's shrug was noncommittal. "Mama says it's part of what you do when you get married."

"Then I won't get married!"

Normally, if either girl had made such a definitive statement, the other would have instantly echoed it, but Jenny said nothing. Meandering along in silence, she was in a world far removed from the one Rowena inhabited. "I d'know," she sighed softly. "I think it would be nice."

Rowena stepped around to face her friend, and stopped. "JENNY! You mean you'd like to have some boy do- do *that* to you?"

For a moment, Jenny's expression didn't change, as she mulled the thoughts she had found so comforting. Then, as the tone of Rowena's voice wormed its way into her reverie, she heard the question.

"Oh! NO! No, that's not what I was thinking about!" The urgency in her voice, illustrated her concern. "Honest, Ween! I wasn't thinkin' about that part of it—I..."

For the first time, in their lives, the girls were embarrassed by their conversation or, more truthfully, their thoughts. Suddenly, Rowena's vaulted far ahead. "Oh, Jen! If- if you get married we- we can't be friends anymore!"

For a moment, both girls experienced a sense of emptiness. A grieving night without dawn was all either could envision of life without the other. Then Jenny smiled. "Nooo— no, Ween, we'd still be friends. My— your mother has lots of friends, an' she's married. It would just mean that we'd have more to talk about."

Rowena stood with her hands clasped behind her, one foot swinging from side to side in front of the other. Unmindful of her actions, she stared at the ground. Then, with an abrupt movement, brought the swinging foot down beside the other.

"I can't see why you'd ever want to get married, and have some boy do that to you..."

They were facing each other, but Jenny was not seeing her friend. Her eyes, turned inward, saw only that which she longed for. A wistful smile lingered about her lips. "It's more'n that, Ween, a lot more. I want babies, lots of babies, and a house to take care of— and a husband that loves me like papa loves mama. One who says nice things to me, and helps with the work when there's too much to do, and— oh, Ween, I want so bad for it to be just like it is for my mama and papa!"

In this light, it was not difficult for Rowena to grasp the depth of Jenny's feelings about marriage. She was very much aware of the love and joy that pervaded the Roblés home. Conversely, being still unaware of the subtle changes taking place in her home, she was uncomfortably aware that these opposites had equal opportunity for becoming her future. It was this, and her new found dread, which placed marriage in the shadow of fear.

* * SPRING 1903 * *

Spring of 1903, heralding the thirteenth anniversary of Rowena's birth, arrived with the glorious perfection winter had predicted. With its longed for rejuvenation near at hand, the earth rejoiced by sending forth delicately colored proclamations of the glory soon to follow.

For Rowena, spring was a special time. Seeing every season as uniquely wonderful, however, those feelings did not detract from her growing love of the somber winter months, or any of nature's days. Although her *almost* thirteen years had not afforded her full understanding of life's cycles, there existed, in nature, that with which her spirit and body were wholly in tune. Her full comprehension of winter and summer, triumph and defeat, tears and laughter would come gradually. Over time she would learn that the bits of life's collage, no matter how widely scattered, could not resist being drawn together in harmony. Formed to fit a precise pattern, those pieces would eventually fall into place, their ultimate portrayal reflecting only the wishes of their Creator.

May brought an epidemic of the *juvenile fidgets*. Summer vacation lay but a few pages deeper in the calendar. As the voided pages were cast aside, winter weary school children, eager to revisit the unhurried days of freedom, became increasingly difficult to manage.

Adel Hurley, just two years into widowhood, was delivering her last lecture prior to final exams. It was, to those listening, well presented, informative, and surprisingly interesting; but, coming right after lunch, on a wonderfully warm Friday afternoon, the date of which coincided with that of Rowena's birth, it failed to hold her attention.

Mustard. Was the word Mrs. Hurley's or of Rowena's daydreams? She had no way of knowing, but it was there in every corner of the room. It took no conscious effort to find herself walking among the clumps growing at roadside, and to follow it to where it had leaped the fence, and gone on to cover the hill. The memories of that day brought a smile to her lips.

To most, the rangy plant represented nothing more than an easy means of stabilizing hillside soil. Even though, when properly prepared, its leaves were edible; and although Rowena's love of mustard was many faceted, it had nothing to do with its taste or food value. Its blossoms, those "preddy fwowers" she had picked for her mother, were part of it, but it didn't end there. In games of hide and seek or kick the can, hiding among the dense stalks had virtually guaranteed a cry of *oly-oly-oxen-free!* And when a lack of companions denied such intrigue, this same foliage had offered solace and refuge to the forgotten.

When Mrs. Hurley had begun, Rowena was furiously taking notes. Now, the pencil drooped from slack fingers, and her eyelids were actively soliciting sleep. She stole a furtive glance at the clock, then at Jenny, and held up four fingers of one hand and five of the other. Forty-five minutes—an eternity!

In preceding years, Ida had seen to it that several of Rowena's school friends attended her birthday parties. The process fulfilled at least two obligations, one, self-imposed, her adherence to proper protocol. The other was that of seeing that Rowena had a "well rounded" list of friends. The degree of success, attained by the latter, remains a question, because Ida's goals did not align with Rowena's. This year, with the completion of their new home, and Rowena's wish to share her first party there with only Jenny; Ida had relented, and Jenny would stay the weekend.

With the Roblés family's move to the farm, and Lorraine's deteriorating health, the girls' visiting habits had undergone a gradual change. With their increased social acceptance, the family found themselves with friends, of long-standing; they had previously been unaware of. Lorraine was asked to join the sewing circle, and invited to speak at missionary fundraisers. The boys' popularity grew to such dimensions that it was necessary to maintain a calendar of "stay over" appointments. Ida's honest efforts at being less authoritarian, and the girls' eagerness to make life as simple as possible for Lorraine, found them weekendening at the Carlson's home regularly.

Nearly every Friday afternoon, one of the girls would help the boys pack, and send them on their way; or, when necessary, see them to their destination. While one was so involved, the other was tending to Lorraine's needs. Later, the two would prepare the evening meal. After supper, once the dishes were done, and everything set to order, they would return to town, leaving Lorraine and Carlos to enjoy a time of much needed quiet.

Although Rowena had taken over much of the housework in the Carlson home, with the advent of her thirteenth birthday Ida's sewing room had been off limits. It was common knowledge that Ida Carlson was the consummate seamstress. Anything she took needle to would be special, and *special* was what Rowena longed for. With her own homemaking skills, and the ever-greater acceptance of adult responsibilities, Rowena was, in many ways, very much a woman. With the imminence of becoming *almost* grownup, she had begun to envision the social aspects of maturity. There would be functions requiring the company of a male companion; that would necessitate a splendid dress, and her fantasy frock, by standards of the day, was daring.

Eyes fixed on Mrs. Hurley; Rowena saw nothing of the tired face, of the wall behind her, its window or the world beyond. Their focus was a grand ballroom where lovely young ladies whirled about the floor with their handsome escorts. Their flowing, *sleeveless* gowns, cut sinfully low at the neck and back, billowed as delicate clouds above satin slippers. Even though Rowena harbored no desire for even a casual male friend, she saw herself, gowned in her mother's finest creation, swaying to and fro with a beautiful man. As she watched, she was

strangely aware of his strong arms about her, of gazing up into the fierce black eyes laughing down...

The click of the door latch, and hurried footsteps whisked Rowena back to reality. She glanced up to see the office monitor hand Mrs. Hurley a note. The plump little lady read it, frowned, then dismissed the monitor with a kindly smile, and turned to face the class. "Jenny, you're wanted in Mister Bloedorne's office, immediately."

A questioning mumble fluttered through the room. Jenny cast an apprehensive glance in Rowena's direction, and hurried from the room. As the door closed, Mrs. Hurley smiled benevolently. "All right, class, pay attention..."

Rowena tried desperately to keep her mind on Mrs. Hurley's words, but they were merely sounds played over the questions crowding her mind. Unable to keep her eyes from the clock, she counted off the minutes. *Ten minutes!* Being called to the principal's office was serious! What could Jenny have done? Each minute, duly noted by the great hand clicking from one position to the next, seemed an eternity. *Eighteen, twen...*

A sound from the road caused every head to swivel. Rowena could see the surrey from Havelly's livery drawing up at the walk and, moving slowly along the path, Mr. Bloedorne was leading Jenny and the boys toward it.

"OH!"

The tragic sound, wrenched from Rowena's throat, was as much an involuntary reaction, as the hand flying to her lips to silence it, and the thrust of her legs that propelled her from behind her desk.

"ROWENA!"

Without being consciously aware of it, Rowena responded to Mrs. Hurley's voice, and stopped mid step.

"I don't believe I excused anyone, Rowena!"

"But— Missus Hurley, Jen..."

"Rowena! Please, sit down."

The girl slipped back into her seat, great silent tears coursing down her cheeks. "But, Missus Hurley— *please!*"

In a lifetime of teaching school, Adel Hurley felt she had been exposed to every ruse a youthful mind could conceive, but in Rowena's eyes she saw only truth, a terrible, tragic truth.

"Rowena, what on ea—" her attention was diverted by Becky, the office monitor. Stifling a sob, the girl pushed a folded sheet into her hand, and rushed from the room. Scanning the note, Mrs. Hurley allowed a tiny cry to escape; then, crumpling the slip of paper, she turned away.

For several seconds there was no sound beyond Rowena's futile attempts to choke back her sobs. Then, with determination bread in the memory of her own deep sorrow, Adel Hurley drew herself erect, and turned to face her students. "Class..." There was a moment of breathless expectation, as she moved to stand in front of her desk. "Class..." Again she was forced to accept silence, as threatening tears denied her speech. "Mister Bloedorne has just informed me that Missus Roblés passed away this afternoon."

Rowena's wretched moan was the first sound to rend the pall of stunned silence. Slumping forward on her desk, she wept the bitter tears of one who, in the depths of their own grief, senses that of others, and is helpless to alleviate it.

As the reality of losing one's mother settled on the class, the silence evaporated in a chorus of sobs.

Mrs. Hurley moved about the room, comforting those whose bereavement seemed destined to reach uncontrollable levels. Finally, she stepped to the front of the room.

"Class, Mister Bloedorne will be dismissing school shortly. You may stay in the room or go outside, but do not leave the grounds until Mister Bloedorne tells you to. Tell him if you know your parents are not at home.

Those of modern urban heritage may find it difficult to understand how intensely a close-knit community can feel the suffering or loss of one of its own. Realistically, it would be wrong to infer that, to a person, an entire town wept. However, as yawns and laughter are contagious, so are some of our deeper, less accessible emotions. In the hearts of all Jenny's classmates there was profound sense of compassion. For those recalling the injustices they had heaped upon her, there was the added pain of self-incrimination.

A consoling hand touched Rowena's trembling shoulder. "Come along, dear. I'll take you home."

Looking into the kindly, concerned eyes, Rowena recalled how briefly Mrs. Hurley had interrupted her teaching following her husband's death, and she was suddenly, keenly aware of how difficult that had been. Revealing a new level of understanding, it was a maturing—humbling experience, and she ached for all whose pain had gone unnoticed.

"Come along, child, let's get you home. Jenny is going to need a strong friend, someone to stand beside her, and give her strength."

Rowena cowered in her seat, a leaden ball lying cold in her stomach. "Oh, Missus Hurley, I- I can't— what could I do?"

Jason Carlson's reaction to Ida's call would have been to close the shop had Ollie Skidmore not come in to help prepare for Saturday's business. Now, as he hurried toward school, Ida's final words overlaid his concern for Rowena in strange discordant harmony:

"I'd go to her myself, but..." There had been a great, trembling sigh. "She'll appreciate seein' you a lot more'n me."

Such an open declaration of inadequacy had vividly underscored to what depth that supposition had burdened her. To Jason it was the blow of a double-edged blade. Upon perceiving Ida's need, his natural, compassionate nature demanded that he go to her. Conversely, his acquired traits, those exulting in vindication and retribution, reveled in a perverse sense of elation.

Exposed to such contradictory observations, and unable to make a rational correlation, Jason attempted to concentrate on Rowena, but it was a futile exercise. Visions of Ida weeping miserably pressed about him. Remembering the clumsy, hesitant supplications, and the poignant, nearly obscure overtures, all the things he had considered trivial, Jason felt the harsh truth of his injustice crushing in upon him: His problems, *their* problems were not simply of indifference,

but of cold, narrow minded self indulgence. Regardless of their roots, their growth had been the result of patient, well calculated nurturing.

Jason was but a few hundred feet from the schoolyard when Mrs. Hurley and Rowena stepped from the building, and headed toward the road. He lengthened his stride and, moments later, was turning into the path.

Even at a considerable distance, Jason was aware of Rowena's pitiful sobs, as she rushed forward. A step or two before they met, she stopped, arms hanging loosely at her sides; in her eyes all the tragedy, pain and sorrow that had so torn at his heart the first time he had seen her.

"Oh, Papa..."

With a rush she was in his arms, whimpering softly.

As he drew her close, Jason managed a sad smile for Adel Hurley. "Afternoon, Adel. I thank you kindly for looking after her. I- I was worried— things bein' what they are."

Adel extended her hand, taking his in her two. "No need for thanks, Jason, but I am glad to see..." Her voice faltered, and she looked away for a moment. "I am well aware of what memories can do." Again, her gaze strayed; and, for several seconds, they stood with only Rowena's sobs between them. Then the shoulders straightened, and her eyes met his. "They can be wonderful, and— terrible. Sometimes, at the same time." She drew a deep breath. "Take your daughter home, Jason, she needs her mother!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SPRING 1903

Ida's ability to affect a stoic presence, in almost any situation, had been extremely valuable, particularly in those times life conspired to treat her badly. Functioning surprisingly well behind this guise, she usually appeared as one in complete control. Arrival of the messenger with news of Lorraine's death, however, had exposed her limits. It was with great difficulty that she went about the task of making the necessary telephone calls. Perhaps, she thought, the absence of others had allowed her the freedom to be something less than the epitome of efficiency. Later, her conversation with Jason would illuminate the lie as wishful thinking.

Bert Honicutt, recognizing the importance of having Lorraine at the funeral parlor, before the children left school, had promised to call Ida as soon as that was reality. "Thank you, Mister Honicutt. Carlos..." Ida sighed softly. Mister Roblés will be in—probably tomorrow, to make the arrangements. Um, Mister Honicutt—I'd appreciate it if you don't mention cost to him. Jason will take care of that."

"Uh—yes, but—" Mr. Honicutt had seemed embarrassed. "Um, Missus Carlson, he will ask about that."

Ida frowned. "Yes, of course, he will. Uh—well, you just make up some story... Tell him the City's payin' for it—lan' sakes, it's certain owed. He won't be in any condition to question it. Can you do that, please, Mister Honicutt?"

"Yes, M'am, I certainly can!"

"Thank you, Jason will take kindly to that, and he'll be in touch."

Without replacing the receiver, Ida rested her finger on its wishbone cradle for a moment; then rang for central to place her calls to Jason, and the school.

It was in her conversation with Jason that Ida's facade had crumbled. Being forced to acknowledge her inability to gain her daughter's love and trust had left her despondent, nearly debilitated. Now she found herself in the kitchen, a cup rattling uneasily in the saucer she held, and no idea of why she was holding them. Placing them on the table, she eased into a chair, and stared blankly at the wall. Then, cradling her head in her clasped hands, she wept softly.

The front gate, having slammed close, had registered only its second rebuke when Ida reached the screened door. Watching the two, she could see little of Rowena. Head down; huddled close to her father, her face was hidden, but Jason's expression, Ida knew, reflected her daughter's misery.

Both Carlsons had feared that the death of someone close to Rowena would be difficult for her; but the composure she exhibited at Hilly's passing had, to a degree, relieved their apprehension. The imminence of Lorraine Roblés' death, however, brought concern of a far deeper nature. Rowena's recognition of remission as healing had only compounded the situation, and they knew that the inevitable would be a terrible blow. The *inevitable* was now, and they would be forced to seek answers; answers neither felt they could find.

The door squeaked slightly, as Ida pushed it open. Rowena raised her head; and, in meeting her daughter's gaze, Ida was unable to stifle a gasp. The anguish and confusion in the child's expression sent a chill chattering through her. With its promise of tears far more desolate than those she had already shed, Ida lowered her eyes.

As laughter is a healer, so also can sorrow become a catalyst. For Ida and Jason, their daughter's need overshadowed all else. With a soft sob, Ida held out her arms, and her daughter rushed to be caught in their circle of love.

Quietly, Jason guided them into the parlor. As they settled on the davenport, Rowena snuggled between her parents, and the three wept, each for the other, and for the Roblés family.

From deep within that uncharted region between the world of children, and that of adults, Rowena's mind provoked rebellion. Ironically, with the same ferocity it was refusing to accept the responsibilities of maturity, it had adjudged her childish fears as unacceptable alternatives. Desperate for answers, she made several futile attempts to speak before finally managing: "Wh-w-w-what a- am I- I- g-going t-to do" W-what am I going t- to s-say to-oo J- Jen?"

Squeezing Ida's shoulder gently, Jason smiled sadly. "Well, sweetheart— you'll probably go out to the farm, and see to Jenny and her men folks. There won't be no need for words, you're bein' there will say all that needs to be said."

A series of sobs shook the tense shoulders. "Oh, Papa, no! I-I- I can't go out there. I- I- just can't!"

Jason drew a halting breath. "I know it don't seem possible, right now, but when you have time to think about it, you'll know it's what you want to do. First, though, you need to figure out if your tears are for Jenny, or— or for yourself."

A questioning frown crept across Ida's brow, but although Rowena stiffened, her sobs subsided considerably. Jason's sad smile remained in place, as she clung more tightly to her mother. "We know," he whispered, "how much Jenny— all the family means to you. We know that this has brought back a lot of unhappy memories, but that will help you. You can tell Jenny, Carlos and the boys that you understand, and they'll remember— and know that you do."

Jason glanced at his wife; her solemn nod reassured him, and he continued: "Now Jenny will have to learn, just like you did, how to remember, and not be sad. She's older'n you were, an' that'll make it some easier, but there isn't much chance that she'll ever have anyone who can cuddle her, listen to her prayers or kiss away the hurts like..."

Jason felt Ida's shoulders tremble, and he looked quickly into her eyes; hoping to not see the pain he had seen before, but anxious for her to know that there was no condemnation in his words.

As the tempo of Rowena's sobs increased, she burrowed deeper into her mother's bosom; and, although Jason's resolve wavered, he went on: "Remember, honey, the Lord helped you live through all that pain and hurt. He gave you a mama and papa who love you more'n anything else in the world. He made you strong, so's you could grow up to be the fine young lady you are, and he gave you wonderful friends like Jenny and her family."

"**NO!**" The word burst from Rowena's throat as a scream. "**NO!**" She shook her head violently. "N- no, h- he t- took Mama Roblés away! H- h- he made her well— an- and then took her away. H- he's mean and cruel, an-- an' I **hate him!**"

Jason drew back in shock. He had never seen his daughter exhibit such animosity, and her words, bordering on sacrilege, fueled righteous fires. Harsh words lay ready on his tongue when he glimpsed Ida's deterrent expression.

Gently, she brushed a few strands of hair from Rowena's forehead. "There, there," she whispered, and kissed the damp cheek. "Deep down, you know you don't mean that."

"Y- yes," Rowena nodded, defiantly. "Yes, I do!"

The words, coming slowly, after considerable thought, lacked the vehemence and conviction of moments before.

Ida's lips brushed the top of her daughter's head. "Shush, now, silly girl. You can't be mad at God for takin' something that was already his. God never *gives* anything; he just lends it to us. We were all with him before we got put here on earth, an' we'll all be with him again—when he wants us back."

Rowena raised her head, trying to look into her mother's face, but Ida's lips touched her cheek again, and she said, "We don't know why God took your mama home when he did, but he found you a new papa and mama. What you learned from all that hurt will be a big help for Jenny and her family. Everything has a way of working to good, even though we can't always see it!"

Jason, tears wet upon his cheeks, watched, and listened in awe, as the woman he'd wed, the woman he knew so little about, became even more a mystery.

Ida rested her cheek against Rowena's head, her voice soft and loving, her words gently forceful. "You and Jenny have a wonderful friendship, but friendship, just like— just like love, isn't always fun. Sometimes—" her head came up, and her eyes sought Jason's. "Sometimes you gotta do and say things that are real hard! But you do it cause you know it's what your— *friend* needs, and—" she drew a deep breath, "sometimes, it's what you need, too!"

For Jason, her words opened doors where only walls had been, and his hope for the love he had considered nonexistent was rekindled.

Ida dropped her gaze; and, again, rested her cheek against Rowena's tousled hair. "If you don't put your own feelings aside, and go to Jenny, you— you'll never forgive yourself."

Ida drew a handkerchief from her apron; and, gently lifting her daughter's chin, wiped away the remaining tears.

"Now," she said. "As soon as you feel like it, you get yourself ready, and we'll take you out to the farm."

Rowena looked pleadingly into her mother's eyes, then to her father.

Jason nodded. "Your mama's right, honey. Just think how wonderful it would have been if Jenny had been there for you when your mother died."

For a moment, there was threat of fresh tears, then a wistful smile played about her lips, and she nodded slowly. "I think I don't want to talk to Jen 'cause I'm scared 'bout what to say— an- and I'm afraid I'll make her cry."

Ida smiled knowingly. "Most likely, just seeing you will do that, but she's going to cry anyway, and havin' your shoulder to lean on will make it a heap easier. You know how awful it is to cry alone..."

"But- but Papa Carlos, the boys and Jen, they— they're family. I- I'm not, I- I shouldn't..."

Ida's finger touched her lips. "Here, here, now. None of that! You're as much Jenny's sister, as if Lorraine had birthed you. They're a close, loving family, but now Jenny is the only girl. She needs someone there who understands the things men don't." She patted Rowena's head. "She needs you more'n ever; you understand, don't you?"

Nodding solemnly, Rowena pulled away slightly, and drew herself erect. "Mama..." Hesitantly, her arms encircled Ida, and she leaned forward until their lips touched. Then, resting her cheek against her mother's, she whispered: "Mama, I love you so much."

Although Jason would carry its memory to his grave, he would never find the words to describe his wife's expression. Had he been there the morning of Hilly's death, he might have perceived its source. But, even in the absence of that insight, future recollections would afford him moments of deep joy and gratitude.

Unaware of her simple declaration's impact, Rowena stood, and moved toward the hall. "I'll get my things."

Fumbling for his bandanna, Jason dabbed first at Ida's tears then his own. His desire to put into words what was in his heart was overwhelming; but the power of his emotions denied him speech. He reached out, reticently. There was a moment's hesitation; then she was in his arms.

For several seconds they sat, the breadth and depth of their feelings beyond anything earthly. The years spent in erecting their battlements, those squandered in seeking reprisal for imagined affronts, all of the antagonism, hurt, sorrow and distrust— the wasted years, all for naught.

At the moment, and for years to come, if asked, neither could identify what it was they had sought, but whether found or not, it was within their grasp!

Gently, Jason pushed her away; and, as his lips touched her forehead, he whispered, "I'll go hitch Dolly. You bring her out when she's ready."

Ida turned her lips upward to touch his, and said softly, "Oh, Jason, will it be like this— I mean, will we..."

"Shhh, don't let's fret about it now. It will be different— it has to be, but it's gonna take time. We'll need a lot of help. I'm hopin— I know the good Lord will do that and we will make it. We..."

Her lips, warm on his, silenced him; and, as they parted, her words came softly: "We'll talk more, later."

Once more her mouth found his. This time, as he drew away, Jason smiled. "You keep that up, and I'll be your love slave."

A flash of color touched her cheeks; and, for an instant, she stiffened as the thought came to her: *Is that what it's all about?* Just as quickly, she read the hurt in Jason's eyes, and gently swatted his shoulder. "Jason Carlson, get yourself out to the stable!"

For a few seconds, following Jason's departure, Ida's mind was awash in conflict, but gradually a sense of comforting warmth, of elation, settled about her. She and her husband had come to an agreement concerning Rowena going alone to the farm. There had been no argument, not even discussion. She had knowingly and purposefully ignored her perception of Jason's thoughts, and found it rewarding and reassuring.

As Rowena came down the stairs, she could hear her mother bustling about the kitchen. Leaving her small valise in the hall, she moved toward the sounds. Entering the room, she saw the large basket that was used for laundry and picnics. "What's that for, Mama?"

"Well, child, if you're gonna be fixin' food for Jenny and her men folk, you'd best be havin' something to start with. She pointed at the large kettle, steam curling from beneath it lid, she had already put in the basket. Them's two old biddies that decided to stop layin'. They been simmering a good spell. Just plop them on the stove soon's you get there. They'll be tender as can be by the time you're ready for them. I wasn't plannin' on doin' 'em both, but I guess the Lord knew what we'd be needin'. You'll have more'n enough left to make a big pot of soup, and you won't need to worry about much beyond that. There'll be food a plenty comin' in." She stepped into the pantry, returning with two quart jars. "A jar of them snap beans we put up, an' one of peaches. There'll be fixin's at the farm to mix up a batch of dumplin's; plenty of potatoes in the cellar, so's you can make gravy—and biscuits, too. Make plenty, so's you can use 'em for short cake with the peaches. You won't have any trouble whippin' up a real fine meal. I'll do up a roast, and bring it out tomorrow. Even if nothing were to come in, that'd be enough 'till the funeral, and after that..."

"**Funeral?**" Rowena's expression revealed the fear prompted by the word. "Oh, Mama—I- I'd forgotten about..." A sob interrupted her, and tears glistened on her cheeks. "Mama, you'll hav... I- I can't, I just can't!"

Ida moved around the table to put her hands on her daughter's shoulders. "Hush, child. 'Course you can, but don't be frettin' 'bout that, now; it won't be for a day or so, and you got plenty of things to keep your mind occupied 'til then. When the time comes, you'll do just fine. Papa or I could stay there with you, but I think it's better this way. Jenny needs you..." There was a slight catch in her voice. "'Cause you're family... But don't you worry none, we'll be right there with you at the funeral."

As she drew smartly into the drive, it was quite obvious where Dolly's heart lay. Her enthusiasm for the trip to the farm far exceeded that of the return to town. Although automobiles were becoming less of a rarity in Garwood, Jason had avoided purchasing one. He steadfastly maintained that as long as Dolly was well and comfortable, it would be near sacrilege to deny her the joy of doing what she was created for. It had been on her smooth, broad back that Rowena learned to sit a horse, and both Jason and Ida believed that it had been because of this gentle animal that their daughter came to love all God's creatures. Once her initial apprehensions were overcome, it was undeniable that animals, even those generally considered to be at odds with humans, seemed to hold no animosity toward this loving child.

As the buckboard came abreast of the house, Carlos appeared on the porch. Stepping to the path, he hurried toward them, but before Jason had set the brake Rowena was on the ground running to meet him.

Pausing, a few steps from him, she gazed up into the rugged face. The tiny lines about the eyes, the furrows of his brow, seemed more deeply etched than she had ever seen them. The tearless eyes, red from the torrents they had shed, revealed what the stoic expression denied.

"Oh," she gasped. "Papa Carlos..." As the futility of words struck her, she dropped her valise, and rushed to press against him, crying softly.

Gently, the strong hands closed on her trembling shoulders. "There, there, little one." He whispered in Spanish. "God is gracious and wise. He knew she could not face life being served by her family. He knew how great the pain had become. It was in love that he took her home. Where she is now, she knows our pain, but would have us strong for each other."

The screen door opened and closed quietly, behind them, and he patted her head. "Go to Jennifer, she needs you!"

Unconcerned with his own tears, Jason gripped Carlos' hand and, as the two embraced, he spoke softly. "I have no words, Carlos, but I and I are here for you. If there is a need it will be seen to. Please, is there anything?"

Shaking his head, Carlos moved back a step. "No, my dear friend. What you and Ida have already done—we can never repay. Your friendship fills our needs. God bless you both! Come, the good Pardré is here. Be with our family."

Without waiting for a response, he picked up Rowena's valise, and turned toward the house. As Jason watched, an involuntary shudder passed through him. He could sense his friend's sorrow, comprehend the pain, and yet, how wonderful that there were no regrets. He was aware of the love shared by Carlos and Lorraine. He had seen the adoring glances, heard the endearing words, and witnessed the affect of their love on their family and his. He glanced heavenward with a silent prayer of thanks. If such a separation were in he and Ida's immediate future, he knew there would be regrets, but there would also be release in the knowledge that healing had begun. Retrieving the basket, from the buckboard, he followed his friend to the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SPRING 1903

Jason was quietly thoughtful on the return trip to town. Though not unexpected, Lorraine's death could not be lightly dealt with, for she had touched too many lives. He was grateful that Father Dudley had come to be with the family; they had suffered a tragic loss, and the strength of their faith would be a wonderful comfort in this time of sorrow. He and Ida had lost a dear friend, and would know a true loss, but his concern was more for Rowena. There was no way of knowing to what depth Lorraine's death had touched her. Most certainly, it would have opened old wounds. Even so, and to her credit, Rowena's concern had been more for the family than herself. It seemed most natural to Jason that this compassion for others had found its beginnings in her mother's death. It had been a tragic, frightening experience, and today had to have seemed much the same. Again to her credit, her reaction made obvious how much she had matured in a brief space of time. For his family, the untimely death had brought them together in a manner, which could be seen only as a blessing.

The vision of Ida, weeping softly as she comforted her daughter, presented a question: Would this woman be waiting with arms outstretched to welcome him? Or would it be that other person, the one he had come to know more recently? She would be more withdrawn, but still openly glad to see him. Either would be a welcome alternative to the cool, distant person he had lived with all those *other* years.

These thoughts, and many others, filled the early evening gloom as he unhitched Dolly, and led her into her stall. He had begun brushing the old mare when Ida's voice brought him nearer reality.

"Jason?"

"Uh! Oh, Id! Lan' sakes, you- you gave me a bit of a start."

"I'm sorry. How- how is the family doin'?"

He leaned heavily against Dolly's withers. "It's hard to say. They're bein' brave, but they're in a lot of hurt." He drew a sharp breath. "I do think, though, it was right havin' Rowena go out alone. They- they... Oh, I don't know, she's..."

"Family?" Ventured Ida.

Jason looked deeply into his wife's eyes; and, seeing no animosity, nodded slowly. "Uh-huh, family."

She moved to his side, her hand resting hesitantly on his arm. "Jason, are we ever going to be a family?"

Leaving the brush resting on Dolly's broad back, he took her hand in his, and squeezed it gently. "Id, we are a family, we always been a family, maybe not like the Roblés, but we're..."

"But," Ida interjected, "that's what I mean— like Carlos an— like Carlos and Lorraine."

He nodded. "Uh-huh, I know. But things have been gettin' a might easier... I- I think we can be what we want to be. I know I sure want to try!"

Ida nodded absentmindedly. "Uh-huh, but the road runs both ways. It has to. If it don't, folks..." She paused, only partially aware of why she was using such a broad, impersonal term. "If we don't make sure it does, it, it..." She shrugged helplessly. "I'm gonna try, too, Jason. I'm gonna try real hard!"

With a soft sigh he drew her to him. "You know, if we do *this* more often, it probably won't be all that hard."

It was a good thought, well intentioned, but it would not be that simple. The last two or three years had suggested that what they longed for was obtainable; but it would not be easy, or perfect; it would be a difficult journey. A little less than perfect, however, was worth the effort, and light years ahead of what had been.

Although Lorraine had never converted to Catholicism, she had raised her children in the teachings of the Church. For this reason a Memorial Mass was held on Sunday evening, but the funeral service was scheduled for Tuesday in Reverend Quintain's church, with both he and Father Dudley officiating.

In planning for two services, the change Jason and Ida might have been expecting didn't happen— or, perhaps, went unnoticed. However, what had become a more equitable, and livable, status quo had enabled them to function with relative calm and unity.

It was Monday night, and they had finished the evening meal. Jason had helped with the dishes; then, with the kitchen put to rights, they had retired to the room Ida referred to as the 'sittin' room. It was a large, comfortable room, whose counter part, in the years to follow, would be known as a den or family room. Its spaciousness was accentuated by a huge fireplace, casual furniture, and an unpretentious quality that welcomed relaxation, companionship and conversation. Its size made it possible for one corner to house a large desk, and serve as an office. With Ida engrossed in the business books, and Jason with the stockman's trade paper, it was nearing eight o'clock before either spoke.

Ida removed her reading glasses, and placed them carefully in their case. Closing the ledger, she put her pen away, and glanced in the direction of her husband.

"Mercy," she muttered. "I lost track of the time. I've got to light the tank."

Jason glanced up in surprise. "This be Monday, Id', you fixin' to take a bath, tonight?"

"Thought it best, what with the service Sunday, an' me bein' out at the farm helpin' the girls with the cleaning today. Then there's the funeral, and wake tomorrow... Don't want nobody to think I forgot to take off my winter underwear."

Jason chuckled. "No danger of that, Id'. Ain't never been a time when you was anything but sweet smellin'! But, if you're a mind to, I'll go light it."

Returning from the cellar, Jason found Ida standing on a stool in the kitchen. "Here." She said, handing him a large serving bowl. "Haven't used this since Aunt Fan died."

Jason took the bowl, and offered his hand to steady her descent. Ida, obviously pleased, accepted with a warm smile.

"Reckon I'll take a bath, too." He said. "No sense wasting gas on just one. You want to take yours first?"

"Uh-huh, I can be brushin' my hair while you take yours."

He nodded. "Be quite a spell 'fore the water's hot; cup of tea and— maybe, a piece of toast might taste good."

Ida smiled. "Water's been simmerin' for a spell. Didn't know what we might be doin', so I just left it there."

She moved to the breadbox. "I'll slice the bread. If you want, you could get the toaster down. Just put it on the front burner."

Ida was in bed with the light out by the time Jason had finished bathing. He switched off the hall light, and felt his way to the closet. Ida's muffled voice came to him. "You turn off the water heater?"

Jason nodded, then remembering the darkness, answered quietly: "Uh-huh. Everything's done up for the night."

As he settled into bed, he spoke softly: "Night, Idee."

There followed only silence.

"Id"?"

Her answer, barely discernible as English, left much to be desired.

"Idee—you all right?"

Rising on one elbow, he turned toward her. "Are you cryin'?"

The response, although negative in nature, did not obscure the fact that, indeed, she was.

The past four days had brought many surprises. Some offering pain or sorrow, others hope. In that brief interval Jason had twice witnessed Ida's tears. This, the third time, found him at a loss as to what to do. If, in times past, he had noticed her tears, and he was shamefully aware that he could not be certain if he had, his conditioned reaction would have been less than conciliatory.

Having been a faithful confidant, and counselor for his sisters, the conundrum presented by his character then, and what he saw of it now, fueled his anger and frustration. Even though he felt these emotions were directed inward, the harsh light of truth illuminated Ida as the *recipient designate* for having compromised him thus.

In his anger, Jason would have turned away, as he had done so often in the past, but the muffled sobs denied him that option. His hand sought her shoulder, but she drew away, the sobs more evident than before. It would have ended there had not that subtle urging become more persistent.

"Idee, please! This is awful." Gently he tugged at her shoulder until she lay on her back. "It just ain't right, us lyin' in the same bed, you crying an' me not knowin' why— or what to do."

Reaching across to her far shoulder, he drew her near. "You- you're my wife, Idee— our daughter's mother. I- I— love you, and I- I... Oh, please, Id!"

It was a brittle little speech, poorly delivered, which became a knife, twisting in the wound, as he realized that in the bitterness of his longing to hear such words, he had forced Ida to suffer the same unanswered need.

If Ida noticed the inept delivery, it was of no consequence. As his arms enfolded her she nestled against him, crying and laughing in a manner that left him only more confused.

'Idee! Don't! I'm so sorry if I said something that hurt you!'

Always, before, such petitions had been difficult, and few in number. Now, Jason was surprised at how easily the words had come. Later, as more and more they put aside the trivial needs of self, it became evident that words from the heart flow effortlessly.

She pressed closer, trying very hard to control her sobs. When she spoke, her voice was rich with emotion. "Hush, you dear man. How else would you expect me to act? I've waited half my life for this moment—and the terrible thing is, I spent most of that time denying it, and running from it."

Tenderly he brought his lips against hers. As they parted, he tried to speak, but her mouth was there smothering his words. As the minutes slipped away, so also did the need of restraint; and passion drew its intimate cloak close about them.

Although the sun was no more than a hint of gray in the eastern sky, it offered light enough for Jason to move from the room with ease. His return from the bathroom coincided with the sun's arrival just below the horizon. In its soft glow, he stood gazing down at the woman he had so recently met, and only begun to know.

In the corner of the room, Ida's nightgown lay in a crumpled heap where he had thrown it. Picking it up, he fingered the warm, serviceable garment, and contemplated the wasted years, the untold suffering they had heaped one upon the other. How sad that it had taken the death of a dear friend to open those long shuttered windows.

Folding the gown, he placed it next to his on the foot of the bed. Then, slipping into his robe, returned to stand beside his wife. Kneeling, he bent and kissed her gently. Her response was a soft murmur. With the second kiss, her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled up at him.

"I wondered if you'd still be here. I thought, maybe, it was all a dream."

"No, Id', not a dream... More like- more like a new direction. And— with the Lord's help, maybe- maybe we won't go wanderin' again."

Her hand slipped from beneath the covers to brush a wisp of hair from his forehead. "Oh, I hope you're right, Jason. I always knew how it ought to be, but I- I couldn't... It was sorta the same with Rowena, but when I saw the two of you coming up the walk— an' then Rowena standin' there hurtin' so bad... I knew what I had to do; even though I thought she wouldn't come to me! It didn't make no difference; I **had** to go to her..."

Ida's expression brought tears to Jason's eyes, and he tried to speak, but her upraised hand stayed his words, and she continued: "After all these years, now that I've started, don't stop me."

Jason's dejected nod was his only response.

"It was terrible, Jason, terrible. Maybe, maybe like giving birth—I- I don't know..." She paused as the painful memories, of another failure, flooded over her. "But it was wonderful at the same time." She gazed up into his eyes. "I- I don't 'spose you can understand..."

For the briefest instant, Jason felt the warmth of anger about his eyes, but just as quickly, it abated. In one way he did understand, for he could not imagine life without Rowena's love...

If Ida had felt she had been denied it, the pain would have been unbearable. Certainly, nothing in their marriage had offered anything remotely close to that kind of love, or— had he simply never taken time to really look for it?

Ida continued: " 'Course not, how could you? You've never been afraid to show your feelings, you always had her love."

Jason shuddered, not wanting to know how it must have been, living within the circle of love he and Rowena shared, longing to be part of it, and being shut out, for whatever reason.

Ida smiled. "Jason— for the first time in my life, I was able to be a real mother to my daughter and—" she allowed a soft sobbing sigh to escape, "for the first time in her life, I heard her say that she loves me." She looked into his eyes, her face aglow. "And last night— last night my husband said the same thing, and..." She heaved a great sigh. "Oh, Jason, it was wonderful— it *is* wonderful, but—" her face darkened, "it scares me." She looked up, fear reflected in her eyes. "It's more'n just that, isn't it? I mean, more'n being there when she's hurt, more'n *sayin'* I love..." She gasped, as she realized her terrible omission. "Oh, Jason, I- I didn't... I didn't tell her, did I?"

Jason slipped his arms beneath her shoulders, and drew her to him. "No, Id', you didn't, but there was no need. She knows, we both know, and you're right, it is more than that, a whole lot more! Like you said: If the road don't go both directions, it don't go nowhere.

"But Jason, she— you both need to hear that. I *know* how much it means!" Her arms encircled him. Oh, Jason, I do love you, I do!"

For several seconds she clung to him, and neither spoke. Then, as she began to relax, and Jason eased her back onto the pillow, she said" "I- I feel like a terrible load has been taken from me— a great big weight lifted off me. But— the sad thing is, there was never no need of it bein' there, 'cause I always knew I was loved. I was just too busy tryin' to prove that I wasn't."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AUGUST 1904

Within Rowena's early cognizance of animals was spawned a subtle suspicion that, between males and females, there existed something, considerably more complex than observations of her parents had revealed. Her discussions, and comparisons, with Jenny had added dimension to these impressions, but for both girls Lorraine Roblés had been the most significant source of *factual* information. Following Lorraine's death, the growing void in their *education* threatened to gain critical proportions. No doubt it would have had they not found a veritable cornucopia of information in the person of Alice Weyford. Possessing a degree of intellect equaled only by her sense of discretion, and nearly four years their senior, Alice took great delight in enriching their lives with the graphic details of her numerous escapades with different men. One particular incident, which left the girls more than a little confused, involved a very worldly traveling gentleman — one Melton Henessey — who, in Mr. Weyford's absence, made himself available to both Alice and her mother. Later, following Alice's unexpected marriage, her premature delivery of an, obviously, full term baby forced the girls to assume that what they had been led to think as being impossible, apparently was not: Pregnancy could occur prior to marriage. This, coupled with Alice's vivid descriptions, seemed to present evidence that much of what they had been told about the coupling of man and woman was not, necessarily, the *whole* truth. Alice, for instance, told of having found it highly pleasurable, even without the benefit of marriage. That she had, over a period of several years involved herself with numerous men without conception, seemed to uphold the whispered theory that, regularly, pleasure was the true motivation for the act; and pregnancy was, too often, considered a curse placed on one's pursuit of happiness.

The regular association of this type of pregnancy with the word, illegitimate, became a source of ever increasing concern for Rowena. Although the word had garnered only minimal consideration when Carrie Littlesby used it, its existence in Rowena's subconscious could not be denied. It lingered in the margins each time her mind recreated the incident, which saw her father strike another man. With Alice's suspicious pregnancy, and the word's reintroduction into Rowena's vocabulary, the need to understand it became acute.

Although Rowena's resolve to bring the subject to her mother's attention requires few words to describe, the hours of arduous soul searching dedicated to reaching that decision, will remain her secret. Regardless of the change in her mother, Rowena's understanding, or acceptance, of it had yet to reach full flower. Based on what had been; "smutty" subjects were still approached with trepidation. Once the course was chosen, however, it became mandatory that she pursue it with the greatest haste, lest her fear render her unable to act. Strangely, and for reasons she was not certain of, she chose a time of her father's absence to speak to her mother.

With the table set, and the evening meal in the final stages of readiness, they were waiting for Jason's arrival. Ida was in the "sittin'" room mending, as Rowena entered, and stood, for several seconds, just inside the doorway. Finally, with what seemed to be considerable effort, she spoke hesitantly: "Mama?"

"Hmmm?" Ida, resisting the conditioned reaction to such an opening, raised her eyes to meet those of her daughter. "Yes, dear?"

"Mama, I need to talk to you about something, um— real serious."

Aware only of Ida's obvious dislike of such conversations, Rowena's apprehension would have been greatly lessened if she had understood the longing that accompanied those objections.

It was another of Ida's quandaries: desperately yearning for her daughter's confidence; but forced to deny herself, and Rowena, that precious intimacy, because of her distorted sense of decency and inadequacy.

Ida straightened her shoulders. She and Jason had known that it would not be easy; and, as she put her work aside, the situation's irony lay exposed to her: Rowena's need was answer to prayer, and yet she wanted desperately to avoid being part of that miracle.

For Rowena, Ida's obvious consternation spoke of the cold, rigidly haughty woman who had so often refused to discuss *off color* things with her. She slumped to the floor at her mother's knees. "I- I'm sorry, Mama, but I gotta know!"

Her desperation brought a catch to Ida's throat. Brushing back a tear, she placed her hand on the girl's head. "There, there, honey, don't fret, you just take your time, and I'll do everything I can to find an answer."

Seeing only love in her mother's eyes, Rowena wriggled as much of herself into Ida's lap as was possible. "Oh, Mama, I..."

The interrupting sob was of little importance, for words had become unnecessary. Together, they wept in a manner incomprehensible to any who have not observed love, longed for it, and been denied the protection of its embrace.

The whims of mortals are of no concern to time. There is, however, within the mind of humankind, a marvelous regulator, which can synchronize its flow with the need of that individual's particular segment of eternity.

With its mechanical proclamation, the mantel clock presented Ida with physical evidence that fifteen minutes of her life had passed as if it were a heartbeat. Gone, too, were the fires of pain and longing, the fuel on which they had fed, and the blackened remains where they had burned. Calmed by the peace of love, given and returned, Ida glanced at the clock. She smiled, and clasped, even closer, that precious bit of life's whole, given unto her keeping.

If anything in creation can lay claim to being predestined, it must be time. So, thus ordained, it remained steadfast in its quest, and with its passage there was change. With the cessation of her tears, Rowena's soft sobs became no more than timid hesitations in her measured breathing. Conversely, the death knell of their reverie chimed in the demands of Ida's body.

"You know, sweetheart, a little girl you aren't, anymore. Your poor old mother's joints are complainin' somethin' awful. Why don't we..."

"Oh, Mama, I'm sorry!" Rowena's head came up with a start, and she began to squirm free, but Ida's strong hands drew her back. "Now, now, dear one, there's no need for sorry, and no need to rush." She kissed her daughter's cheek; and, with a soft laugh, gently pushed her away. "Now, let's move to a more comfortable place."

Rowena stood with her hands extended toward Ida. Graciously, she took them, and drew herself erect. For several seconds they merely stood facing each other. Then, unable to resist the

demands of their love, they embraced amid a second onslaught of tears, these accompanied by laughter.

"Oh, Mama, Rowena whispered. "I never knew crying could be nice. It- it's kind of like when Hilly died, but—" she paused to catch her breath, as the words refused to leave her lips. "But *different!* I never felt like this before, never ever!" With a soft, whispered sigh, she pressed closer. "I love you so much!"

Ida had come to an unexplained awareness, the first time her daughter had spoken those words; but within the intimacy of this moment, and being intensely aware of the spirit that surrounded them, she was overwhelmed. Here were emotions of such depth, and staggering power, that she found it difficult to catch her breath. There had been times, shared with her husband in climactic passion, when she had felt consciousness slipping away, but that had been from the demands of her body. Now that body rejoiced in being the conduit through which love flowed with selfless fervor. With her realization that this love lived free of passion, with no need of recompense, she found a sense of serene calm. This was a gift, one that could not be lost or stolen; for such love, far beyond the reach of human endeavor, was the gift of God.

Quietly, Ida led her daughter to the davenport. Once seated, she drew to her breast the child— if not her womb, of her heart and soul. "My precious baby," she whispered. "I love you, too; more than I can ever tell you!"

Although the clock continued to give regular accountings of its passage, time for mother and daughter had, again, ceased to be. Nor was either aware of the exact moment that earthly matters, reclaimed their place as part of their lives.

Ida was the first to speak: "I don't know, for sure, what just happened, but I know we should give thanks."

Closing her eyes, she was about to bow her head, when she stopped. "No," she whispered, "not that way."

In reverent awe, as Carlos had, Ida gazed heavenward: "Dear Lord, there just don't seem to be words big enough to thank you for this- this wonderful thing you've done for us. Guess we don't understand much what happened, maybe we aren't suppose to, but that isn't important. It did happen, and we thank you for it! If you never give me another thing in my life, that's all right, but— if it could be this way from now on, I- I will never stop thanking you... Amen.

From the tousled head pressed against her came a quiet, "Oh, yes, thank you, Jesus!"

Rowena shivered, and cuddled even closer. Ida, also aware of a chill, glanced at the clock. "Mercy!" She breathed. "We've been here over an hour. Your Papa's late. I'll have to see to the supper.

When Ida returned from the kitchen, Rowena was rubbing her forearms briskly to dispel the chill. "It's all gone, isn't it, Mama?"

The warmth of Ida's smile was in her voice. "No, child, it's not gone. We can still thank the Lord, hug each other, and say I love you. What ever it was that gave us a push, just isn't as strong right now, but—" she sighed happily, "it's still here, and I pray that it never goes away."

Rowena smiled. "Ooo, I hope not I- I like it, even though it- it's sorta scary. Once, I felt like I was kinda floatin'..." She paused. "Mama, do you 'spose that's why them folks roll on the floor?"

The words brought to Ida's mind some of the, not too kind, comments she had made concerning those more zealous worshipers. The acknowledgment came with some difficulty, but she nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised."

Clasping her hands in her lap, Rowena drew her shoulders up against her neck. "I wonder if they can feel that way anytime they want?"

Ida took a seat beside her daughter, and smiled thoughtfully. Her association with God had not been a particularly personal one, and with the Holy Spirit, minimal, at best. Now, even having known its touch, and reveled in it, where before she would have been quite outspoken, she found herself questioning her ability to speak on such a profoundly moving experience. Her response came after several seconds of thought: "I- I don't really think so. Like it did with us, it's something that just sorta happens. Seems like they..." She paused, not comfortable with the stereotypical reference, but finding no alternative, allowed it to remain. "They always speak of it as being a gift. Reckon you don't ask for gifts; they just come along—once in awhile."

Gently pushing her daughter away, Ida stood. Arms folded, she rubbed her shoulders, and nodded. "It is a mite chilly, for this time of year, but Papa's got the fire set, best I light it. Then we can go into the kitchen. I still ain't heard what it was you needed to talk about."

Smiling warmly, Ida seated herself across from her daughter. "Now then, young lady, let's hear about this terrible thing that's botherin' you."

Surprised by her self-assurance, Rowena began: "Is illegitimate— um, when a woman has a baby before she's married?"

Ida frowned, her confidence fading, somewhat. "Well, that's part right; but there's another word that kinda goes with that. You see, when a woman has a baby, a-and she's not married, what she did to get the baby is called fornication, and that's wrong. Wrong because the Bible tells us it is, and wrong because that baby's gonna be born without no proper name. So that child is illegitimate." She paused, pondering her own words. "It peers to be as much a legal thing as anything else. Children without legal names don't have much chance. They're looked down on by most folks..." Again, she paused. "Don't seem right either, 'cause they had nothing to do with being that way."

Ida shook her head, startled to suddenly see as unfair something she had always considered correct. She drew an uncertain sigh. "Them poor little tikes, they have to go through life bein' ashamed, and bein' punished, for something their parents did."

Rowena read the deep resentment in her mother's eyes, and wondered what other things she lived with that were unacceptable to her. For now, however, the need for answers overshadowed all else, so she continued: "Alice Weyford got married, but she knew 'fore the weddin' that she was gonna have a baby. Is her little girl illegitimate?"

Ida mulled the question for several seconds, then: "Nooo, not legally, but in another way — we- we call it morally — she is..." She interrupted herself as a different scenario presented itself. "But— if the boy Alice married is the baby's true father..."

It was the recollection of another story that had triggered Ida's hesitation; a story that could, depending on how one chose to view it, have two radically opposed "right" conclusions. It had embroiled she and Jason in many heated discussions, and remained a secret they had guarded since before Rowena's adoption.

She shrugged helplessly. "Mercy, child, I thought this was something I pretty much understood, but now I'm confusing myself; heaven knows what it's doin' to you.

"The Bible says it's fornication to try and make a ba..." An expression of firm resolve enveloped her features. "That's called *intercourse*." The first, far more definitive, portion of the term, she could not bring herself to speak. "The Bible says it's fornication to have intercourse before you're *officially* married, especially, if makin' babies ain't why you're doin' it! God don't take kindly to them folks that does that... And yet—I know of two fine families, right here in Garwood, whose first baby come way too soon after the weddin'..."

Rowena offered a half smile. "I don't think Tom, that's Alice's husband, is the baby's father. I think it was the..."

Ida's finger came to rest on the tip of Rowena's nose. "Sush, now, don't be tellin' me, or anyone else, who you *think* it is. Even if you're sure, I don't want to know, and no one else *needs* to. If those two can make a go of their marriage, and make a home for that little baby, more power to 'em. They're gonna need all the help they can get; and gossip, like that—sure isn't it."

"Confusion was still quite apparent on Rowena's countenance, and she started to speak. "B- but..."

"I know," Ida interspersed, "it don't make much sense! It's almost as though making it legal makes fornication all right, but it doesn't! The Bible says there's a time for everything. The time for- for-- the time for intercourse is after you're married, and never with no one but your husband!"

There was a hint of relief in Rowena's expression. "Then as long as the baby's got a proper name, and her folks are married, she can't be illegitimate?"

For Ida, Rowena's, seemingly repetitive, question was a source of irritation, but she controlled her ire. "As far as the law is concerned—and if no one ever found out, or they didn't need a birth certificate there'd never be a problem."

Ida was pensive for a few seconds then, as if gathering up her courage, she continued: "And that brings up somethin' else: You were about to tell me who you thought the father of Alice's baby is. That must mean you know that Alice has been with more than one man. Tha..."

Rowena's stifled giggle interrupted the pending dissertation. Ida glanced at her daughter. "That strike you as funny?"

"Oh, no, Mama! It- it's just that Alice—well, I don't think she can remember all the men."

Ida's eyes rolled heavenward. "My stars, that poor child. Didn't her folks pay no 'tention at all to her?"

Rowena shrugged. "I don't think they much cared—least ways, not her mother. Some of the things Alice told me'n Jenny kinda makes it seem that way."

While Ida pondered the ramifications of such a family, as compared to she and Jason's, Rowena's mind was racing on to the real reason for her question:

"Mama, were my real mama and papa married?"

"Wh- what? Lan' sakes, child, 'course they were. Wh... Oh! So that's what this is all about? Who told you?"

Rowena shook her head. "No one told me anything, Mama, but I remember when my real papa had a fight with another man. The man kept pointin' at me and hollerin'. One of the words I remember was, illegitimate." She closed her eyes, and shook her head. "Ugh, it was awful. There was blood, an' I got sick." Pausing, again, she looked away. "Then— then one time, Carrie Littlesby called me an illegitimate orphan. Jen and I looked it up in the dictionary, but it never made any sense to us."

With another of her parental failures laid bare, the pain of Ida's guilt was multiplied many times as she perceived her daughter's misery and despair. She grasped Rowena's hand. "Oh, my poor baby, and nobody was there for you..." A sob burst from her throat. "Lord have mercy! While I went 'round worrying 'bout the evil other folks was do..." Huge tears filled her eyes. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Rowena left her chair, and moved to her mother's side. Slipping her arm around Ida's shoulder she hugged her close. "Oh, Mama, there isn't anything to forgive. You couldn't do any different, none of us could. I think it was supposed to be this way so Jesus could help us. If it had been different—I might never've had a chance to talk to him."

Deeply moved by the wisdom and maturity, of her daughter's words, Ida looked up at her. "Maybe it would have been better if we'd told you right from the start, but we could never be sure." She drew a deep breath. "No way to prove any of it, anyhow... All I can tell you is what I heard from a distant cousin. You're related to her, on your mother's side, way, way back." Her smile lacked enthusiasm. "You'n me— we're blood kin, but so distant it doesn't really count."

Rowena smiled, and said, eagerly, "Oh, Mama, please tell me. It's all right, I been mixed up for so long, anything'll be better."

Ida nodded. "Something else for your papa and me to regret, but... All right, get 'round there and sit. I'll see if I can make sense of it for you..."

As Rowena scurried back to her chair, Ida searched for a starting place. "Well, it was through this cousin, Rachael, that we first learned about you. For the life of me, I don't know how she found out that we were thinking about adopting— but she did... Anyway, your papa's name is *Martin* Braunhauser. The man who brought you to us is *Michael*, his older brother."

Rowena leaped from her chair with a joyful whoop, and danced about the room laughing and clapping her hands.

A startled Ida looked up in surprise. "Rowena! Wh.." Before she could complete her question the girl had floated back, and settled onto her chair.

"Oh, Mama! I just knew he couldn't be my real papa. It- it was awful. I had memories of him being so happy an- and so nice, but all I could *really* remember was how mean he always was, an- and I didn't know what I did to make him mad at..." Her sentence ended in a sob, as tears of relief burst forth.

Even Ida's lingering euphoria could not dispel the terrible burden of guilt Rowena's words placed upon her. Before her lay the excuse of innocent ignorance, but she could not bring herself to claim it. Even though shielding their daughter from grief had been their only motive, in realizing what it had meant to Rowena, Ida's remorse was overwhelming. To apologize was not

an option, for it neither changed nor excused. She could only hope her daughter would understand.

Not certain she had heard correctly, Ida gazed searchingly at her daughter. "You remembered?"

Rowena nodded solemnly. "Uh-huh. He used to hold me way up in the air, and whirl me around. I remember him holding me so close that I could feel it when he talked or laughed."

"But, b..." It was still not making sense to Ida. "You-- you couldn't have been a year old, are you sure?"

"Oh, yes! I always see him,' she pointed to her forehead, "in here, and now that I know the papa who brought me here isn't my real papa, I'll remember more, 'cause I can forget all the bad things... OH!" Her hand darted to her lips. "What happened to him, why was I with my- my uncle?"

"Martin died somewhere in Colorado. An avalanche, at least, that's what folks figured. They never found him."

Ida looked away, for a moment; then shrugged. "Best, now, that you hear it all. Your mother's name was Darlene May

Truedo— or something like that. It's a French name, and Rachael wasn't sure how to say it, or spell it... 'Course, you probably never heard her first..."

"Everyone called her May." Rowena interjected thoughtfully. "It's a beautiful name."

Ida covered her displeasure, at being interrupted, with a patronizing smile she was not terribly proud of. "She lived with her folks in one of the big cities, Chicago or New York... Anyhow, the Braunhausers lived there, too. Your mama and Martin met, and fell in love. Your mama's folks were wealthy, but I guess they didn't like the crowds or smell of the big city... Story goes: they didn't care much for Martin, either. Anyway, they decided to move out west, Colorado, and Martin went with them..."

"My stars, why them youngsters didn't get married 'fore they went I'll never know... 'Course, they had no way of knowing what was going to happen. I guess the Tru— your mama's folks, were hopin' that the long trip, and bein' so close would end the romance." She smiled thoughtfully. "The way Rachael told it, they couldn't've been more wrong!"

Rowena looked inquiringly at her mother. "What did happen, Mama?"

"Your grandpa bought a section of land; 'bout twenty miles from some little town, sort of in the foothills, and they began to clear a home site. It was early spring, and by summer's end they had a small cabin, and a good size barn built— I 'spose, by then, they was glad to have Martin along, but he probably slept in the barn— that's just my guess. Would've been mighty cold in the winter..."

Because folks in town had told them they wouldn't be able to get to town for about two months in the winter, they put in a good supply of food for themselves, and the animals. They'd bought a farm wagon, and a good team; don't know what they had when they came across, probably oxen. Anyway, it was good thing, or- or you might not be here."

Rowena shuddered, but said nothing, and her mother continued: "Long in fall— no one's real sure when, but it must have been late September or first of October, your mama's folks took the team and wagon to town to pick up the last of their winter supplies. They never got there. By the time your mama and Martin began to worry, it was already too late.

Martin was all for head out walkin', to see if he could find them, but May talked him out of it. That was a good thing, too, 'cause come up a terrible storm, worst'n anyone could remember.

It was into April before anyone got through to your folks. They was told the team had come to town, still in harness, but without the wagon. Later, folks found parts of the wagon in a ravine, but not much else. Animals and the creek took the rest.

The man who brought the team back was the town's pastor. He said a prayer for your mama's folks, and for your mama and papa.

You were born in May or June. Another date no one is real certain of. Nobody 'round there knew they weren't married, so I guess they didn't see no reason to stir up a fuss by mentioning it.

Next winter was a heap milder. They still weren't able to get to town for a month or so, but they were able to be outside more... 'Course, if that hadn't been the case, your papa might still be here... Anyway, he went huntin'..."

Ida interrupted her narration to gaze sadly at her daughter. "A lot of things might have been different *if*... Well, that's the way it happened. He was up in the mountains. Must've got caught in an avalanche, 'cause he never came back. Come spring thaw, your mama packed what she could on the one horse, climbed on the other one with you, and come back to face the world with an illegitimate child."

Rowena's silent tears were of her own pain compounded by what she had learned of her parents. She smiled sadly; and, making no attempt to stop the flow, shuddered as she said: "Why did she marry Michael? Wouldn't no one ever know she and papa weren't married!"

Ida nodded her agreement. "That's true, and I don't know the answer, but I can guess that she felt guilty about you not having legal claim to a proper name. From what Rachael told me, Michael got a birth certificate that said he was your father... He paid some doctor to make it up for him. "

Tears came in greater abundance as Rowena thought of Michael's cruelty, his anger and violent temper. "Ooo," she murmured. "She did all that for me, and I never had a chance to thank her." She looked helplessly at Ida. "Oh, Mama..."

It was Ida, this time, who rose to move around the table. Kneeling beside her daughter, she whispered. "There, there sweetheart, your mama had you for four years. She got to nurse and bathe you; listen to you cry and laugh; see your first step; hear your first word; all those things that mothers think about long after their children grow up and leave home. And, now, she can look down and see what a fine young woman her daughter turned out to be. No, little one, don't you fret none about your mama. Doing for you was all the payment she needed or wanted."

They shared several wordless minutes before Rowena spoke: "Mama, I'm so lucky. My mother and my really-truly papa loved me, and now so do you and papa... It feels so good! I can

forget all the bad things, 'cause they aren't part of my life anymore!" She smiled reticently. "It's kind of like they never happened!"

Having been nearly free of negative thoughts, Ida was surprised when Rowena's words brought a surge of resentment she felt required vindication. "But, sweetheart, I've always loved you. You *knew* that— didn't you?"

"Y- yes, Mama, I knew, but it's different, now, isn't it?"

Even in the face of Rowena's slight hesitation, Ida found a surprising amount of joy in acquiescing: "Yes, little one, it is. Much different!"

Rowena lay her cheek against Ida's, and uttered a squeal of joy. "Oh, Mama, I can hardly wait until papa comes home!"

Ida felt only the slightest tinge of incrimination as she considered the different manner in which she anticipated Jason's being there. Rowena, reading nothing of its nature, laughed at the impish smile as her mother nodded, and whispered softly: "Mm-hmm, me too!" Then, standing, she said, "I'm gonna call the shop, and see what's keepin' him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

1905

Sex, in those years that found Rowena leaving behind the toys of childhood to take up the trappings of adulthood, although less blatantly paraded, was no less a part of life than today. By the time they were biologically mature enough to make it feasible, most males had made an *attempt* at coupling. A number of adolescent boys and young men eventually took their first partner from the ranks of those whom they publicly shunned, and referred to as cheap and easy women. The age at which success was achieved may have been slightly higher; but, there having been little change in male ego, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction in the tales of conquest, then or now. What is known is that those gentler times offered a more defined sense of right and wrong. At most social levels there was a very real stigma attached to those who partook of "loose" sex. Adding to this deterrent was the overriding fear of pregnancy and parents, those of both partners. These and others pressures, from within, and outside, the closed community of youth, allowed the majority of young ladies to enter matrimony as restless virgins, while a goodly number of young males rushed breathless to the altar in much the same state.

Quite some time before Rowena had celebrated the sixteenth anniversary of her birth, she had come to the conclusion that, with the right companion, the pressure of male lips on hers was not totally disgusting. Soon afterward, she concluded that an inquisitive hand fumbling about her bodice, although not to be encouraged, was not as disagreeable as she had been led to believe. On the contrary, she found the reaction of her body strangely exhilarating. Having pursued these sensations to their fullest, when alone, she was certain that this considerable pleasure was only a token of what fulfillment of her ultimate fantasy would produce.

The hiring of Bertram Tibbs, two years Rowena's senior, as assistant to Carlos, closely followed Jason's construction of an icehouse, adjacent to the pond, at the rear of the meat market. That endeavor; and his escalating duties, as president of the Cattlemen's Association, required more of Ida than she could give without cutting corners. Because this was impossible, it was decided that Rowena would spend more time in town. For a short time, Carlos had managed with only Jenny and the boys, but this soon became a hardship for all concerned.

Bertram's introduction into Rowena and Jenny's lives came in the year they turned sixteen. This coincidence found that young man the topic of many fanciful conversations, and the girls facing marriage a little less than they had sworn to be.

Bertram and Jenny's sharing of common acreage was a challenge for Carlos. By keeping them both busy, however, he felt confident that neither had time for more than a passing wave, and a few *friendly* words at mealtime. Jenny's position as cook and housekeeper made some contact unavoidable, but even this he monitored closely.

With the hormones of youth as they were, are, and have always been; and the duplicity of those they inhabit more than equal to the wiles of the cleverest parent, Jenny had no problem circumventing any barrier her father erected. Carlos, totally outclassed, was blissfully, naively oblivious to the numerous *liaisons* regularly enjoyed by the two.

Although Jenny was thoroughly smitten with Bertram, and permitted him to *have his way* up to a point, she adamantly upheld her oath to enter marriage offering nothing less than virginity.

Even though he often bragged to his peers of his many conquests, Bertram was as innocent in body, if not in mind, as Jenny. Because his youth refused to acknowledge that there were some who would find him less than irresistible, he saw her unwavering stand as frustrating, but only temporary. He would keep trying, and she would submit, of this he was certain. In the meantime Rowena, equally captivated, eagerly cooperative, and as adept at clandestine meetings, represented a pleasant diversion. One who, if she were the first to weaken, would be as welcome a trophy as Jenny.

The possible ramification of such covert amours, with two who were best friends, had either escaped the young man, or he bore a depth of intuition far greater than any outward manifestation indicated. Presumably, his only defense, against the disaster his actions presaged, was his subtle request of each girl that she not divulge *their* secret to anyone!

It is doubtful that either girl made a conscious decision to honor his request, there never having been a secret between them, but it did seem they chose this to be their first. Whatever the reason, their complete compliance allowed Bertram Tibbs to indulge a fantasy experienced by few young men of the time. Under the circumstances, it was a fantasy that could become reality.

Charlie Ravenhurst, now nearly seventy, had visited Jason and Ida shortly after Lorraine's death. Before leaving, he had convinced them that a few weeks in Chicago would greatly broaden Rowena's education. Even in retirement Charlie maintained controlling interest in the business, but was content to leave its operation in the hands of a very competent younger assistant.

Just prior to the final week of school, arrangements, for Rowena's trip, were finalized, to coincide with one of Jason's rare trips east. This frugal plan would preclude any additional expense, and provide a chaperone both to and from Chicago.

A two-week absence, while not considered of sufficient duration to be seen as histrionic, did merit a going away party, to be held at the farm. Not surprisingly, because Jenny and Rowena compiled it, Bertram Tibbs' name topped the guest list.

For the girls, still unaware of their shared *secret*, the idea of being *openly* in his company was tantalizing, and frightening. Covertly, each harbored misgivings as to how Mr. Tibbs might conduct himself.

Bertram, since learning of Rowena's trip, had been desperately seeking time alone with her. Now, seeing the party as his last chance, he feared he might be denied the opportunity to give Rowena the *perfect* going away present.

With the greatest ingenuity, Mr. Tibbs distinguished himself as the soul of diplomacy. Not only did he divide himself graciously between Jenny and Rowena, but with equal ease among all the young ladies present. Rowena and Jenny reveled in their secret; each reading into Bertram's slightest glance the promise of undying love.

Ida's announcement that she and Jason would be leaving early in order to make final preparations for the morrow's trip, while of little consequence for Bertram and Jenny, it was, for Bertram and Rowena — particularly Bertram — a reason for greater expectations. Their high hopes crashed miserably when Ida requested that Carlos see Rowena safely home.

It was growing late; and, fully expecting Carlos to call an end to the festivities at any moment, Rowena's fanciful dream of being alone with Bertram seemed doomed. No doubt this would have been the case had not Ira's stomach rebelled at the indignities it had suffered over the course of the evening. In a state of despondency, he approached his sister complaining of a stomachache. Then, without waiting for the solicited words of comfort, he provided vigorous proof of his diagnosis by vomiting on the front of her dress. With no need of further formalities, the party ended.

While Jenny slipped away to find a clean dress, Rowena busied herself mopping up the remainder of Ira's gluttony. At a discrete distance, Bobby and Bertram stood watching as Carlos escorted Ira to the washtub around back.

With a considerable amount of picking up yet to do, and Ira's deep commitment to self-pity, Carlos felt it necessary to assist Jenny and Bobby. For reasons, known only to him, he saw no threat to Rowena in the person of Bertram Tibbs, so it was with no sense of trepidation that he stepped to the edge of the porch and called, "Bertram!"

The young man hurried toward the house. "Yes, sir?"

"Would you hitch Ben to the wagon, and deliver Rowena to her home?"

"Sir?" Though absolutely certain of what he had heard, Bertram found it difficult to believe. The moment of indecision and hesitation was brief. On the sizeable list of things Bertram Tibbs was not, consummate opportunist did not appear. "Sir? The wagon? Yes, sir! See Miss Rowena home? YES SIR!!"

With Carlos' admonishment, regarding the need of haste, still drifting on the soft breeze, Bertram guided the horse away from the lights of the farm into the welcome darkness of the warm spring night. Looping the loose reins about the brake handle, he turned to Rowena. "You be in a hurry, Ween?"

In the combined light of a near full moon, and the pole lantern, Rowena's smile was softly expectant. With a shy shake of her head, she allowed it to fall against Bert's shoulder. His arm encircled her, and they drove on in silence.

Following the first few hesitant kisses, through the months Rowena and Bertram had become involved in a series of lingering, passionate episodes. Though certainly not committed to the end Bertram had in mind, Rowena was thoroughly enjoying the breathtaking excitement, and utter *wickedness* of it.

Although she was rapidly reaching a level of arousal that could easily override the virtues of chastity, Rowena felt no threat of being compromised. The unforgiving wagon seat, and constricting clothing, she was sure, represented a barrier capable of protecting her.

As the wagon entered the last wooded section outside town, Bert gazed intently into the darkened shadows. Then, tugging gently on one of the reins, he spoke quietly. "Gee up there, Ben." The animal plodded obediently in among the trees.

"Bert, wh..." The answer, obvious even before the fact, left the question to die on her lips, and she would have drawn away, had not his words been so persuasive:

"Oh, Ween—we won't be seein' each other for almost a month..."

"Whoa up, there, Ben." He set the brake. "Won't do no harm— for just a minute or two. Ain't no one knows 'xactly what time we left?"

Rowena, still apprehensive, sat hunched forward. "Um, Bert— um, I want to, but..."

With his finger at her chin, it required minimal pressure to bring her mouth close enough for his lips to make an end of her objections.

A soft sigh was Rowena's only response. "Mmmm, I guess we could stay— just a little while."

The breeze rustled the trees about them and Bert drew her closer. Thoroughly enjoying the warmth of his strong arms, she slipped hers about him, and responded eagerly as his lips covered hers. As they parted she drew a sharp, trembling breath. "Oh, Bert, I don't want to go with Papa! It- it's gonna be awful!"

As he drew back, the lantern cast a flicker of amber across her hair, turning the copper to burnished gold.

Bertram caught his breath. "Lordy, Ween! You are plumb— plumb beautiful. I- I d'know what I'll do without you."

Standing, he took her hand. "C'mon, let's get in the back." Still holding her hand, he stepped around the seat. "Lots of clean straw, Ween, it'll be nice and soft."

For a moment they stood arms entwined, then Bert lifted the lantern's chimney and extinguished the flame.

Rowena found the darkness frightening and exciting. "Bert?"

"No sense tellin' the whole town we're here."

Easing himself into a sitting position, he patted the several inches of fresh straw. "Nice'n soft, Ween, sit yerself."

Beneath the weight of their bodies, the straw issued up a clean, fresh aroma, and Rowena allowed herself to be contentedly lost in Bertram's arms. As his mouth pressed warmly on hers, her lips parted slightly, and he bore her back into the beckoning resilience. With a soft whimper, she drew him fiercely to her; and, as his hand stole up to lie on her breast, there were but three to hear her exclamation of pleasure: Bert, Ben and the moon.

What panty hose and leotards are to the amorous males of today, petticoats and bloomers were to their great-grandfathers. Even though, due to the mild weather, Rowena had not *overdressed*, what she did wear presented Bert with a formidable challenge. Even in his innocence, he knew asking Rowena to disrobe would end his conquest. It must be accomplished carefully, over her not too strenuous objections. Deftly, he initiated a long, passionate kiss, and let his hand slip from her breast.

As Bert's withdrew his hand, Rowena was beset by a frenzy of conflicting thoughts. There was no doubt as to Bert's plans, and she was frightened by the realization that she was very close wanting the same thing. The temptation was maddening, her longing nearly beyond control; but as his hand moved down across the outer folds of her dress, the moment of decision had come. Fully aware of what she would be sacrificing; it was suddenly clear that she was not

prepared to do that. The reaction of her body was instantaneous; the muscles of her abdomen contracted violently, and she propelled herself onto one elbow.

"BERT!" The fire in her voice was not that born of passion. "What are you doing?"

Not waiting for a reply, she pushed him away, and drew herself into the corner of the wagon, struggling to straighten her skirt.

"M'gosh, Ween, what's the matter with you? Isn't that what you was askin' for."

"Asking? I never said a word!"

"You didn't need to, I knew what you wanted. It- it's that way when-- when... Aw, a fella just knows, and he does it."

"What ever made you think I wanted *THAT*?" She spat out the final word as if it carried a foul taste. "I- I won't do that until I'm married!"

"Well," muttered Bertram. "Then you better stop tellin' fellas you're ready. Anyway, you might as well have—you done everything else."

The slivers of moonlight, making their way through the trees, made the night less that total darkness, but little more. Bert didn't need to see, however, to know that Rowena's eyes were flashing fire. "NO, no I didn't!"

The words had come easily enough, but Rowena wasn't sure they were true, and that left a troubling question, which would not soon be answered.

Bertram, still feeling much the one wronged, sought to put himself in a better light. "Well, you sure did! I know what was happenin' with you— what you was wantin'! What else do you think there is?"

"I- I guess I don't rightly know, but it must be pretty important, or you wouldn't be tryin' so hard to do it."

"Oh, hell, Wee..."

"Bertram Tibbs! Don't you swear at me, or I'll kick you right— right there in that thing you're so all mighty proud of."

Bert drew back apprehensively. "Aw, I- I ain't proud, I- I..."

"Oh, you aren't? Well, the way you were carryin' on, peers as though you thought it was so wonderful that I just couldn't live without it. Well, I certainly can! I don't want any part of— it!"

Bert shook his head in bewilderment. "Well, what *did* you want? You sure was likin' what we was doin'. The other is just— just a lot more fun!"

There was a note of hopeful speculation in his voice, but Rowena's quick retort ended it.

"Well, of course it is— for you *men*. You don't have no worry about gettin' a baby!"

Standing, rather shakily, Rowena said, "For heaven's sake, Bert, stop talking, and take me home."

Still aware of Rowena's withering gaze; and still feeling, very much, the jilted lover, the chagrined young man hastened to his feet. "'Tain't fittin' fer a girl to talk that way." He said, defensively.

"HA," snorted Rowena, climbing onto the seat, "and I 'spose it was all right for you to-to..." She paused, her voice dropping noticeably. "T- to do *that*?"

Bert mumbled something unintelligible, and seated himself beside her. Kicking the brake handle free, he flicked the reins across the horse's rump. "C'mon, Ben, giddyap!"

They had reached the paved street before Bert broke the silence. "I- I'm sorry, Ween."

Rowena came erect. "Yes, I just bet you are, but most likely 'cause you didn't get what you wanted!"

Bertram dropped his head, averting his eyes. "Huh-uh, that ain't why. It's cause— 'cause I went farther'n you wanted me to— an- and made you mad..." He paused, expecting her to speak, but when she didn't, he continued: "Ween, I- I really like you. I don't want you to be mad at me— 'specially, with you goin' away."

Even as the harsh words had left her lips, Rowena had begun to regret them. "Oh, Bert, I ain't mad, it- it's just that- that girls..."

The pause was triggered by the recollection of her numerous conversations with Alice Weyford.

"*Some* girls think different about- about *things*. It wasn't your fault that you didn't know that. I guess what we were doin' would just, sorta naturally lead to- to somethin' else."

Bert breathed a deep sigh, and slipped his arm about Rowena's shoulders. "Then we're still friends— I mean, you still like me?"

Rowena leaned across, and kissed his cheek. "'Course, silly."

As Bert offered his hand to help Rowena down from the wagon, the porch light came on, and Rowena snickered. "Bet papa's been watchin' ever since he first heard the wagon— most likely, 'fore that."

Bert chuckled softly. "Uh-huh, but I sure do like your daddy. Don't reckon I'd ever want him mad at me— but I do wish he hadn't turned the light on. I wanted to kiss you good bye."

Rowena's smile was answer enough, but she said, "Silly, you can kiss me, but like friends, not like back there in the woods."

She placed her hand on his shoulders. "I'm gonna miss you, Bertram Tibbs— but it ain't like it was forever, I'll be back 'fore you know it." She reached up and kissed him quickly on the mouth. "G'night, Bert."

Knowing that they were being observed, Bert fidgeted nervously, fearful that his thoughts might also be open to the same scrutiny. "Night, Ween, I'll miss you."

As Rowena turned to leave, Bert's hoarse whisper pierced the night stillness. "WEEN!"

The panic in his voice caused her to stop and whirl to face him. "What?" She whispered.

He pointed dumbly. "There- there's straw all over your back."

"Oh, my," Rowena whispered, then turned, took a stumbling step, and fell gently to the earth.

"Ween!" Bert was beside her. "Are you all right?"

"Rowena!" It was Ida. "What happened, child? Are you hurt?"

"No, Mama, I'm fine. I just stumbled." Then more softly: "Bertram, help me up— and brush me off."

Bert smiled wisely. "Well, I never," he muttered. "Here, Ween, take my hand."

Rowena stood easily and, after ascertaining she was thoroughly brushed, made her way to the front door with Bert still solicitously picking bits of straw from her back side.

When, on the second day following the party, Ira's discomfort seemed to indicate his problem went beyond that induced by overeating, Carlos summoned Bertram, instructing him to take the wagon, and request that the doctor pay them a visit. Jenny's request to accompany him, a most natural reaction from a caring sister, rang no bells for Carlos. Besides, it was broad daylight, early in the afternoon. What could happen?

Having been extremely shy and very studious, Carlos had gone from college into marriage without experiencing social life at any level. This void in his education left him woefully ill informed as to the workings of young minds when the host bodies ached with the pangs of passion.

As Bert geed old Ben onto the path leading beneath the trees, Jenny lifted her head from his shoulder. "Bertram Tibbs, we aren't going to find the doctor here!"

Bert grinned. "Nope," he whispered. "Somethin' a lot nicer." Drawing her close, he kissed her lightly. "A lot nicer!"

Jenny snuggled in his arms. "Oh, you wicked boy!"

Most of Bert and Jenny's romantic interludes, up to now, had been in the hayloft, or the semi-seclusion provided by whatever fate offered at the moment. There had been considerable exploration by inquisitive hands; much pressing of undulating bodies, but never had isolation been complete enough for Bert to chance a full-scale assault. Now, that had changed; but, with time a deterrent, speed was of the essence. He would have preferred it otherwise, but this would not be a prolonged affair. Once she was his, however, there would be endless opportunities for *her* need to be gratified. What Rowena had failed to take advantage of, Jenny would enjoy, thoroughly.

Although Bert's fantasies dealt with elaborate scenarios, he had never really formulated a plan of action. What he had tried with Rowena, certain she eagerly anticipating it, she had rejected in a completely unacceptable fashion. Not so today. Today Rowena's loss would be Jenny's good fortune.

Lack of time would preclude any *formalities*; once in the back of the wagon, he would use only the most basic *attack*: A few kisses, an exploring hand brushing aside the folds of material then, the final barrier, her underpants. Never in the past had he been able to breach their position of security. There had been touching, lots of it, but always those stalwart guardians of her chastity had remained firmly in place.

Although assured that he would prevail, it wasn't until some serious fondling failed to yield the desired results that he decided to use the approach he had planned for Rowena. As they lay in the straw, and he pressed down against her, her cry of delight left no doubt, the day was his. Lifting his hips, his lips smothered her objections as he freed the final buttons of his trousers. Still fully involved with the probing kiss, he brought his body against her.

There followed no moment of wild ecstasy. Jenny's lips exploded against his, as she screamed his name. A brief struggle ensued, but as Jenny clamped her legs together, and rolled to the side, Bert retreated in shocked disbelief.

"Damit, Jen, what the hell's wrong? You're carryin' on just like Rowee..."

Too late, his lips clamped shut and Jenny sat bolt upright.

"ROWENA!" She cried. "You mean you tried this with Ween, too?"

In today's world, or with a more experienced, aggressive partner, Jenny might have become a victim of "date rape". However, in a time when the average young man fully expected to be repulsed, a fruitless pursuit was often a desirable alternative. It was something to be wildly embellished, recounted many times, and often turned into a victorious conquest. The only truly violent emotion Bertram Tibbs was aware of was acute embarrassment.

They sat staring dumbly at each other until Jenny's burst of laughter broke the silence. "My Lord, Bert," she turned from him. "That's disgusting! Put that thing back in your pants!"

After a considerable time, Jenny asked, "Are you decent, yet?"

"Yeah," he grunted, sullenly.

"Well, it's about time! Now, you look the other way while I take care of what you did to my clothes. Then, let's get to town!"

With Dr. Isaacs's assurance that he would be out before day's end, Jenny and Bert headed back to the farm. During the trip Jenny sat as far from Bert as the wagon seat made allowance for. As Ben's plodding gait brought them ever nearer the farm, Bert moved closer, and slipped his arm about her shoulders. She brushed him away, glaring at him, her piercing dark eyes flashing fire.

"You get away from me, Bertram Tibbs. I don't want you to touch me, not now, not ever!"

Bert moved back apprehensively. "But, Jen— aren't you gonna let me explain?"

"EXPLAIN?" The word burst from her lips. "Just what lie could you make up that might change my mind?"

"But, Jen, it- it ain't like you think. I- I really like *you*!"

"Oh, that's nice! That's just wonderful, Bert. You mean you don't like Ween?"

"No, Jen, I- I like her, too..."

"Bert, for heaven's sake, just shut your mouth. All you're doin' is makin' a bigger fool of yourself than you already are. All this time you been tellin' Ween the same things you been tellin' me. Doin' the same things with her, and tryin' to- to... An' when she wouldn't, you thought I would. Damn you, Bertram Tibbs, you make me sick!"

A wicked smile crossed her lips. "Oh, yes, Bert, you can explain. You can explain to both of us, just as soon as Ween gets back from Chicago! But nothing's gonna change. I know what kind of person you are..." She drew a quiet breath. "Only thing I don't know is— what kind of person I am!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

1908 - 1909

Long before it had been discussed, Ida had prayed that Rowena might attend college. Memories of the bitter disappointment, she had experienced, when her education had been aborted, only increased the number and urgency of her petitions. Under the circumstances, it followed, only naturally, that once Rowena's education was a certainty, Jenny became the object of Ida's concern, and the pleas continued uninterrupted.

For Carlos and Lorraine to see their children's education advance beyond high school seemed an impossible dream. Granted, their move to the farm dramatically improved their financial status, but it was Jason's funding that made the dream a reality. The girls' decision to attend different institutions was a heart wrenching one; but it was time for them to follow separate paths.

Jenny had applied, and been accepted, at her father's alma mater, but in the final reckoning she had opted for an AG school nearer home. As for Rowena, her choice of a smaller, up state New York, university seemed to satisfy Ida's dream of a "big" eastern college.

Graduation for the class of 1908 and, in particular, the party following, would be, by rural standards of the day, a lavish affair. Well beyond what senior classes were accustomed to, it would also double as a dedication celebration for the new, as yet unfinished, gymnasium. This plan had been conceived when it was felt the building would be completed prior to the summer hiatus. Even in the face of unforeseeable construction delays, the planned "doin's" was not to be put off.

School Board members, professing frugality, but unable to work within the parameters of what their preaching established, were well over budget. The multi-functional festivities had seemed an artful way of diverting attention from their dilemma, while saving a few pennies.

Skillful draping of crepe paper and bunting covered nearly all areas still in need of finish work. By virtue of its, at least, twin objectives, the party/prom would be attended by as many adults as students. This, though seen by some students as being something akin to taking a bath in ice water, seemed to affirm that the gathering would be a huge success. Again, the means of reaching these assessments, and the conclusions drawn from them, varied dramatically, depending on the age of the assessor.

The confusion, and general chaos, created by the festival's expansion, and the burgeoning body count, was, a plus in the eyes some students. There was little doubt that the greater the number of attendees, the greater the opportunity for couples to slip away undetected.

Later, although it was never proven that any young ladies gave up their chastity, there were persistent rumors. Certainly, there was no denying the sizable assortment of women's undergarments that the clean up operations unearthed. While this evidence was only circumstantial, and presented a number of questions, it left but one conclusion.

Emma Lou Becker was born to a local prostitute in a small Texas town nestled just north of that state's border with Mexico. Shortly after turning fifteen, she married Melton Henessey,

nine years her senior. Before reaching the next anniversary of her birth, she had given birth to a son; a child not sired by Mr. Henessey.

Melton worked for a major tanner as a salesman, a *traveling* salesman. Primarily, he sold harnesses, but if it was made of leather, and in his catalogue, Henessey could sell it. Quite often a product ended up in the hands of someone who had no use for it, questioned why they had ordered it, and rightfully wondered if, indeed, they had. This being the case, the word was that Melton's sales techniques would embarrass a hardened confidence man. To be fair, and there is considerable question as to whether a need exists to be so, it could be said that Melton Henessey was not *completely* aware that his method of closing fell into that gray area between a clever sales technique, and out right dishonesty. In that vein, it could be *assumed* that his drunken binges, numbering about six a year, were triggered by the wrath of dissatisfied customers as it was passed on to him, rather harshly, by an irate supervisor.

When Melton drank, he gambled; when he gambled, he lost, and when he lost, he beat his wife. It took several years, but eventually, Emma Lou, when sensing a pending binge, would scoop up her son, a few provisions, and run away. Quite often those days of exile were spent cowering in an empty boxcar, a nearby woods or the inhospitable darkness of a deserted building.

For all his faults, Melton Henessey had been a reasonably good provider. So, when it was that he finally managed to stumble beneath the wheels of a loaded beer wagon, poetic justice was served, and Emma Lou's lot improved in one sense, while becoming much more difficult in another: The *tragedy* of her husband's death left Emma Lou destitute, with a fourteen-year old son to care for. Although grateful to be free of his drunken, abusive ways, Emma Lou found herself friendless, without income, and totally unprepared for widowhood.

Because of Melton's philandering, moving regularly had been a necessity of life— his. The year that the Henesseys had lived in Garwood was one of the best Emma Lou had known. Twice, on the occasion of Melton's rampages, Garwood neighbors had sheltered her and her son, Thad. It is understandable, therefore, that in her memories of Garwood lay a glimmer of hope, a promise of security.

For Thad, Garwood offered even greater appeal. Following an unpleasant incident in school, he had been accepted in a manner that had provided the nearest thing to real friendship he had ever known.

Due to differing registration dates, and Rowena's extended travel time, she had left several days prior to Jenny's planned departure. Those were hectic days for Jenny, for although much time, and thought, had been allotted to preparing for college, little had been set aside for finding her replacement as cook, housekeeper and— mother.

The boys were carrying a nearly full workload, but the sum of their domestic skills equaled nearly zero. This, never an important issue, became even less so with Jason's acquisition of several hundred additional acres, for it followed that any time, not spent in school or bed, found them working.

For the family, aside from necessary chores, Sunday was a time for church and rest. For Bertram, and any other hands, it was often their only day off.

There had been a few brief discussions about hiring someone to take over Jenny's chores, but lack of enthusiasm, and consensus, had left the issue undecided. Now, with very little time remaining, Jenny was facing the formidable challenge of finding an acceptable replacement.

Although there were agencies, which could have assisted her, Jenny had little confidence in them and, in addition, felt an obligation. After all, as sole caretaker of *her* men folk, it was a *duty*.

When Jenny had first heard of the widow Henessey, she had sensed some misgivings, but following several discrete inquiries, and numerous glowing recommendations, she found herself knocking at the door of one of the several miserable little houses perched along the railroad right-of-way.

After her ugly confrontation with Thad Henessey, Jenny had made it a point to avoid him. Despite numerous reports that he was really a rather nice boy, she had never changed her stance, and was relieved when the family left town. Their reappearance had been of no consequence, for Thad had not returned to school.

It was common knowledge that he and his mother were hard pressed to find enough work to maintain body, soul and roof. Word was that they would do any honest work; but, while accepting an occasional church basket, they refused any other form of charity.

In learning this, Jenny had begun to develop a rather precise concept of Mrs. Henessey's character. Perception of her physical characteristics, however, was based on the tremendous amount of work she could accomplish in a relatively brief space of time. Jenny was quite satisfied with what she *knew*, and extremely pleased with what she had envisioned.

The ramshackle house and tiny patch of earth, on which it was rather awkwardly placed, were as neat and tidy as conditions would allow. For Jenny it was a trip back in time; all of it, including the colorful, inexpensive curtains, was too reminiscent of the home in which she had spent much of her childhood.

Standing before the miserable shack, her memories were not of that happy childhood, but those that the bitterness of maturity had created. This biased, present day interpretation placed her home, at the dump, and the one she was about to enter, in a most unfavorable light. Had she expunged the bitterness she felt toward those responsible for her home, her recollections would have been of a time filled with joy and love:

The exquisite joy of finding Dooley's "treasure"... The hours of fanciful exploration, as she and the boys rummaged through the piles of discards... The excitement of finding items that became their own treasures, things to play with, and build with, some of no value whatsoever, and others cherished simply for the mystery of not knowing what they might be.

Response to Jenny's knock was not immediate, and she was about to repeat the process when the rattle of the knob, precluded it.

The diminutive form, appearing before her, became, in retrospect, one of Jenny's finer lessons concerning the folly of prejudging.

"May I help you?"

The voice, soft and quite melodic, imparted to its query a true desire to fulfill whatever request might be forthcoming. The body, from whence it had come, was not the robust, farm wife in Jenny's mind. On the contrary, it was small and petite, to the point of being, almost, delicate. The face, mirroring the willingness of the voice, was openly honest, and only slightly less than beautiful.

Having been so certain of what Mrs. Henessey should look like, Jenny stepped back in surprise. "Um, uh, is Missus Henessey at home?" A quizzical smile played about the expressive mouth. "I'm Missus Henessey."

For a fleeting second, Jenny hesitated; then she smiled warmly. "Oh, Missus Henessey, forgive me. I- I thought... Well, that is, I..." She blushed, and thrust her hand forward. "I'm Jenny Roblés. I heard that you might be looking for work."

Even as she spoke, Jenny was aware of the childish awkwardness her words imparted. "Oh," she fussed. "That isn't the way I meant to say it." She gazed pleadingly into the warm, hazel eyes. They, in turn, smiled mischievously, as their host bade her enter.

"Come on in, Miss Roblés, I am always interested in work. I'll be real happy to hear what's on your mind."

The soft, barely discernible accent, lacking any harshness, held only a gentle lengthening of certain vowels; the occasional dropping of a consonant, and a muted rounding of sharp corners, all of which Jenny found most pleasing to the ear.

Age was another area where Jenny's *foreknowledge* had led her astray. Reckoning Thad to be a year or two her senior, she had placed Mrs. Henessey's age near that of her father's. It was quite obvious that her error involved several years, perhaps as many as ten. In only one instance had Jenny's intuition been correct. The handshake had proven that Mrs. Henessey was hard working and strong.

In the course of their conversation, Jenny learned that Thad had been working, for several months, as an apprentice at a shoe repair shop in Des Moines. Mrs. Henessey reported that with room and board, and a small wage, he was happily independent, and able to send some money home.

It took only a few minutes to form a verbal contract. Emma Lou's duties would be only those pertaining to housekeeping and preparing meals. In lieu of any farm work, she might be asked or wish to do, the extra compensation would be at the same rate as that of the other hands.

For the time being, a horse and buggy would be put at her disposal. Later, if all went well, and she felt it feasible, accommodations would be made available at the farm. With final acceptance, by Carlos and the Carlsons, only a formality, Jenny was certain she had found the prize they had all hoped for. If her convictions proved correct, and it was agreeable to all, the transition would take place over a period of three weeks. This in order to allow Mrs. Henessey time to fulfill her commitments, and give adequate notice to those using her services at the time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHRISTMAS 1908

For both Rowena and Jenny, their first trip home had been during the Christmas and New Year holidays. On the train, returning to school, Jenny could see the time as only a frenzied blur. With both she and Rowena home, it had been an impossible round of visitations and parties. They spent very little quiet time with any one individual. This had been extremely disappointing for them, for they had eagerly anticipated having ample time to be alone and talk.

Her father — she thought he had gained a little weight — had looked wonderful, and happier than she had seen him since her mother's death. The boys, Bobby a young man, and Ira nearly so — *How could they have matured so much in so short a time?* — had treated her with something akin to reverent awe. The house was spotless, and it had been obvious that Mrs. Henessey was doing an outstanding job.

The presence of Bertram Tibbs at meals, and nearly every other occasion, had detracted from her overall enjoyment of the visit. She and Rowena, having long since risen above their feelings of guilt and embarrassment, managed to conceal their dislike for the man by treating him with polite detachment.

Now, with the countryside scrolling past her window, Jenny was having second thoughts. Why had she allowed him to live this lie for so long? He maintained a position of respect in her family's eyes, which had denied her the pleasure of relaxed gatherings with friends and family; and, though without actual intrusion, he had become an integral, unwanted part of her life.

In the light of this retrospective soul searching, fear stood forth as the culprit. Fear of seeing her folly— her childish liaison paraded before her family; and fear of what a confrontation with Bertram might lead to... It would have, if nothing more, left her compromised in the eyes of her family and close friends. It angered Jenny to have allowed herself to be put in this position, but her inability to put it from her mind became the underlying reason for devising excuses for not spending Easter at home.

From her childhood, and in the death of her mother, Jenny had found the confidence to deny fear a place in her life, and yet, it was there, very real and very current. Its presence, and her abhorrence of it, forced her to reorganize the memories of the last two weeks. Quietly, suppressing her propensity to haste, she drew together the annoying ravelings, those seemingly unrelated moments, actions and words. Gradually, a pattern emerged. The boys' strangely detached asides took on ominous overtones. Sudden, unexplained omissions in conversations appeared as the result of a prearranged plan to make certain subjects out of bounds. Finally, there was the unnatural coolness she had sensed in those brief periods she was with Emma Lou Henessey; and it all came together as an accusing finger, one pointing directly at Bertram Tibbs.

The letter arrived a few days after Jenny's return to classes. In her father's bold, flowing hand it told of Bertram's dismissal, and the circumstances surrounding it.

It wasn't difficult for Jenny to read her father's thoughts as he wrote of things that he found so distasteful. For sometime, it seemed, Bertram had been seeing the former Alice

Weyford. Clandestine as these liaisons were, they were common knowledge, due mainly to the inability of either party to resist recounting such indiscretions.

That Carlos could not be held responsible for Bertram's actions did nothing to lessen his concern, or shame. These feelings would have differed little if one of his sons had been the perpetrator.

The situation had become unbearable two days following Jenny's return to college when Bertram had attempted to force himself upon Mrs. Henessey. The lady had not been injured or compromised, but Bertram had not fared as well at the hand of Bobby. Following this "conversation", Bertram had been paid an extra week's wages, and threatened with the possible loss of some of his masculine attributes if he was ever seen in the county again. Fortunately for Bertram, it was not learned until later that Mrs. Henessey had repeatedly been forced to repulse him.

Jenny crumpled the letter viciously. *They should have gelded him!* The words had come within a breath of being spoken, and Jenny gasped, startled that her mind could have conceived the thought, much less, the words. Her embarrassment came as water on the fires of her anger, and she began formulating plans for spending Easter at home.

As with so many *well-laid* plans, Jenny's trip did not become reality until the cessation of studies in June.

With all her cramming for finals; the confusion of the last minute good byes; the frantic rush to pack, and get to the station on time — which she very nearly didn't — with her midnight arrival, Jenny had been less than perky when her father picked her up. All things considered, it was not surprising that Carlos was the only one she had seen before falling exhausted into bed.

College life had taxed Jenny beyond what she had expected. In the terms of today she was: "stressed out!" The burden had traveled with her. It had been there as she dropped into bed, and had filled her dreams, but with the familiar sounds of morning, being foreign to the environment, they vanished. In finding home unchanged, Jenny was comforted, comforted and reassured.

In her first month or two, of college, the immediacy of getting accustomed to new surroundings, class schedules and studies, this more difficult than anticipated, she had found little time to be lonely or disenchanted. As she became inured to her new life, however, her mental outlook had changed dramatically. Life without Rowena became almost unbearable, and prolonged sieges of homesickness, triggered bouts of depression, which Jenny could not combat, much less, understand. This, of course, only worsened the situation, and there were times when she was ready to quit. Ironically, it was that word which forced her to stay. Quitting was a concept that Jenny found impossible to embrace.

The sound of Ira's voice drew her from the soothing warmth of bed to a position at one side of the window. From there she could observe without being observed. Ira, bearing the morning's clutch, was coming from the hen house. As he passed the barn door, he shouted to someone beyond Jenny's range of vision. The comment, delivered in a teasing manner, dealt with the premise that one's ability to oversleep required a mentality similar to that of a chicken.

Jenny was unable to hear the reply; but as Ira hastened for the house, a goodly portion of manure-laden straw followed closely.

Jenny snickered, and was about to turn away, when the recipient of Ira's remark appeared in the doorway; pitchfork in hand.

What had amounted to idle curiosity, quite suddenly became a well-defined priority. He was tall, not quite so as Papa Carlson, but nearly as broad through the shoulders. His recklessly scattered hair, running more to blond than brown, bore traces of being curly; and the mouth moved to frame a broad smile.

"'Bout the same as that needed to steal cackle berries, ah reckon."

The face, from her brief glimpse, was vaguely familiar, and not unpleasant to look at. His voice, rich and resonant, reminded her of her father's. His easy laugh, a delight to her ears, stirred a peculiar sensation somewhere south of her solar plexus.

Abruptly, he disappeared into the barn, and Jenny, sensing more than a trace of disappointment, entertained a fantasy that found her *almost* intimate with this total stranger.

"My," she whispered then, blushing, shook her head. "Jennifer Roblés, you are a wicked woman, but..." She paused, giving her imagination free rein. "That is a very interestin' man!"

As Jenny reached the kitchen, Mrs. Henessey was putting the finishing touches on breakfast.

"Good morning, Miss Jenny! My, don't you look purtty. I'm so glad you'll be here for a spell. Your papa has missed you sompin awful." She smiled knowingly. "Your brothers, too, though I 'spect they'll not own up to it."

Jenny smiled absentmindedly, and nodded slowly. "Thank you, Missus Henessey, it will be nice to forget studies for awhile."

Jenny was more than a little surprised at the obvious change in Emma Lou's demeanor. The pressure she had been under, with Bertram Tibbs ready to pounce on her at any moment, must have been acute. With that only an uncomfortable memory, Jenny had expected to see some change, but the glow in Emma Lou's smile spoke of something beyond mere relief.

Mrs. Henessey's smile broadened. "There!" With a flourish, she placed a plate of biscuits on the table. "The eggs'll be ready in a minute... Um, Miss Jenny, would you mind callin' the men folk?"

Jenny's, "Of course not!" came from behind her own smile, and she hurried to the door. Then, pausing, she spoke back over her shoulder. "I didn't know papa had hired a new hand. Who is he?"

Emma Lou, her face wreathed in a motherly smile, eased two eggs from the sizzling skillet, and added them to the growing pile on the platter. "That's my son!"

"Oh, I see... OH, Th- Thad?"

The hint of a frown drew its shallow furrows across Emma Lou's brow. "Why, yes, don't yo..."

The door closed on the remainder of the question, as Jenny stepped across the back porch.

She was not completely at ease with her thoughts as she opened the screened door and called: "Breakfast's ready!" Moments before, she had found herself enjoying the thoughts of being held by the strong, tan arms of that— then unknown, man. Now, those same thoughts

brought a sense of revulsion. *How could she bring herself to speak in a civil manner?* It had been many years, but the memories and hurt were as real as yesterday.

As she returned to the kitchen, her thoughts were suddenly redirected to her immediate surroundings:

"Miss Jenny?"

There was something in the inflection that told Jenny there might have been previous words.

"Wh- what? Oh, I'm sorry Missus Henessey. I— my mind was wanderin'."

Mrs. Henessey appeared relieved. "Well, it's no matter, as long as you're feelin' all right. You seemed— um, well, I thought, worried."

Jenny shook her head. "No, just lost in thought; thinkin' 'bout things we- us kids used to do. This was a nice place to grow up."

Mrs. Henessey nodded. "I'll just bet it was."

Jenny glanced at the mountains of food on the table and smiled. Both she and her mother had fed well, but never like this. It was obvious why her father was carrying a few extra pounds.

The sound of heavy footsteps on the porch brought her back to the present. "What can I do, Missus Henessey?"

The small woman's eyes darted about the room. "You might pour the coffee, if you're a mind."

As Jenny finished filling the last cup, Carlos entered closely followed by Bobby and Ira. Her smile, somewhat forced, was inclusive, but she sought to avoid eye contact with the forth member of the group. The effort became immediately futile, as Bobby, a reluctant Thad in tow, confronted her.

"Hey, Sis, 'member this fella?"

For a brief moment their eyes met, then Thad's dropped.

Jenny's voice was coldly toneless, her smile even less gregarious. "Morning, Thad. It's been— several years."

The young man shuffled uncomfortably. "M- mornin', Miss Jenny. Yes'm, it's been a spell."

Not near long enough! Jenny's thought had sprung from the pain of childhood memories, but something, perhaps the fantasy of earlier, had left her speechless, and facing a decision she could never have imagined.

"Well!" Her father's deep baritone, rumbling at the periphery of her consciousness, pushed aside all but the present. "You two can talk over old times later, it is time now, before this fine food turns cold, to eat!"

Carlos stood behind his chair, watching benevolently as the others took their places. Then, blessing himself, he prayed: "Oh, Heavenly Father, on this wonderful day, this day of our daughter's return, grant that we may be truly grateful for all you have blessed us with. Let there be no desire in our hearts beyond that of loving our neighbor and serving you. Give us the

wisdom to accept humbly all that you send our way. Thank you, Lord, for the safe return of our beloved Jennifer. Bless this food and the hands that prepared it! This we ask in the name of our Lord, Jesus the Christ. Amen."

The emphasis on, "... and the hands that prepared it..." did not go unnoticed by Jenny. Noting also that Thad and his mother had blessed themselves prior to grace, she wondered if it was out of respect for Carlos, as Rowena had always done, or because they were of the same religious conviction. It had not been a question she had felt it proper to ask, when discussing employment with Emma Lou.

Jenny's time at the breakfast table had not been overly awkward. Thad had been respectful; and, for the most part, quiet. In his brief additions to the conversation, though, she had sensed wisdom and maturity beyond that of Ira's or Bobby's.

Much of those first weeks at home Jenny spent with Rowena. Soon, as they slipped back into their old habits, the days drew her more deeply into the routine of farm life. She found herself helping around the house more and more. It was time well spent, for it afforded a degree of intimacy with Emma Lou she might not have achieved, otherwise. From their conversations, and the glances shared by Emma Lou and her father, Jenny soon realized that, even if she were to absorb all of Emma Lou's work, that lady would be no less a member of the family. This revelation explained a number of things, and Jenny wondered how long her father and Emma Lou might continue their little charade.

In an attempt to ease her study load, Jenny had brought some of the next year's reading with her. Not surprisingly, even with ample time to complete it, the bulk remained untouched. As the day of class resumption drew closer, she began to cram in earnest, telling herself it was better this way because she was less apt to forget.

Once most of the work was completed, it became increasingly difficult to put aside visits with friends, and her desire to spend those final precious times with Rowena. Now, with Rowena gone, and only two vacation days remaining, she still faced a formidable number of unread pages.

It was early evening and, after helping Emma Lou with the dishes, Jenny was struggling, with little success, to concentrate on a particularly dry text. In the cozy warmth of the great room, with the residue, of Emma Lou's wonderful meal, resting comfortably in her stomach, Jenny found concentration impossible. After rousing herself for the fourth time, she put the book aside, and glanced across at the man seated opposite her.

"Papa, I can't keep my eyes open. I'm going to take a little walk."

Carlos eyed her causally over the edge of his newspaper. "All right, little one. Take a lantern, though, the night has clouds that hide the stars."

Jenny nodded. "Mm-hmm. I won't be long."

The boys, seated at the kitchen table, were engrossed in a game of checkers. As Jenny walked by, Bobby, without looking up, said, "'S matter, Sis, farm life too boring for the big city girl?"

Jenny shrugged in disdain "Poor country bumpkin, how ever do you put up with it?"

More interested in fresh air than exercise, Jenny moved slowly along the drive. Familiar objects, unrecognizable in the lantern's feeble effort, melted into the darkness beyond its intimate

halo. She had nearly reached the road when, from the darkness, a quiet nicker drew her to where she could touch the soft muzzle Dolly thrust toward her. She lay her cheek against the coarse waves of her mane. "Good girl. Bet you miss pullin' the wagon or buggy, or havin' someone ride you." For several seconds she rubbed the animal's forehead gently, then turned to wander off in the direction of town.

Jenny had walked less than a quarter mile when she turned to retrace her steps. Having reached the pasture corner, she paused as another lantern came swinging down the drive toward her. Her pulse quickened for an instant, then realizing it had to be someone from the house, she called quietly. "Who's that?"

The lantern's movement ceased, and a voice came from behind it. "Oh, it's only me, Miss Jenny, Thad. Ah come to fetch Dolly."

Jenny would learn that Thad's accent grew more pronounced when he was ill at ease or emotionally involved in some way.

Thad continued on until, with only a few feet separating them, the lanterns' combined light shown brightly on Dolly's broad neck, as she stretched toward them.

"You take her in every night?"

"Oh, yes Ma'm. Won't be much longer'n she'll stay in most all the time. Mistah Jason, he won't leave her out when the weathah gets bad."

Jenny nodded. "Dolly always was Papa Carlson's favorite."

"Oh, yes Ma'm, no doubt about that, but..." He paused, as if reconsidering his words. "Ah mean, uh— Mistah Jason, he takes good care of all his stock..." Again, there was a hesitation of indecision. "Ah- ah mean— he..."

"Yes." Jenny interjected. "I know what you mean. Papa Carlson is a gentle, caring man."

Relief was evident in the young man's voice. ":OH, yes, yes, Ma'm, none finah! Reckon him and Mistah Carlos be about the two straightest fellahs ah evah hope to know. Ah'm mighty beholdin' to them, both!"

Thad placed his lantern on a fence post; then, with so little effort as to give Jenny the impression that a giant hand had lifted him, he vaulted over the fence and, with the same effortless grace, arrived astride Dolly's back.

Jenny pondered the contradiction this man represented to her. Nowhere in his manner, nothing he did or said bore any resemblance to the boy whose actions she condemned him for.

"Thad?" The question, too ridiculous to consider, fell from her lips before rational thought could stop it: "Are you the same Thad Henessey I went to school with?"

As she heard herself speaking, her mind was chanting, *stupid is as stupid does*. Now, in her words' hollow echo, she found it difficult to believe she had uttered them. Vainly, she searched for others that might make her appear less an idiot, but none were available.

It may have been a smile, or a peculiar shadow cast by the lanterns, Jenny wasn't certain. There was a sound, one she knew to be of vocal origin, but not as a laugh or word, merely a soft exclamation. Thad drew one leg back over Dolly's neck, and slid to the ground.

"Miss Jenny, ah- ah ain't much with words. Sometimes, 'cause ah can't find none to use— an' sometimes 'cause ah ain't too sure how to use 'em, um— even if they was theah. One thing ah am sure of, though, and ah have been foah a long time. That's how sorry ah am foah them awful things ah said to you! Reckon ah could say t'weren't me a-talkin', but wouldn't change nothin'. Ah'd be beholdin' to you if- if you think that- that someday— um, you might fo'give me?"

Thad's plea, duly noted, was filed for future reference, but something else he'd said had captured a major part of her attention. "Thad— you said it wasn't you talking." She stepped closer to the fence, to more clearly see his face. "What did you mean?"

"Oh, Ma'm— ah don't rightly know if ah can explain. Y'see, when we come to Garwood, ah'd been in— uh... Lordy! Ah don't know— maybe a dozen different towns and schools. Nevah did make no friends; seemed as though ah was nevah in one place long enough. An' it kinda seemed every place had different rules 'bout how you done it. When ah heard..."

It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to speak, and Jenny, fearing he might give up entirely, urged him on. "Yes, Thad, go on. I understand."

Jenny felt little remorse for her, less than truthful, statement. The circumstances, she felt, offered ample justification for such a transgression. Her judgment was quickly validated as Thad continued:

"Wheah I was born— a little ole dirt patch in Texas, just cross the bawdah from Mexico, I use to heah the big boys talkin' 'bout the girls that come ovah at night to earn extra money. Then when ah come here, ah heah some of the big fellahs talkin' at the pool hall 'bout girls like you. Ah-ah figured if ah did the same, they'd think I was pretty much okay."

Anger burned in Jenny's cheeks. "T- talking a- a- about girls like me? Does that mean a— half-breed?"

Even in the dim light, Jenny could see the color drain from Thad's cheeks. "Oh— oh, Ma'm, thet were only part of it, but ah could nevah repeat it to nobody! What ah said to you weren't nothin' like what ah heard..."

Thad's eyes rolled upward in a gesture of helplessness. "Ah, ah don't know thet ah can say anything moah, it's..."

"Thad!" Jenny's voice held a cold edge that offered no alternatives. "You can't stop now!"

"No, Ma'm, don't reckon ah can. Them things ah said to you— mostly, ah didn't know what they meant. Ah was just repeatin' some of what ah heard. Back home, fellahs talked like that, all that time."

Thad's shame and anguish were obvious; and, even in her rage, Jenny found herself sensing compassion.

Thad continued, dejectedly. "You'll nevah know how ah've wished ah nevah- nevah said them things... Wished ah'd nevah heard 'em!"

Jenny's mind was a jumble of wild, angry thoughts, none making sense, none doing anything to ease the pain feeding the fires of her fury.

"Wh- who were those boys?"

Thad pressed against the fence rail, his eyes meeting Jenny's squarely. Reaching out, his hand came to rest gently on her shoulder. "Oh, Miss Jenny, you- you don't want to know. They wasn't boys from school. They was just some fellas talkin' 'bout girls. Th- they was only one that honest knew you— 'n he- he, well he ain't been in these parts for a long time. Them others— well they's just talkin'— the way fellahs do."

"The way fellows do?"

"Yes, Ma'm. Some fellahs take a heap of pride in- in what they do with girls, an' an' even if they nevah done it, they talk about it. If ah'd been a little oldah; or, maybe, had a daddy that'd taught me some things, ah'd knowed there weren't nothin' to it."

Jenny was aware that her clandestine meetings with Bertram Tibbs were fairly common knowledge, but she would never know exactly who or how many he had regaled with his tales of wild times with the *little half-breed, greezer whore*.

It required tremendous effort for Jenny to suppress a cry of pain and outrage. Almost dropping her lantern, she placed it unsteadily on the ground, whirled, and walked toward the road.

For several seconds she stood, fists clenched at her sides, trying to control her emotions. Suspended, somewhere, between screaming obscenities at all the men of earth, or weeping the bitter tears, of humiliation and utter degradation, she stood, mute, in silent misery.

Jenny was unaware that the fence no longer separated she and Thad. It was not until she sensed his nearness that she turned to find herself facing him. No more than a silhouette against the glow of the abandoned lanterns, his drooping shoulders lifted in a gesture of helplessness as he spoke. "Miss Jenny, please— please, don't hurt yo'self like this. It- it's all ovah and gone. Ain't no use lookin' back. It— well, it just ain't worth it! You- you'ah too fine a lady to worry 'bout what anybody evah said."

As Jenny listened, his quiet words soothed the raw edges of her torn pride; and, as the level of her anger subsided, she observed a difference in his voice. It was as though he were fighting the words free, or— weeping. She moved around into the light, forcing him to face it. The tears, their moist avenues of escape, and his misery were starkly exposed in the lantern's glow.

"Oh, Thad..." With heart wrenching suddenness, Jenny realized that both victim, and perpetrator, had suffered equally. Tenderly, she brushed away the tiny rivulets. "Don't," she whispered. "Please, don't. You're right; it isn't worth it. It's over and gone! Gone and..."

Forgotten, as yet, lay beyond her reach, but Jenny knew, now, that it would not always be so. Gazing up into his eyes she searched for words to fill the void, and heal the wounds, but they were, as yet, of the distant future.

For several seconds, they stood silently apart. Then, gently, lovingly he drew her close and, as her arms encircled him, they wept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1909 - 1910

Days spilled into weeks, then months. Holidays passed without observance of any kind, and Jenny, cloistered with her books, watched helplessly, unable to escape the vortex she had assigned herself. Lonely, homesick, and hosting a disquieting desire to see Thad Henessey, she longed to be with her family. Finally, when an extracurricular study project threatened to cut several days from her Christmas-New Year break, she called a halt, and went home.

They were wonderful, happy holidays. Rowena was home, and they spent many hours together. Although nothing was said, the affection, shared by her father and Emma Lou, was even more obvious than on her last visit. As for her expectations, concerning Thad Henessey, whatever they entailed, they were limited to a constrained greeting, and some rather uncomfortable moments during meals.

Whether the lack of connection with Mr. Henessey had any bearing on it is uncertain, but Jenny's return to class found her pursuing her studies with even greater intensity. Without question, a person of less determination would have found it impossible to carry the number of credits she did. Of course, there are those who might view this level of resolve as self-destructive. Certainly, it appeared deficient in wisdom. Unwittingly, however, this *near* obsession was instrumental in bringing about a major change in her life.

Although it was not her major, Jenny was interested in veterinary medicine, and spent as much volunteer time as possible with a local veterinarian. It was during her sophomore year, while working with Dr. Jelvik, that she met Stuart Clauson.

"Mornin'."

The big man's voice was gruff, but not unfriendly. Jenny smiled up at him. "Good morning. May we help you in some way?"

His slow grin was infectious. "Um, no, but..." He held up a gunnysack, which had remained hidden until then. "I was hopin' you might do somethin' for this old cat."

Reaching into the sack, he withdrew a very large, yellow tabby. The animal, hanging limply from his huge hand, appeared quite dead.

Jenny reached out to touch the cat. "Is it— dead?"

"Naw, don't think so, be a might sick, though, ah reckon..."

There was a touch of concern in his voice, when he continued. "Y- you be the new doctor?"

Jenny shook her head. "No— no Doctor Jelvik is in the rear. If you can wait a moment, I'll get him."

As he nodded, and stepped back, Jenny allowed herself a more thorough appraisal of the big man. Obviously, not a fellow student, his well-worn bibs spoke of a man of the soil. She doubted, however, that a farmer would bother to seek medical treatment for a cat, those particular bits of God's creation being considered of little value beyond their mousing abilities. There was

much about his size that reminded her of Papa Carlson, but the resemblance ended there. His face, neither handsome nor unattractive, was deeply tanned, and rather angular. The inquiring blue eyes were deep set. A lopsided mouth seemed anxious to smile, even though the rest of him appeared reluctant to support such an endeavor. A crop of dark hair gathered thickly, a considerable distance from his feet, and fell over his forehead nearly obscuring one eye. His hands, the one holding the cat, and its mate, were attached to long, muscular arms that hung expectantly; almost, Jenny thought, as if awaiting a command to action.

Sensing that her examination had gone beyond what could be termed polite, Jenny smiled up at him. "Your name, sir?"

"Clauson, Ma'm, uh, Stu— uh, Stuart Clauson. Doc knows me, purtty well."

Jenny nodded. "Thank you, Mister Clauson," and hurried off to summon Dr. Jelvik.

Following an exchange of friendly greetings, Dr. Jelvik put his hand on the ailing cat. "What happened to her, Stu?"

Laying the animal gently on the counter, the big man shook his head. "Not sure, really, 'spose, maybe she got hold of somethin' that didn't agree with her. I did everything I could think of, but she ain't getting' no better"

The doctor shrugged. "Don't seem hardly possible it could be food poisoning. She's been eatin' anything and everything she could find or catch for near twenty years, now."

Turning to Jenny, he said: "Would you mind the front for a few minutes?" Then, picking up the cat. "C'mon back, Stu. Let's have a look at her."

Jenny was mildly surprised. There were very few examinations or procedures that she wasn't asked to participate in. As accustomed to this as she was, the doctor's request did not upset her.

Twenty years? Jenny was astounded. If she hadn't heard so clearly, she would have doubted her ears. The life span of barn cats, while not overly short, was never reckoned in decades, they being viewed as a delicacy by marauding coyotes. How could this animal have lived that long? The two men disappeared, and only muffled voices greeted her attempts to overhear.

Although she had not consulted the clock, the examination was brief. In a relatively short time the sound of footsteps brought the two men back into her field of vision. Stuart was still carrying the burlap bag which, judging by its drape, contained the cat.

Dr. Jelvik stopped at the counter next to Jenny, but Stuart hurried on past. Pausing briefly at the door, he turned toward them. "Uh, you send a bill, okay, Doc?"

Dr. Jelvik shrugged. "Yeah, sure, Stu; first of the month. Uh, Stu, I'm sorry."

Jenny sensed true compassion in the doctor's voice, and was saddened, but inexplicably pleased to see what she thought were tears on Stuart's tanned cheeks.

In the next instant the door closed and he was gone, and Jenny turned to the doctor. "He was crying..."

The doctor nodded. "Not surprising." He allowed himself a quiet sigh. "Her kidneys had shut down'n I had to put her down." A shallow breath served a moment of quiet reflection.

“Stu's had that cat since he was 'bout three years old. They grew up together. Old Missy — she wasn't, really, had one litter 'fore I fixed her — helped fill the emptiness when his folks were killed.”

Through the accounts of Rowena's early childhood, and memories of her own, Stuart Clauson became one whose inner thoughts Jenny felt privy to. The question this posed seemed totally irrelevant, but she was about to voice it when Dr. Jelvik continued.

"Stuart was, I think, an unexpected child. His father was near sixty, his mother forty-eight or nine when he was born. It was his older brother raised him. He died 'bout three years ago. Since then Stu's worked the farm alone."

Jenny's cognizance of how her thoughts, and these bits of information, would alter her life was evidenced only in the subliminal determination that she must see Stuart Clauson again. Petitioning Dr. Jelvik for information of his whereabouts was out of the question, however, and a search of the patient files, such as they were, listed only a box number.

It was nearly five weeks, and then not of Jenny's doing, before they shared a proximity conducive to conversation. It was a Saturday morning; Jenny had accepted Dr. Jelvik's invitation to assist with an operation on a small dog. With the procedure completed, and the patient recovering from the effects of the anesthesia, Jenny was assisting with the clean up when the outer door opened.

"I'll be with you in a moment," she called. Putting aside the instruments, she washed her hands, and hurried to the front.

Standing at the counter, burlap bag in hand, was Stuart Clauson. It was obvious that this time the sack's occupant was very much alive and, judging by the sounds, a kitten.

"Mister Clauson, how nice to see you, and—" nodding toward his burden, "I hope, under happier circumstances."

The big man, suddenly aware of the comely picture Jenny presented, and thoroughly enjoying that revelation, grinned broadly. "Thank you, Ma'm, and yes Ma'm it is..."

The final word was left hanging, as if more were to follow; but, much to Jenny's delight, it seemed their utterance was stayed by his receptivity of her. He stood smiling his crooked smile, and openly admiring the lovely girl standing before him.

Even with the pleasure of being so thoroughly appreciated, Jenny could feel the color creeping into her cheeks. Clearing her throat softly, she pointed at the sack. "Uh, what might be the problem with the kitten?"

The smile remained, but Mr. Clauson, uncomfortably aware of his breach of etiquette, was flustered. "Uh, um— beggin' your pardon, Ma'm, I- I..."

Remembering her vain attempts to see him, and the nagging emptiness she had felt since their first meeting, Jenny was embraced by a whirlwind of shameless thoughts. Thoughts, which filled her with an audacity that, being foreign to her, was startling. "Mister Clauson, there is no need for embarrassment. I— any woman would be pleased to know that her appearance was such that a gentleman might find pleasure in looking at her. I, for one, am delighted that you find me— attractive... And—" Jenny's smile was as provocative as her meager seductive prowess

could make it, "so that you don't feel this is one sided; um, I find you quite handsome and- and intriguing..."

There would be a day when she and Stuart would laugh at this unorthodox beginning to their relationship, but not this day. She stopped, eyes wide with surprise. The bubble had burst, and she was mortified. Clamping her hand to her mouth, she stammered: "O- oh, my. I can't believe I said that... I- I.. Oh, Mister Clauson, I'm dreadfully sorry!"

He extended the hand not involved with the squirming bag. "I'm Stu."

Jenny took the huge hand warmly. "Yes... I'm Jenny— Jenny Roblés."

There had been a trace of defiance in the heavily accented Spanish pronunciation, but whatever its aim, the mark was missed. Stuart Clauson, lost in the spell of Jenny's dark beauty, could only mumble. "Name's most as purty as the one it belongs to."

After this brash forwardness, what followed represented an enigma, of sorts. Although they saw each other regularly, if they gave a thought to meeting socially it was never mentioned. Even by standards of the day, a courtship it never was.

The kitten, still too young to be "fixed", had gone home with Stuart. Shortly after that, when Stuart had exhausted all feasible excuses for being at the clinic, a routine developed: On the days Jenny worked, he would pick her up in the buckboard, and drive her; returning, again, that evening to take her home. Quite often, they would share a picnic lunch, prepared by Stuart, on the clinic's porch.

During the following months, in quiet talks, Stuart told of growing up without his parents, of his love for his brother, and what life had become without him. Jenny shared the difficulty she and her family had experienced because of their ethnic diversity, and told Stuart of the great love she had for her family and Rowena. In sharing these things, and what they felt life held for them, much of what a customary courtship may not have had time for, was openly discussed.

Jenny's attraction to Stuart Clauson began with their first meeting. Stuart's reaction to that incident is unknown, but what transpired following their second meeting established his interest in Jenny as being considerably more than casual. It soon became apparent that they shared many common interests, and a level of compatibility rare in any geological time. Their physical attraction, though very real, was ignored to a point of being undetectable.

In our "Let it all hang out!" and "If it feels good, do it!" society, it is difficult to accept or understand why or how two normal, healthy, mutually attracted people would or could disguise their most basic impulses. Whatever the reason, it happened, physically, and, more subtly, emotionally.

This is not to suggest that runaway hormones were any less prevalent in that time. And whether this, somewhat atypical, situation grew from the mutual respect of both parties, or any of numerous other viable reasons, may never be known, but it was obvious that what Jenny and Stuart shared, and the manner in which they shared it, promised to return a bountiful harvest.

Had Jenny been a paid employee, it is quite possible that Dr. Jelvik would have found her behavior unacceptable, and terminated her. That could have been a *possibility*, but never a probability. The good doctor, being extremely fond of them, had recognized a need in both, and felt that theirs was a relationship worth cultivating.

The advent of finals, in concert with Stuart's preparations for spring planting, drastically curtailed their time together. Quite abruptly, both realized that their relationship was not as they had envisioned it, and were deeply troubled.

As can happen, when two are involved in a relationship, which seems destined to become one of a romantic nature, this eventuality comes to be viewed as a certainty. When it is finally realized that such will not be the case until someone accepts the role of instigator, quite often, the expected, most natural, conclusion never occurs. Generally, this is because, suddenly, both parties, unable to consider the other capable of such groundless concerns, are fearful of having misinterpreted the other's intentions.

It must be assumed that Stuart, sensing this impasse, decided to take action. His opportunity came in the form of the advance playbills for a traveling circus. His request for the pleasure of Jenny's company, on opening night, was accepted without hesitation. When closer scrutiny, of the play date, revealed that the show opened a few hours after Jenny was to board the train for home, the rendezvous was added to the burgeoning list of things that *should* have been. This, Stuart's total involvement in planting, and the threatened failure of a corner timber on his ancient windmill, reduced their chances of being alone, to zero.

Jenny faced the choice of being separated from the man she felt she had fallen in love with, or the misery of not being reunited with the family she so loved and needed. Neither did she see as being possible. Surprisingly, as orderly, and self-assured, as she was, Jenny was unable to consider a melding of the two alternatives.

Stuart, feeling the problem was of his making, harbored an even greater sense of disaster. Desperately seeking to make time to be with Jenny, he worked nights on the windmill. Through it all, and unfortunately so, neither, it seemed, was capable of making the declaration that would have satisfied every aspect of their quandary.

The few lax days, following exams, found Jenny in a state of mental torment. In looking back she could see where it was not just indecision that had kept them apart. Retrospect not only illuminated the times they could have spent together, but it allowed her to understand, though not accept, some of her reasons for refusing to let it happen. As enlightening as hindsight would become, it changed nothing; and, for many years the residue, of tender moments, forever lost, would lie bitter and corrosive in the repository labeled: "Things I should have done."

Understandably, as one not anxious to accept all the guilt, Jenny found herself wondering if Stuart known these same thoughts? What her heart felt, and accepted as truth, had little to do with what her head *knew*, and this left her hosting anger because he had denied her in this manner.

Not until the last day, barely an hour before Jenny's train was to leave, did they manage a tryst. So described, only if sharing an ice cream soda, at the local drug store, could be such.

"Miss, uh, Jenny, I..!"

Having only recently been able to address Jenny by her first name, Stuart's stumbling search for words was not surprising. That, coupled with his sense of doom in knowing these could be their last moments together, made casual conversation something he had no desire to pursue.

Stuart drew a deep breath. "J- Jenny we— um, we don't have much time. I dunno, but it seems as though suckin' on a soda ain't really what folks in- in our fix should be doin'!"

Jenny, although close to tears, smiled and nodded. "I know, Stu, but—" her own sigh interrupted her words. "But just what is our 'fix'?"

Stuart looked at her helplessly. "Oh, Jen— I- I don't know... We- we ain't never been to a dance, or an ice cream social, not even a band concert at the park— but- but we must be something!"

"Yes, Stu, we are, we..."

Jenny's words, her whole world crashed into a chaotic jumble, as the train, which would carry her away, sounded a warning blast at the first crossing outside of town. Her hand darted to his. "Oh, Stu, it- it's coming. We- we..."

Stuart's other hand covered hers squeezing it gently. He nodded. "I- I know— I know..."

The air hung damp about the station platform, heavy with the odor of oil-laden steam. The two young people, he handsome and uncomfortable in his "Sunday-go-to-meeting" best; she, picture perfect in her smart traveling ensemble, clasped hands, and stood quietly facing each other. The depth of their misery was clearly visible to any but the most unfeeling.

"BOARD!"

Jenny gasped. "Stuart, wh..."

The big man released her hands with a helpless gesture, huge tears streaming down his cheeks. "Don't, Jen, we— you gotta..."

Jenny, nodding absentmindedly, turned to walk away. She had taken three, perhaps four steps when his voice cut through the cacophony of sounds.

"JENNY!"

Freezing in mid stride, Jenny dropped her bag, whirled, and rushed into his outstretched arms. Catching her up, he whirled her about; then stood quite still clutching her to him.

From the depth of their embrace the long suppressed words burst forth:

"Oh, Stu, I can't leave you..."

"Jen, my sweet, Jen. I could never let you!"

"BOARD!"

The call went unnoticed, as did the two just before the whistle's final warning cry. Then, beneath clouds of blue-black smoke, amid intermittent blasts of cascading steam, and the rhythmic, coughing chugs of its kind, the engine with its congeries of cars, moved slowly into the gathering dusk.

As the clicking echo of the last car faded into silence, the two, still enfolded in each other's arms, parted, and the big man looked down at the beautiful woman before him. "Jennifer Roblés, I love you!"

Jenny shivered, slightly. "Oh, Stu, I think I would have died if you'd let me get on that train. I love you so much it scares me. I knew what I wanted it to be like, but- but now... Oh, Stu-- I- I don't know if I'm ready for it."

With the dismantling of the imaginary barriers, Stuart was freed from, what he saw as, the need of formal address. He smiled quizzically. "Ready for what, Jen?"

"For having my whole life tied to one man, for feeling that if anything should happen to you—" she caught her breath, "my life would end."

Stuart grinned. "Well, lookie here, little girl; ain't nothin' gonna happen to me, 'specially now that I have you. I didn't know I could feel like this— uh, like the way I've felt ever since I brought Little Missy in to be fixed. I..." Suddenly, the realization of what they'd done stuck him. "OH! Jen— you- you missed your train, what are we gonna do?"

Jenny let out a whoop of joy, flung her arms in the air, and whirled about the platform for several seconds before throwing herself into Stuart's arms again. "First of all, Mister Clauson, you're going to kiss me!"

Her lips found his, and for the second time in an incredibly wonderful few minutes, the world about them ceased to be. For a long time Jenny clung to him; but, finally, allowing herself to slip to the rough planking, she said laughingly: "What we're going to do is see when the next train leaves; send a telegram to my father; and then— then you're going to kiss me again— and again, and..."

Stuart's lips on hers ended her rambling, and she cuddled against him with a soft cry of contentment. "Silly man, just think what we've been missing. Think what we could have been doin' all this semester— if you hadn't been so bashful."

"BASHFUL! ME? Wh- why you were the standoffish one, you..."

This time, Jenny ended the conversation. When she released him, she placed her hand over his mouth. "Shhhush, darling, we have plenty of time for that. For now, let's talk about the important things, like— how much I love you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

1913

Rowena's fingers trembled slightly, as she tore open the envelope. The lengthening breaches in Jenny's, usually steady, flow of letters had troubled her; even though Jenny had resolutely maintained that all was well.

Dear Ween,

This letter comes as a confession. I've been keeping a secret from you. I am writing from the train; the train that is taking me away from the man I love.

There! I said it. Yes, dear one, it happened. I'm in love with a wonderful man, who feels the same about me. Isn't that exciting? No, NO, not just exciting, wonderful, glorious, it's— oh, Ween, I'm so happy!

Please, PLEASE, be happy with me!

Rowena's reactions spoke of the emotions evoked by the letter: A frown, a smile, a soft laugh, and a tear— several tears.

Jenny in love... It was not unexpected. As Lorraine, she was born to be a loving wife and mother.

A wayward tear splashed onto the page, smearing Jenny's precise penmanship; Rowena hastily blotted the splotch, and continued reading:

Strange, isn't it? Maybe the most important time of my life— and I haven't shared it with you. Are we drifting apart, or is it just another part of growing up?

I have wanted to tell you, right from the start, because I knew you would share my joy, but— oh, I don't know, maybe, the trust of children is lost in the scramble of becoming adults; and— I guess, that is what we are.

Drifting apart? The words, echoing in Rowena's thoughts, prompted a moment of concern. *Well, physically, maybe, but not in spirit! Oh, Jen, that can't ever happen—ever!*

If you have changed your mind about staying on at college (I'll know when I get home) I won't need to mail this, but if not, please write and tell me that we are just like always. My love for you will never change. It's like the love I have for Papa, Bobby and Ira, greater, in some ways. Oh, Ween, you do understand, don't you?

Please write, soon,

All my love,

Jen.

Rowena nodded quietly; and, folding the letter, carefully placed it back in its envelope. "Yes, dear, I understand... I understand very well... I only hope you will."

A soft whimper, from a large basket nearby, focused Rowena's attention on the small bundle it contained. "Hush, little one, it's not time for din din, just yet. Mommy needs to write a letter."

On the diminutive table, of whose numerous functions one was that of a desk, was a bottle of ink, a pen, and small packet of stationery. Rowena fingered it hesitantly. How could she put into words all that had happened? Explaining her love would be unnecessary; Jenny's own experience precluded that, but the rest... She was certain that Jenny's romance was far less complicated than hers, and she wondered: Will *she* understand?

A college associate from Garwood was so inconceivable that when the name appeared on the debating team roster, Rowena had assumed it to be a coincidence. Upon meeting Anthony Kramer, and learning that he was from Garwood, there was an attraction of two who shared a common denominator: the town they had grown up in. As Rowena would learn, the place of Anthony's birth knew little of him beyond his early childhood. Most of his maturing years had been spent in boarding schools, while his parents traveled about the world.

As they began to spend more time together, their conversations grew increasingly candid; and, in these shared intimacies, Rowena came to know a sense of true compassion for Anthony. Her mother's death had caused her terrible pain, and lingering unhappiness; but, with maturity, there was comfort in being able to see God as having spared she and Rowena the misery of life with Michael. Rowena's feelings for Michael had been extremely disturbing. He had deserted her; and left her with a terrible, longing emptiness that she would never have come to grips with had she not learned the truth from her mother. Out of this had come the realization that Anthony's anguish was many times greater than hers. Anthony's parents were both alive. He could contact them, even see them, but the protection and love of caring parents, that she known, had never been his. In his mind, they had no interest in him.

Contemplating the ramifications of this in a child's life, Rowena had known an overwhelming burden; one she had no wish to deal with. What she would have had it be, and what her intrinsic sense of right mandated it must be, begat an inner conflict from which there was no escape. Her struggle to remain aloof was futile. Regularly, thoughts of Anthony's pain found her on the verge of tears. In sensing the remnants of that suffering in his voice, and haunted expression, her tears would not be denied.

When it was that friendship became something more, Rowena was never quiet certain. She knew only that it happened. From the resulting turmoil of conflicting thoughts had come the resolve to never, **never** be a source of additional suffering for this troubled man.

Tall, and quite slender, Anthony's appearance was not that of robust health. Physically, he was not what Rowena had envisioned the love of her life to be. Yet, beneath the, less than hearty, exterior, dwelt a man of indomitable strength and courage, a gentle, caring man, capable of deep, abiding love. This love he lavished on Rowena in a manner that filled her with contentment far beyond the fanciful imaginings of her adolescence.

As a senior and junior, respectively, Anthony and Rowena nurtured their love with gentle, caring exploration; allowing it to mature without the distracting pressures of violent passion. This is not to say that there were not moments when reasons for waiting seemed ridiculous, even nonexistent. In these times it was their mutual desire to fully understand, and honor, a lifetime commitment that staid the demands of their fervor. It was Anthony's graduation, his decision to

stay for a few weeks of post-graduate work, and a demand by his parents that changed those parameters.

Rowena, adept at fabricating stories to explain missed vacations, and less than exceptional grades, devised one for staying at college through July. Fortunately, the off-season enabled her to find affordable housing: a very small, converted implement shed, which offered privacy, and most of the *conveniences* necessary. Growing up on a farm made acceptable, if not completely comfortable, what would have been hardship for an urbanite.

Rowena and Anthony were dining at the small restaurant that had become *theirs*. Anthony's concern was evidence in his voice. "Ween, honey, try to understand. This is something I feel I must do. Not out of respect for my parents, but for myself.

Rowena nodded, sadly. "I do understand, but *Paris!* You'll be gone for- forever!"

Anthony smiled reassuringly. "Not, *forever*, darling. Eight- nine weeks, at the most. I..."

"But, Tony," she interjected, "school may have started before you get back. We- we couldn't get married then, we'd have to wait!"

"Ween, college students get married everyday. It doesn't represent a problem."

"But- but our honeymoon... We'd have to wait— 'till *Christmas!* It- it wouldn't be the same, not the same at all!"

Anthony shook his head. "No, no it wouldn't, but you could steal a week. I could help you with the work you'd miss and... Ween, honey, don't worry. There'll be a way. We'll work it out."

For a moment, as her spirits lifted, Rowena's expression was hopeful; then disappointment returned. "But- but there wouldn't be time to get home, and- an— oh, there's just too much to do... Mama and papa couldn't be there, or Jen... Jen *has* to be there! It- it's what we always planned, she's going to be my maid of honor. Then there's Papa Carlos and the boys... Oh, Tony, I- I just couldn't... You— you understand— don't you?"

Anthony nodded. He understood very well. Rowena's need of family was as great as his, but in vastly different ways.

He took her hand; and, not in the manner of one ignoring her concerns, but to underline his own, he said: "My father knows I'll have nothing to do with his businesses. Becoming a teacher, though... Well— women can teach, but men who teach are sissies. He's always said I would never amount to anything, so I guess he's resigned to that, but a failure, and a sissy... This, for Osgood Kramer's son, is not acceptable; if he can't change my mind, he will disown me.

A soft sob slipped past Rowena's lips, and Anthony reached across to brush away a tear. "Ween— darling, it's nothing to cry over. Your love has lifted me out of that pit! It's more than made up for what I missed. I just... I guess I have enough pride left that I need to assert myself, just once.

"Demanding that I come is father's trump card; at least, until he learns that I haven't come to beg. When I tell them there is someone who truly loves me— just me, and not the Kramer money, he will have lost the battle— the war! Oh, he'll still cut me off, but there won't be any joy in it because, down inside he'll know I've won. In not being able to force me to kowtow,

he'll have lost control." His deep sigh accompanied a sad smile. "Being right is very important to a man like my father. Being in charge is— *everything!*"

Rowena's expression reflected her apprehension, and she was about to speak, but Anthony smiled and shook his head. "Don't worry, dear one, nothing is going to change. I've already lost my parents, losing my inheritance means nothing. A teacher's starting salary isn't much, but we won't starve.

"Oh, I know, I should just forget the whole thing, but now— now that I have you; now that I am someone— someone of myself; I- I can't give in. I need to stand up to them!"

Rowena nodded. She understood, but in that understanding lay a tiny blemish; one that could fester, and cause them pain or, at least, serious concern. "But, Tony, I could go with you; it- it wouldn't cost too much, would it?"

"Cost hasn't anything to do with it, sweetheart. I just don't want you exposed to them. They're consumed with greed— well, at least my father is. He would try to find some way to use our love as a bargaining chip, or drive us apart. Until we've been married a few years, until we've established ourselves, I don't even want them to know who you are!"

"ANTHONY— they're your parents!"

Again, the sad smile, and he shook his head. "In as much as they brought me into this world, yes, but beyond that..." "Ween, I believe— at least I try to believe that they love me, that they think what they did was in my best interest. I'm not conscious of any feelings for them, and yet— I know, deep in my heart, that I love them... He took her hand in his. "And it's because of you that I've come to realize that."

Rowena's eyebrows arched in a silent question, and Anthony continued: "Before you, I hated them. No— I didn't, but I truly *thought* I did, and that made it fact; but you let me see how wrong hate is. Once it was gone, I began to see that, in a round about way, they were responsible for us finding each other. I- I thank them for that!"

As her hand closed over his, she made no attempt to hide the tears. "Oh, Tony, I love you so... I don't dare let myself think of how they treated you, or what you went through; and- and I thank God for bringing us together."

Their eyes met, lingering for several seconds, then Rowena's drifted to a more distant point. "Tony, do you really think it might be nine weeks?"

Anthony nodded. "If I can book passage on the faster ships, it might be less, but that's a big if."

Rowena sighed, her eyes reflecting her melancholy. "I wish there was another way. I don't care about the money, I know we'll get by."

"Of course we will, and it won't be so bad, there's a small trust fund — they can't touch it — but I'll need to see a lawyer. It shouldn't take too long."

Rowena's hopes soared. "Couldn't you do that here or— in Garwood?"

Anthony smiled. "Yes, yes I could. That would save time."

Toying nervously with his cuff link, her elation was short lived. "Tony, I'm scared. Professor Rolf says that conditions are right for a war in Europe. He says Germany is armed to the teeth, just waitin' for an excuse."

She shuddered, as if to shake off a thought too terrible to deal with. Without Anthony, there was no reason to live..."

She paused, considering her next words, thoughtfully. "Your father's drive to be in control is obsessive, but isn't what you're doing, almost the same?"

Anthony frowned. "I-I never thought of it that way, but— yes. I'm his son; it would be only natural ..." He smiled lovingly. "You are wonderful..." Sighing, he looked away. "Seeing how I ignored that in myself lets me understand him a little better. It-it's almost a sickness, an addiction." For a moment, he avoided her eyes, gazing into the distance.

Noting the change, she said, hopefully, "Couldn't we just let your father think he's won? Would it make that much difference? Nothing can change how I feel about you. Is- is it really so important?"

Anthony devoted several seconds to fashioning his reply. Then, shaking his head, he said, softly, "I remember the look in my mother's eyes when father would say that it was time for me to go back to boarding school. I'm seeing the same in your eyes, tonight. Yes, yes it is important, but not as important as you. I can't face remembering the hurt, and knowing that I'm responsible for it. I won't—I can't go."

It was a forthright statement; and, bearing no hidden agenda, expressed only a sincere desire to ease Rowena's fears. Such frank declarations warrant equally open responses, but too often this requires trust beyond that established in the relationship of those involved. Such was not the case here.

Rowena smiled wistfully. Her prayers were being answered; and, suddenly, it was no long important. What would a few weeks, even months, mean to the lifetime they would share? She would put her foolish fears aside and... She shook her head. "No," she said firmly. "I'll not have our life together begin with my silly *premonition* being responsible for denying you the self-respect you've been robbed of. I'm not sure of what I expect of our marriage, but I do know it must be built on trust and understanding!"

Anthony drew her hand to his lips; and, kissing it tenderly, said, "It was never possible for me to know what it meant to be loved; so I never knew what it was that was missing. Having your love has shown me how empty my life was; but never, never in my lowest moments, or most fervent prayers, did I ever ask for, or expect, anything as wonderful as you."

He glanced heavenward, and whispered, "What I owe my parents, for bringing us together, is nothing compared to what I owe God."

It was much later; they had spent several hours, walking, talking, and thinking. Now, at the door of the shack, Rowena called home, at the close of a lingering kiss, her fumbling hand found the latch. As the door swung aside, with neither questioning why, they entered, and the door closed soundlessly.

There were alternatives. Certainly, returning to Garwood, prior to Anthony's trip, was one, but the decision, once made, became the only one considered.

Why two serious minded, well-directed young people, who had steadfastly avoided compromising situations, would suddenly cast it all aside, is not a question to be answered here. Biologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, physicians, and dream interpreters offer their *wisdom* on the subject, but a single, definitive answer, beyond, perhaps, it was meant to be, is not to be had.

The privacy of Rowena's little house, which she had seen as merely a convenience, became the means of circumventing the one obstacle, which might have dissuaded them. In the seclusion, of that humble shed, their marriage, lacking the trappings of legality, or theology, was consummated in the honesty of their love.

The baby's fussing grew more insistent. Rowena put down the pen, and turned to the basket. "All right, dear one, we've both waited long enough, but first, a clean diaper."

* * * * *

Brushing aside the tears, Jenny crumpled the letter, and hurried to answer the insistent knock. As she opened the door, the figure of her father loomed before her.

"Little one, you are crying?"

The tears returned, in force, and Jenny fell into the waiting arms.

"Oh, Papa, Papa..." Sobs replaced words, and she buried her head against his chest.

"Ah *mi caro*, what is the trouble?"

Without raising her head, Jenny thrust the crumpled letter toward him.

Puzzled, he took the piece of paper. "Yes, yes, little one. It is a - a letter?"

Jenny's, *uh-huh*, was squeezed out between sobs. "It- it's from W- Ween."

Even more puzzled, Carlos gazed at the letter. "A letter from your sister brings you to tears? Is- is she ill?"

"No, she- she had a baby," murmured Jenny.

Carlos grinned broadly. "A baby! Our Rowena is married, has a child, and you weep? I— do not understand."

Drawing back to gaze into her father's eyes, Jenny shook her head adamantly. "No, Papa. She isn't married!"

Carlos stepped back, an expression of concern on his face. "*Madre de...*" He suppressed the oath; and, blessing himself, lifted his eyes heavenward. "Heavenly Father, be with our little girl. Show her the love she needs at this moment. Grant her peace of mind, and send her home to us, that we may care for our daughter— and- and her child! Amen."

Carlos fixed his gaze on Jenny. "Not married. What scum brought this shame to our Rowena?"

"They were to be married and- and he died— in Europe. It was Anthony Kramer!"

"*Madre de Dios!*" This time the words slipped out. "I recall seeing in the paper— influenza. But I saw no mention of Rowena or a child... Ah— of course, no one else knows..." He dabbed at his eyes. "Oh, dear one, I share your tears."

Again, he blessed himself. "Gracious God, grant Jason and Ida the understanding that will allow them to think only of their daughter's well being— and that of their blessed grandchild."

He drew Jenny close. "Do they know?"

A small spasm passed through her body. "No," she whispered, she doesn't want anyone to know."

The broad shoulders drooped. "Oh, we must talk to her. This is too great a burden for one to face alone, and I cannot keep from my dearest friends this terrible— wonderful secret. Write to her. Write quickly, and make her understand that love awaits her here. Love for her, and for the child..." A sad smile touched his lips. "It- it is a boy or a girl?"

"A boy: Anthony Jason."

"Ahh," Carlos nodded. "Of course, her two great loves."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

1913

"Garwood! Ten-minute stopover. Newspapers, magazines, candy, coffee and tobacco in the Harvey House."

The vestibule door closed, and Rowena, recalling when she had first heard those words, looked lovingly at the basket resting on the seat facing her. *Another child comes to Garwood*, she thought. *What will life here hold for him?*

As the final scraping of brakes ceased amid a great sigh of escaping steam, Rowena picked up the basket. Then, gathering up the other items necessary for traveling with an infant, she moved toward the door. It would have been a great deal easier if she had taken a compartment, but chair-car was all her budget would allow. As yet, she was unable to accept, let alone, ask for aid from anyone.

The porter, gracious and smiling, reached up from the platform to take, and hold, the baby's things until she and Anthony were beside him. Tipping his cap, he handed her the bags, and smiled down at the baby. "Mighty good baby, Ma'm. Haven't heard a peep outta him since you got on. You and your husband must be mighty proud."

It was bound to happen, she had known it would, but that didn't make it any easier. It required an extreme effort, but Rowena smiled appreciatively. "Thank you." She said quietly. "Um, yes— yes we are."

A flurry of movement behind her caught Rowena's attention, and she turned to find Jenny and Carlos at her side.

Without a word, Jenny took the baby basket, while Carlos took charge of the other things. "Go," he whispered, nodding toward her parents. "Go, they feel they lack the proper words; but have no fear; words will come. For now, though, there is no need. Go!"

With a rush, Rowena ran toward the two. Stopping, a foot or two from them, the three stood for a moment, as if transfixed. Then as one they came together amid tears of joy and relief.

Carlos smiled down at Jenny and her burden. "He is beautiful, yes?"

Jenny poked gently at the tiny hand. "Oh, Papa, he is! Truly beautiful— life is beautiful and— Papa," she looked up, tears playing about the corners of her eyes. "I have something, very important, to tell you as soon as we get home."

Amid the earnest application of handkerchiefs, a few hesitant sobs, and much laughter, the Carlsons approached Carlos, Jenny, and the baby. As Rowena walked toward Jenny their eyes met, and they were children again. With a soft cry, Jenny handed the basket to Ida, and the two, arms entwined about each other, wept unashamedly.

"J- J- Jen, oh, Jen—" Rowena sobbed. "I've messed everything up somethin' terrible; what am I gonna do?"

"Shhh, Ween, it's going to be all right. It's not the end of the world. It- it's the beginning of a new life."

"But- but, Jen, my baby's a bas..."

Jenny's hand was on her mouth before the word was spoken. "Don't you ever say that! This baby had a father— just like you did, a father who would have loved his son just like your papa loves you! You know that, God knows that, and he's gonna see that little Anthony is taken care of. You just remember that, an' don't worry!"

The rumble of Carlos' deep voice, as a foghorn to errant ships, guided them safely back to the present. "Jason, let us go, and retrieve the rest of your daughter's belonging. It appears that they have finished unloading the baggage car."

As the two men moved away, Ida held the baby's basket toward Rowena. "I think I have the most beautiful grandson in the world. Why don't we take him over to the buggy? Then, soon's the men have found your baggage, we can start for home. You and Jenny are gonna have all the time you need, later, for talkin' and— gettin' reacquainted."

Rowena cast a worried glance at her friend, but Jenny nodded her approval. "Good idea, Aunt Ida." Then, turning to Rowena: "Ween, give yourself a couple of days to rest, and get settled in. Then bring Anthony out to the farm. The boys are about to burst for wantin' to see him."

Rowena acquiesced graciously. "Okay. I'll be out real soon."

Conversation, during the short trip home, was not allowed to touch on the reason for Rowena's being there, although it was foremost in every mind.

Following their arrival at the Carlson home, Rowena went immediately upstairs to take care of Anthony. After changing him, she had settled into a chair to feed him, when Jason's bulk filled the doorway.

"Oh, 'scuse me, honey, I didn't..."

"Papa! The door was open. I'm still your little girl— aren't I?"

Jason scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well— yes, but you sure ain't the same little girl that use to run 'round in her birthday suit. " 'Course, that ended a long time ago. Actually, honey, I was thinkin' more 'bout you, than me."

"Oh, Papa..." She pulled the burp cloth over the baby's head, and smiled up at her father. "Thank you... I guess things have changed, but I'm not sure it's all for the best."

"Most of life is just that: A trade off." Jason said with a droll smile. "Some good, some not so. I got to admit, I do have a little trouble adjusting to my *baby* having a baby of her own."

A cloud crossed Rowena's face. "Papa, I..."

Sensing the urgency of her need to explain, Jason raised his hand. "Huh-uh. Not now, sweetheart. Later when Anthony's asleep, and we're all together, there'll be plenty of time for that."

"Oh, Papa," she sighed, "you always..." Tears threatened, but a second sigh seemed to forestall them. "I'm ashamed for hurting you and mama this way, but..."

Jason's expression was firm, but his voice gentle. "Little one, you haven't hurt anybody. You've given your mama and me a grandson, a child conceived the only way you could have, in the love you shared with his father." He paused for a thoughtful moment. "Um, I can't deny that it wouldn't be an easier, happier time if— if things were different, but I figure the good Lord had somethin' to do with you not bein' able to get married..." Again, mental wanderings interrupted the flow. "But- but I don't see him holdin' a grudge, not when he give you such a beautiful son."

He stepped across the room, and kissed her forehead. "There *have* been a lot of changes, but one thing hasn't changed, and it never will. Your mama and I love you more'n anything in this world!

"You know, some of God's blessings come in strange, sometimes frightening packages, but we know we gotta be grateful for all of them and—" he smiled down at the baby, "we're sure grateful for this one!"

The clock had completed striking the half hour preceding nine. The family, enjoying the warmth of the late June evening, was gathered in the parlor. Ida and Jason were seated on the davenport, and Rowena had curled up in the large overstuffed, where she could observe Anthony, as he slept in his basket beside her.

Rowena, tugging at her bodice, fidgeted uncomfortably. "Mama, what am I gonna do when Anthony starts sleepin' through?"

There was a trace of sadness in Ida's smile. "Fraid I can't answer that, not from experience, but peers that nature has a way of takin' care of that. If you get too uncomfortable, I hear they do make a pump."

"Ugh!" Rowena shivered. "That doesn't sound very pleasant."

Ida's smile was more relaxed. "I've helped a lot of new mothers. Don't remember any of 'em sufferin' too much with their milk. Anyway, *havin'* the baby wasn't very *pleasant*, was it?"

Rowena shook her head. "It's all kind of a blur. When I finally found out what had happened to Tony, I was terribly confused. Lookin' back, I really don't remember too much of what it was like bein' pregnant or givin' birth."

Ida drew a deep shuddering sigh. "Did you know you were pregnant when you were home last summer?"

Rowena nodded, hesitantly. "I- I suspected. I never did get very big, so I stayed in class to the end."

Ida's shudder reestablished itself. "How- how long... I mean— when did you learn about Anthony's— about his..."

The word was beyond her reach, but as the shadow of its memory fell across Rowena's face, Ida averted her eyes.

Blinking back the tears, Rowena spoke softly: "I- I don't know. I kept waiting for Tony's wire; he told me he'd send one soon's he got to Paris. Then when I read the article..."

"Article?" Ida's question cut her short.

"Um— I'd been writing to Missus Hurley; I mentioned that Anthony Kramer was a year ahead of me, and that we'd dated, once or twice. When she sent me the article— I- I just got numb..."

Ida's face fell ashen, her voice a hoarse whisper. "And you never told anybody. Oh, my baby— why didn't you tell us?"

"I- I couldn't, Mama, I just couldn't!"

The words, for Ida, held but one meaning, and she was stricken with the agony of one who had failed a loved one in need. In the misery of her guilt, her life took on the aspects of an ugly, distorted picture smeared on the wall of a crumbling building, a grotesque depiction of her single-minded ignorance— her *stupidity*! How could there be love where trust was nonexistent?

Ida slumped forward, whimpering softly: "Oh, dear Lord, forgive me, forgive, please!"

Instantly, Jason's arms encircled her, and Rowena sprang from the chair to hover over her mother. "Mama, what's wrong? What's wrong?"

In the depths of her anguish, no words could find their way past the convulsing sobs; leaving Jason and Rowena to watch, helplessly, able to offer comfort only with words of consolation and love.

The clock had announced the twenty-first hour before Ida had regained sufficient composure to speak: Oh, Ween what did I do to drive you away. I'm so sorry! Please, can you forgive me?"

"*Forgive?* Mama, there's nothing to forgive! You didn't do anything to be sorry for! You— we... You're a wonderful mother! I- I don't know what I'd do without..."

The words had triggered almost forgotten memories, and a shudder passed through her body. "What did I say to make you think you'd driven me away?"

Unable to perceive the absolution in her daughter's words, Ida struggled to speak. "Oh, Ween, if- if I'd been the mother I should have, you'd have come to me— you- you wouldn't have been all alone!"

"Oooo, Mama, nooo!" The wretched cry carried with it the shards of a breaking heart and, for a few seconds Rowena was unable to speak. Finally, she said, "Mama— oh— how could I do that to you? Please— you- you're m-my rock. I- I..." She drew a trembling sigh. "It- it was what you t-taught me about c-caring for others, about not hurtin' them, that- that kept me from telling you and Papa. I- I thought it was the right thing to do. I- I never thought about how it would hurt... Oh, Mama, please! I'm the one who needs to be forgiven!"

With both women reduced to a sodden, sobbing mass, of entwined arms, disheveled hair, and wrinkled clothing, Jason, as best he could, gathered them into his arms.

"Peers, you both been carryin' a world of hurt for no reason. That seems a waste, 'cause it looks as though most of it can be explained away. What say we try some of that? Um— after you get settled down a bit."

For several seconds there was little change, but gradually the sobs grew less frequent, the breathing less fractured, and an aura of calm eased upon the scene.

It was Rowena, her voice still unsteady, who spoke first. "I- I tried to write and tell you— after... I didn't say anything, right at first, because I was waiting' for the wire from Anthony.

Then— then when..." Tears broke the narrative, and several more seconds passed before she could continue.

"W- when I read that T- Tony had d— that he was gone, I- I..."

Jason's breath caught in his throat. "Ween— baby! How did..." He cleared his throat. "How did you ever get through it?"

Rowena shrugged helplessly. "I don't know, Papa, I..." She shook her head and drew a quick breath. "That's not true, I do know... I prayed, I prayed a lot. I was so afraid that Jesus would hate me for what I did, and yet I *knew* he wouldn't..." She paused, a whimsical smile touching her lips. "'S funny, I was scared 'cause of how bad I'd been, but I kept thinkin' about all the people Jesus helped, 'specially that woman those men were gonna stone, and I knew I'd make it, somehow. 'Course, a lot of it—" Another short sigh. "A lot of it I don't remember. Some of the time I made believe it wasn't true. When I wrote to you and Jen, I pretended. When I was in class, I pretended. Sometimes, though, there just wasn't any pretend left, and I'd have to leave class..."

She fell silent, lost in a flood of frightening memories. When she spoke again, it was in a hushed whisper. "I- I was afraid... Sometimes I- I really thought I was losing my mind..."

The unbearable weight of Ida and Jason's anguish was obvious as the terrible reality of what their daughter had faced settled about them.

Then, clasping her hands together to restrain their trembling, Ida spoke. "An- and after you found out— all that time you- you wrote just as if nothing had happened. Oh, Ween, I..." The words caught in her throat, and the tears began anew. "Sweetheart, it must have been awful."

Rowena nodded. "I can still remember how it was when my mother died, but that— that was not the same, not the same, at all. I thought my insides were comin' out. Nothing I could do, nothing I could think of, would change it. Nothing! Anthony was gone, I was pregnant, and..." Another tremor shook her. "I didn't know what to do. Sometimes, I'd just curl up on my bed— an' cry— cry and wish that I could die, but— that's when I knew Jesus was there. When it got so bad I knew I couldn't stand it any long, he'd be there!" A grateful smile engulfed her face. "And the bad thoughts would go away— and I'd feel better."

"After I learned about- about Anthony, I- I couldn't bring myself to say *pregnant* or *baby*. But I kept praying and it helped. I got myself together, and took a job washing' dishes in the college commissary. Those who knew about Tony and me, thought we were married, and that he was making arrangements to send for me. Those who didn't know— I just let 'em wonder. I called myself, Missus Kramer."

"Oh, Mama, it was... I felt so guilty. I knew it was wrong. I wanted, somethin' awful, to tell you and papa but..." In the liberation of a quiet sob, more tears found their way to freedom, and Rowena shrugged. "I was so mixed up; I- I couldn't see any other way. I don't know what I was thinking..." Her lingering sigh pulsed softly with the uneven rhythm of dissolving sobs. "Maybe I hoped that it would just— go away..."

Ida, having found a measure of control, patted her head, gently. "There now, honey. It's behind you now; time to start thinking about what's ahead."

Rowena, realigning her shoulders, managed a wistful smile. "Uh-huh, the future. This past year I've felt like there wasn't gonna be any."

In the following, nearly, two hours of quiet conversation, numerous fears and uncertainties were put to rest. The love, which all were now assured had never faltered, was reaffirmed. Ida's terrible doubts, and their oppressive residue, she would never quite be free of; but through their discrediting had come a stronger deeper understanding of her love for Jason and Rowena, and a kinder acceptance of herself.

Following two days of rest, Rowena and Ida took Anthony to the farm for all to see. After much ooing, ahing, and kitchy-cooing the boys had gone back to work and, with Ida's suggestion that she and Carlos take care of the baby, Rowena and Jenny went in search of a quiet retreat.

Beneath a huge tree, they sat on the grassy earth talking quietly. Although there had never been an *official* covenant, they renewed their pledge never conceal anything, even their innermost thoughts, one from the other.

As Jenny revealed the *secrets* of her *romance*, Rowena's joy, even in the shadow of her own difficulties, was boundless. "Oh, Jen, I'm so happy for you. I just know Stuart is a wonderful man, and..."

A sudden change of thought brought an elongated pause. "Jen?"

"Hmmm?"

"Have we changed, all that much?"

"All *that* much?"

"Well, you've found someone you want to spend the rest of your life with; you'll be getting' married. I was *almost* married, and have a baby — something I swore would never happen — our lives are totally different... Are we?"

Jenny frowned, thoughtfully. "I think..." She paused, inhaled deeply then, expelling the breath quietly through pursed lips, reconsidered the question. "To say that we haven't would be— um, probably wishful thinking. Look at us. We're grown women. Obviously, we think differently than we did, both collectively and individually. Deep down, though, if we dig far enough, I think we're still those two silly little girls who went miles out of their way to walk home together. The same two, even sillier girls, that thought they were in love with Bertram Tibbs. We'll still cry when the other is hurting. We'll go our own ways, but nothing can ever separate us. You're as much my sister as if we'd been twins; maybe- maybe even more so. I can't imagine loving anyone the way I love you."

Rowena moved close to her friend and, for several seconds, they shared a tender embrace. "I guess that's what I wanted to hear," she whispered. "I worry, sometimes... There were only two things we ever kept from each other. Both times it was about men. Telling about Bert sure would have made life easier. Telling you about Tony and- and little Anthony, that... Oh, Jen, what got into me? What have I done to us and our families?"

Jenny shrugged. "A lot less than you think you have. We both know that love isn't something you turn off and on. It doesn't run away when bad things happen. That's when love really counts." She paused, seemingly pursuing the thoughts her words had triggered. A few seconds passed before her smile introduced: "The way I feel about Stuart— well, what happened

to you and Tony could have happened to us!" She nodded in the face of Rowena's shock. "If he'd been gonna leave, like Tony, and I'd had that terrible fear of losing him... It's been awful hard to wait!

"When I first met Stu it seemed kind of dumb to think that anything would ever come of it; no matter how I felt. Still, I wanted, so bad, to tell you—I was near to bursting; but I couldn't for fear that I might have to admit I was wrong. Once I knew it was truly something special, I was ashamed to tell you. It had been going on for over six months. That's human nature, I guess, but what it really comes down to is: we shouldn't judge others by ourselves. Me thinkin' what you would think, and you thinkin' what I would think was— well, it was a good lesson, but it came at a terrible price!"

Rowena's found Jenny's hand, and squeezed it gently. "I guess, being sisters, and loving each other doesn't stop us from bein' dumb."

Their laughter, having fulfilled its mission, led them quietly into pensive silence. There they remained for some time before Jenny spoke:

"Ween?"

"Yes, mm-hmm— OH!" She clamped her hand over her mouth. "My, I haven't done that for years. I used to all the time, when I was little. Mama thought it was so cute; made such fuss over it that I made up my mind to stop doin' it." She snickered, softly. "Dumb? Well, I guess... Oops, sorry, Jen— um, what was it?"

"What was it like, I mean— havin' the baby?"

"Ummmm, I can't tell you much; 'cause I don't remember. When I wasn't worrying about what was gonna happen to us — me'n the baby — it was nice being pregnant. Most of the time, though, I was so scared that- that I just wanted it to go away.

"I worked right up to my time. When it started, I guess, I sorta fainted. Next thing I knew someone was saying: 'Congratulations, you have a fine son.'

"One of the professors was having lunch in the commissary." She laughed quietly. "He's an M.D..." Another chuckle. "It didn't cost me anything. Good thing, too; I'd just paid my rent— didn't have a penny to my name."

Jenny's face fell. "You didn't feel anything?"

"Oh, I'd had a couple of pains, earlier in the day. Cramps, I thought. I remember one, pretty good one, just before things went blank. The doctor told me it was a real easy birth. He said I was born to have children..." Her laugh, considering the subject, seemed out of place. "You can be sure that isn't gonna happen! I'll not be fallin' in love again. Losing' three of the people I loved most— well, th- that's enough for one life!"

The words startled Jenny. It was the first time she had ever known Rowena to be so adamantly negative, and the statement's implications frightened her.

"Oh, Ween, don't say that! There'll be someone for you to love, and you'll want more children. You'll be a wonderful mother!"

Rowena nodded. "Oh, I'm going to spend my life being that for Anthony, but it'll be just the two of us. There won't be any other man for me. It took a long time for me to find the

courage to love Tony. I knew it was happening, but I didn't want anyone to be that much a part of my life... It- it sorta snuck up on me. It won't ever again!"

The words forced Jenny to acknowledge that the changes, Rowena had alluded to, were indeed upon them, and would become even more dramatic in the years ahead. The sense of foreboding this understanding fostered, she would never forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

1913

Rowena had been home less than two weeks, but Ida had made baby Anthony as much her responsibility as Rowena's. Hopelessly captivated by the beguiling bundle of seemingly boundless energy, delightful sounds, and dirty diapers, Ida and Jason found it difficult to stay away from the child.

For Ida, the power of this bond was such that she was drawn from a sound sleep at the baby's slightest whimper; its stimulus was responsible for her hovering at Rowena's side during night feedings. This, even though, beyond changing him, there was little for her to do.

Investigating the why of this would involve considerable speculation; but that her sense of responsibility exceeded the natural instincts of a loving grandmother was obvious. A fertile imagination will offer numerous reasons for this, but for any to constitute more than an educated guess, is highly improbable. One fact was very clear; the love Ida had been incapable of openly expressing, during Rowena's childhood, she was able, and anxious, to lavish on Anthony.

With supper a pleasant memory, and the kitchen put to rights, Wednesday evening found the Carlsons at ease in the sitting room. Rowena and Ida were busy knitting, while Jason sought to appear engrossed in the newspaper. Several times, during the evening, Ida had cast inquiring glances in his direction, but they seemed to have gone unnoticed. Finally, she set aside her needles, and turned toward her husband.

"Jason, what on earth is botherin' you?"

Jason's expression, lacking any vestige of the surprise it was meant to communicate, inspired no more than a quizzical, upward curl at the corners of Ida's mouth.

Seemingly oblivious to the fact that his charade offered no mystery to Ida, he continued it: "Hmm? What's that, Id'?"

"You heard me, Jason. What is wrong?"

"Oh— yes, Well— um, I had a visitor in the shop, today."

Ida's arched brow offered the only indication that she had heard, was interested or wished him to continue, but he did.

"Osgood Kramer..."

Fledgling pilots are instructed in the execution of a 180° turn, and impressed with its importance. When it's too high to fly over, too wide to fly around and too low to fly under, it is the maneuver of choice for prudent, long lived pilots. Its significance in other venues, however, is not as well defined. Observing it in conversation, or being the beneficiary of its occurrence, is noteworthy.

It was obvious that Jason's insertion of, Kramer, induced just such a *turnaround*, and afforded him the instant, undivided attention of both women.

Ida's question was heavy with apprehension: "What on earth did *he* want?"

Jason's shrug accompanied his bewildered expression. "I'm not sure, really— 'cause I'm not certain that he knew."

"What did he say, Papa?" Now, Rowena's query bore the overtones of concern.

For several seconds, Jason considered the question thoughtfully. "Uh— well—" He rubbed his chin, and smiled sadly. "He said that Anthony died hatin' them, and life had been a living hell ever since. Told me his wife tried to kill herself, and that, um— that he didn't know what to do."

"Jason?" Gazing steadily into his eyes, Ida said; "That ain't all he come for, was it?"

Jason smiled understandingly. "No, Id', it ain't."

"Well?"

He drew a deep breath. "Seems Mister Kramer wasn't none too happy about Anthony's plans to marry Rowena. When Anthony— died, he hired a detective..." Sensing Ida's antagonism, he held up a hand. "Um, Id, you gotta understand, this man is very wealthy; he's had people stealing, or trying to steal from him all his life. He don't trust nobody..."

"JASON!"

"Uh-huh." He nodded. "Well, the detective found out about Rowena having a baby. Osgood's sure it's Anthony's, an- and— he thinks seein' the baby might be a help to his wife..."

"WHAT?" The word burst from Ida's lips in the manner of one who has heard, understood, and is still unable to believe. "That- that... How **dare** he?"

"Now, Id', reckon he feels he has a right, he..."

"A RIGHT? A right to what? Send the child off to boarding school? To treat him like an animal; the way he did his own son? Well! I hope you threw him out!"

Jason's smile was wistful, almost sad. "No, no I didn't. I, uh... To be honest, I felt sorry for him."

"Sorry? Jason, you had a touch of the sun?"

"No, Id', it ain't like that. The man seemed down right humble. He needs help."

"Help?" The word bore some of the explosive power, of her earlier outbursts, but it was clear that Ida's anger had cooled, considerably.

"Yep, he said if they can't do something to- to make up — I guess, for the way they treated Anthony — he don't know what they'll do."

Rowena's quiet sob averted their attention. She sat, leaning forward, arms resting on her knees, hands against her cheeks, rocking gently forward and back. "Oh, Papa, how awful. I know how much it hurt Tony 'cause his folks didn't show him any love. Deep inside, though, he knew— in their own strange way, they did love him. For them, for any parent, to think their child died hating them..." She shuddered. "It- it's too terrible to think about..."

With tears coursing down her cheeks, she lifted her eyes heavenward. "Dear Jesus, please, **please** help those poor people."

With a subdued cry, Ida moved to kneel at her daughter's feet. Taking both her hands in her own, she whispered: "Oh, Ween, honey, forgive me! I- I gotta long way to go... I'm tryin'— Lord knows I am, but... Oh, I hope he hasn't given up on me! If anybody should understand how them folks feel— it ought to be me."

Jason joined them and, as they had done many times since Rowena's return, as a family, they prayed. Each petition that of a heart yearning for understanding, overflowing with love, and yet, still hobbled by the humanity of its host.

It was Jason who put words to their thoughts. "Lord, sometimes it's hard for us to see past our own little problems. But here tonight, you showed us there ain't much that counts less folks got love to go with it. We thank you for the love we have, and the knowin' that it comes from you. Please, keep remindin' us of that!"

"Now, Lord, we're pretty sure that you know all about Mister and Missus Kramer, but we'd be obliged if you'd show us some way we could help them.

"Uh, I know there's better ways of saying this— Pastor Quintain would know, but I can't think it makes a lick of difference to you. Them folks need help'n we do, too.

"Well, I guess that's all— you know what's inside. We're hopin' it's something to your likin'. In Jesus' name..."

Following Ida's, and Rowena's softly echoed amen, they remained quiet for several minutes. It was Jason who finally broke their reverie:

"Seems we been spendin' an awful lot of time on our knees, lately. I wonder— I wonder if we'd done more of it before..." He stopped, suddenly uncomfortable with where this course might lead. "No, no that's not right. That ain't the way the Lord does things. We may not understand it, but the Bible tells us that all things are for our good..."

He stood, grinning sheepishly. "Ain't just how the Good Book says it, but meaning's all the same. The Lord may give us a mountain to climb, but we gotta be grateful for it..." He chuckled. "Good exercise."

Ida grasped his outstretched hand, pulled herself erect, and returned to her chair.

"You know, it's funny— no, strange. Before..." She waved a hand indicating a time past. "When folks would say somethin' about the Lord, or there was prayin', I'd get kinda— mmm, kinda uncomfortable. I went to church all my life. I never went out of my way to do anything religious any other time, but I thought I was doing what I should. I don't know when it changed. I didn't do anything to- to get more religion, no more'n I did to not, but it happened." She looked into the distance. "Maybe- maybe it was when Hilly died." She smiled at Rowena. "Somethin' sure happened then, but..."

She turned her full attention to Rowena. "You know, them Kramers being able to see their grandbaby— well, it just might help. Reckon you could see your way clear to let them?"

Rowena nodded, solemnly. "Yes, mm-hmm..." The hint of a smile played about her lips. "I was thinking the same thing." She drew a shallow breath. "An' I can tell them that Tony did love them. He- he told me so."

"Grannies," whispered Jason. "Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing for them to hear?"

Rowena's expression was distant. "I'll write, and ask them if it will be all right."

"Won't be necessary," said Jason. "He's coming back tomorrow, for an answer."

Ida looked up into her husband's eyes. "Jason Carlson, you think you're pretty smart, don't you?"

There had been no malice in her tone, and Jason slipped his arm about her shoulder, smiling wisely. "Nope, but there was no way I could figure that you two would hear 'bout them folks, and not want to do somethiin' to help!

* * * * *

It was the grandest coach Rowena had ever seen. With the driver and footman in such fine livery as to make her feel like royalty. For a giddy moment, as the footman opened the door, and offered his hand, her mind hosted thoughts of Anthony's inheritance. *How would it feel to be someone that lived like this all the time?* It was a brief, fanciful excursion, then she was on the walk, and the butler, arm outstretched, waited to receive baby Anthony's basket.

"Good day, Madame. Allow me, please!"

Later, breathtaking, was the word Rowena used to describe the house. "Absolutely breathtaking." Many times she had gazed, with almost reverent awe, at the outside of the Kramer mansion. Experiencing its inner grandeur, however, relegated her most fantastic imaginings to the realm of rudimentary daydreams.

The butler stepped aside, to usher her in, and announced, rather pompously: "Miss Rowena Carlson."

In a subliminal sense, the lack of a fanfare was somewhat of a disappointment. *Certainly*, Rowena felt, it would have been apropos.

The room, small, and cozily inviting, was a pleasant surprise. The Kramers were installed, with regal decorum, on a small, richly upholstered settee. With the butler's departure, Mr. Kramer stood. He was not as tall as his son, but somewhat more robust. As he approached, his strong resemblance to Anthony gave rise to some disquieting moments for Rowena.

"Miss Carlson, we're pleased that you—that you and Anthony could come. I am Osgood Kramer. Come, allow me to present my wife, Winifred." Turning, he said, "Winifred, dear, this is Miss Carlson."

Shifting Anthony's basket to her left arm, Rowena stepped forward, curtsied slightly, and waited.

Winifred Kramer rose; Rowena thought, rather awkwardly to stand quietly evaluating the beautiful woman facing her.

Although she had not been offered a hand, Rowena felt no discomfort in submitting graciously to the scrutiny. She would learn, later, that her quiet reserve had begun the dismantling of Mrs. Kramer's formidable, prearranged defenses.

"Rowena," she repeated softly, and leaned well forward to catch hold of the unencumbered hand. Then, clasping it between her two, she said: "My dear, I'm Winnie. I am so...!"

Her gaze had strayed to the basket and, coming to rest on its precious contents, the remaining battlements crumbled. The hands gripping Rowena's began to tremble, and tears filled the terribly sad eyes.

Without a word, Rowena turned slightly, and handed the basket to a dumbfounded Osgood. Then, with a slight tug, drew the frail woman toward her.

Initially, Rowena sensed Winifred's reluctance to respond, but following her gentle urgings, the older woman nestled against her. "There, there," Rowena whispered. "Such a beautiful grandson is not something to cry over."

Soft sobs shook the thin body, and Rowena was unable to check her own tears. "Winnie, Winnie," she murmured. "I know; believe me, I do know—but I have something to tell you that will make everything, *everything* so much easier to bear."

Foregoing, even a backward glance, Rowena motioned for Osgood to join them, and began steering Winifred toward a larger davenport. "Come, dear, let's sit down, so you can relax while I tell you."

With Winifred seated, the still befuddled Osgood took a seat a respectable distance from her. Rowena retrieved the basket; and, placing it on the floor, took the peacefully sleeping child in her arms. "Here," she said, quietly, handing him to Winifred. "It's time you got to know your grandson."

Drawing a small occasional chair to a point where no more than three feet would separate them, she seated herself, hands folded demurely in her lap.

Up to now, all that had transpired had come about, Rowena felt, in a most natural manner. Now, quite unexpectedly, she was ill at ease. At the most important juncture of her mission, she found herself with no proper place to begin.

"Um, I- I hope you don't see me as an intruder in your lives because, although you haven't had as much time to think about it as I have—we *are* family."

This contention seemed to find a certain amount of disfavor with Osgood, but she continued, undaunted. "There is no way I can tell you of the love that Tony and I shared, but..."

"Miss Carlson..." The interruption, coming from Osgood, Rowena acknowledged it with a warm smile. "Yes, Mister Kramer?"

"I- I think we understand—partially, how Anthony felt—uh, about you. He was very ill, but he was none the less adamant in telling us that neither of you wanted anything to do with this family, or its money."

Rowena smiled sadly. "Did he say anything to lessen the harshness of that—that declaration?"

Despite his attempts to conceal it, Osgood's discomfort was evident. "Wh- why, of course not. Why should he? It- it was forthright and—honest. I- I would have expected nothing less of him."

Quite apparent, now, was the pain that Osgood's words were causing Winifred; perhaps not the words, as much as the callous manner in which they were delivered. Whatever the cause, her distress was real, and Rowena could feel her anger mounting. She shook her head sadly. The

hurt she had experienced, when Anthony spoke of his parents, had been nearly unbearable. Repeatedly, she had found herself wanting to believe it couldn't have been as he described it. Now, in the presence of such foolish, stubborn pride, conviction was hers.

"Mister Kramer, Papa told us that you had come to him asking for help. Looking for some word, something that might make it easier for Mis— for Winnie. It seems to me that it has been in your power to do that, right from the beginning, but you have chosen not to use it!"

Osgood, stiffened, as if he were going to rise, and Rowena sensed that she was about to be ordered out of his sight, but Winifred's small hand darted across to rest, trembling, on his knee. He settled back, glaring angrily at Rowena.

Looking at Winifred, Rowena was instantly sorry for her moment of self-indulgence. "Oh, Mister Kramer, Mis-- Winnie, forgive me, please! What I came to say would have prevented this. I apologize for not getting to it right away. My reasons, I fear, were very petty and selfish.

"If that was all Tony told you about us, and his feeling for you, I can understand the depth of your grief, and why it has been so difficult for you. Tony loved you. He told me so. And- and he knew that you loved him..."

The effect of her words, she knew, would be startling. It was, but not in the manner she had expected. Osgood Kramer's great, shuddering sigh ended prematurely in a racking sob, and he slumped forward, weeping bitterly. Instantly, Winifred passed Anthony to Rowena, and moved close to her husband. Slipping her arms about his shoulders she drew him to her.

"Ozzie, Ozzie, hush, darling. It's all right; it's all right... Everything is going to be all right— now!"

For a few seconds, Osgood allowed his emotions free reign. Then, rising abruptly, he strode from the room.

Startled, Rowena stood, and turned to watch him leave, but the rustle of Winifred's skirts redirected her attention.

Winifred Kramer, her face tear stained and radiant, stepped across the narrow breach separating them. Again, her two hands grasped Rowena's one. "God bless you, Rowena Carlson. I- I believe you may have given me back my husband."

With little Anthony pressed between them, the two women wept quietly. "Oh, Winnie," Rowena whispered. "I'm so sorry that I didn't come sooner. It must have been terrible for you, thinking that Tony didn't love you."

The slight shudder was barely perceptible, but Rowena sensed it, and the reason for it. "Winnie, do you think Mister Kramer will ever accept little Anthony?"

Drawing back, slightly, Winifred looked deeply into Rowena's eyes, and smiled happily. "Oh, my dear, he already has. What will take time will be his willingness to admit it."

Anthony began to squirm, and Rowena placed him carefully in the basket. "I don't think he's ready to wake, just yet, I could nurse him now, but it will be better a little later."

Winifred nodded. "He is a beautiful child." She glanced furtively about the room. "God has given you— us a wonderful blessing."

Rowena lifted her gaze to the sunlit windows, her face reflecting the peace, and joy she knew. "Oh, Winnie—I thank him again and again, every day!"

* * * * *

In the following weeks, Winifred Kramer became a regular visitor at the Carlson home. Aside from building a strong relationship with her grandson, she found true friendship; and, with Ida and Jason's gracious acceptance, she, oft longed for, simple pleasure of being liked for oneself.

It is doubtful that Winifred was fully aware of the forces responsible for the change in her life, or that they were active in her husband's, too. With, or without, her knowledge, however, they were not to be denied.

It was not with Osgood's best wishes that Winifred was spending so much time with the Carlsons. In the past this could have meant a violent upheaval in her marriage, one broad enough to threaten its life. In the aftermath of his own *revelation*, however, Osgood's ability to acquiesce was only one of the changes taking place in this domineering man.

Muffled by the gravel on the drive, the cadence of the team's hooves disappeared, as the Landau rounded the curve leading to the stable. Bentley, the butler, waiting stiffly at the doorway, offered his obligatory: "Good evening, Missus Kramer. Mister Kramer is in the li'bry."

Winifred smiled warmly. "Thank you, Bentley. I will join him, and we will have tea, if you would, please."

Bentley's English heritage had been well documented, long before being considered for employment by the Kramers. It was that background, perhaps, which kept him in a state of nearly constant turmoil at the Kramers' definition of *tea*, and the times they wished it served. Never the less, true to his careful training, he responded: Very Good, Madame."

Osgood glanced up as Winifred entered the library. "Oh, Winnie, you're late. Been with those Carlsons again, I suppose?"

Winifred stepped to his desk; and, leaning across its imposing mass, planted a kiss firmly on her husband's lips. "Yes," she whispered. "*Those* Carlsons. *Those* Carlsons whose friendship you would come to cherish as much as I, if—you'd only give yourself a chance."

Osgood's exclamation, similar in its monosyllabic structure to that used so effectively by Ida, was uttered in more of a defensive manner than its usual totalitarian finality. Normally, Winifred found it intimidating, in any form; but, for several weeks, its use had provoked nothing more frightening than the need to smile, and inwardly give thanks.

"Oh, Ozzie, I'm on to you. You're dying to see that grand baby again; but you're just too contrary and stubborn to admit it. Why don't you come with me tomorrow?"

"TOMORROW? You're going, again, tomorrow?"

"I most certainly am. He recognizes my voice, he smiles at me— an- and when I pick him up, h..." A tear teetered at the corner of an eye. "He is such a beautiful child, and so good! He reminds me so much of Anthony. Don't deny yourself this opportunity. There..."

"Winifred! The child's a bastard, a..."

"OSGOOD! Don't you **da**re say that about our grandson, not— not ever again!"

Osgood Kramer was not one to tolerate dissent or incivility, particularly in a subordinate, but the aftermath, of the *subservient* Winifred's fiery defiance, was a feeling of near elation.

For Osgood, a man who answered to no one, the death of his son, and the circumstances surround it, exposed him to sensations completely foreign to him. Fear and insecurity had been his constant companion since Anthony's death. The mental chaos of the past months, in destroying his sense of invincibility, had forced him to acknowledge his miserable performance as a parent. At a point in his life, one whose eventuality he had vehemently denied, Osgood needed a strong right hand, and knew not where it might be found. In his eyes, as a result of his controlling ascendancy, Winifred was a mouse. Even if this had not been the case, looking to his *wife* for support was unthinkable.

Unthinkable? Yes, but there it was; there in his response to the subtle mitigation of his concern for Winifred's individuality; and, there in, the joy that awareness afforded him. Winifred saw Osgood's expression as one of self-reproach, and several tears escaped. Putting her cheek close to her husband's, she said, "Oh, Ozzie, I'm sorry. I know how difficult this is for you, but he is so sweet; an- and there won't be another... Ozzie, dear, they're little for such a short time. Just think of what we can do for that child. This is a- a second chance. A chance for us, as grandparents, to be the kind of parents we should have been."

Osgood had been thinking of nothing else. He had seen the joy in her face, the love in her eyes, and longed to share it. He did want to see his grandson, to hold him, and tell him, over and over, that he loved him. Sadly, a lifetime of shunning all such thoughts had left him poorly suited to fulfill the role of loving grandparent or, as he understood now, husband.

It should be noted that the depth of servitude, Winifred allowed herself, bore no resemblance to that which Osgood assumed to be the case. Noteworthy, also, is that Osgood's projected nature, hard and brutal as it appeared, was not an accurate measure of his character, nor did it reflect Winifred's perception of him. Partial understanding of these seeming contradictions comes when one discovers that it was Osgood, not Winifred, who attempted suicide in those dark days following Anthony's death.

Osgood's *one eighty*, once it had begun, progressed rapidly in rather large increments. With the realization that his grandson was a very important part of his life, a portion of the dictator's facade fell away; and he, *begrudgingly*, began to accompany Winifred on her visits. In a short time, and of no surprise to her, he was initiating visits; to such an extent that she found it necessary to curtail them.

Within a relatively short time the wealthy, powerful, domineering Osgood Kramer became the servile subject of an enchanting, wholly guileless, and totally helpless child. A tiny miracle that had wrought, in the lives it touched, astonishing changes. As his attachment for his grandson developed, the friendships, Winifred was already enjoying, became Osgood's, with one exception: the determined young woman, with copper colored hair. With her he had fallen hopelessly in love. This love, not of desire, possession or passion, Osgood found distressing. Having never known a selfless emotion, he could find no comparative event that offered a basis for rationalization; there was no logical explanation for this disturbing experience. One he found both exhilarating and terrifying.

Had Osgood been able to correlate these emotions with those associated with the death of his son, there would have been a comparison. The emotions evoked by knowing love, and not understanding its origin, needs or purpose, are nearly as powerful, though not as painful, as those

resulting from having failed to express love, when death has precluded any future opportunity to do so.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

1913

Even though the issue prompting it had been resolved, Stuart held faithfully to his promise to write everyday. Not surprisingly the amount of mail directed to, and issuing from, the farm became a source of open conjecture by its other residents. It was not until Rowena's arrival, however, that Jenny had felt the time was right to tell her father and brothers about Stuart.

Apparently, Jenny's announcement was the impetus needed to stir Carlos and Emma Lou to action. In deference to Jenny, however, they waited a suitable length of time, before revealing their plans to wed. Pleased, but not surprised, Jenny returned to Winton with but one intent: obtaining, and accepting, Stuart's proposal of marriage.

In keeping with her wishes for a small wedding, Jenny decided it should be at the farm. Talk of a double wedding followed, but Carlos would have none of it. He would not be denied the pleasure of giving his daughter in marriage, or that of viewing the ceremony. However, being a frugal man, the obvious cost savings could not be overlooked. It was, therefore, deemed perfectly proper, and prudent, to have a second ceremony take place immediately following Jenny and Stuart's.

The oft quoted lament, which describes, as ill fated, even the most optimal plans of rodents and humans, is no less a given when referred to simply as "Murphy's law". Murph's involvement with the preparations for those weddings was easily discernible.

With the guests to be seated in the parlor, and the wedding parties positioned in the arch leading from the dining room, the guest list, of necessity, would be small. Stuart's only known relative, a reclusive bachelor uncle, was geographically, and subjectively, distant, therefore, his lack of response neither surprised nor troubled Stuart. So, it was that Dr. and Mrs. Jelvik, and Stuart's neighbors, the Kopczweskis became the sum of his guest list. With these two couples being Jenny's friends, too, the goal of achieving *small* was foreseeable, for it left only Carrie Littlesby and Alice Weyford-Carver-Brightmore, as those guests not considered family. The latter's number, however, was swelled considerably by the inclusion of the Kramers and Henesseys.

It became obvious that, though small by comparison to some, the physical mass was well beyond the parlor's load limit. The result was a number of creative, alternate plans, but with none proving suitable, it was decided, much to Jenny's dismay, that the service would be held in the church.

All went well until the day before the wedding when it became clear that no amount of decorating would disguise the sanctuary's size, in relation to the number of people that would be in attendance.

"It will be like being married in a barn," moaned Jenny; and, in her lament, Bobby found inspiration for an idea that would, eventually, provide an alternative. Granted, after Jenny's statement, it seemed ridiculous; but, following the initial guffaws, and uncomplimentary remarks concerning the mental capacity of its framer, the plan became the obvious solution.

The weather's apparent eagerness to cooperate spurred Bobby, Ira and Thad to construct a crude, but serviceable altar, and the decorations adapted surprisingly well to the building's interior. Due to necessity's maternal instincts, ample seating was assured by arranging hay bales in semi-elliptical rows. The result was a warm, relaxed setting, whose charm and beauty far exceeded Jenny's grandest expectations.

In keeping with, small, it was determined that Rowena and Bobby would assist the bride and groom, while Thad and Jenny stood for Carlos and Emma Lou. As with Lorraine's funeral, the services of both Father Dudley and Pastor Quintain would assure all concerned that the knots were securely, and *properly* tied.

It was late; at the station Bobby, Ira, Thad and Rowena had bid God's speed to Jenny and Stuart, and their Winton friends. Having left Rowena and Anthony at home in town, they had arrived back at the farm just as Jason and Ida were leaving.

Amid a flurry of good byes, Jason slapped the reins gently, and they started down the drive. They had almost reached the road when a soft whinny from the pasture caught Jason's attention. Tugging lightly on the reins, he called softly: "Whoa up there, son."

The horse, an *almost* palomino gelding, had replaced Dolly two years before, but had yet to be properly named. The animal stopped obediently, and Jason chuckled quietly.

"Well, lookit there," he murmured, "the old girl's waitin' to say good bye to us."

Ida tugged at his arm. "No, you silly man, she don't want nothin' but them two lumps of sugar in your coat pocket."

Jason smiled at her feigned sarcasm. It hadn't come without a struggle, this trust and understanding; even though its beginning had been breathtakingly sudden, and deceptively easy. There had been many difficult hours of painfully revealing, heart rending conversation. There were times, days, even weeks, when it seemed they had embarked on a journey neither was capable of completing. But there had also been wonderful times of sharing, as they began to reap the benefits of their efforts. Self-indulgence, ignorance, vindictiveness, and pride had been heaped upon the sacrificial pyre; and, in their ashes, Ida and Jason had found the love both had longed for, and feared would never be.

Jason set the brake, and jumped to the ground. Stepping close to the fence, he whispered: "Hello, girl. You miss us?"

A sound from behind caused him to turn in time to see Ida step lightly from the buggy. "Oh, Id', I'm sorry. I didn't know you was wantin' down."

She was beside him now. "Hush, 'tain't like you never pay me no mind!" She reached up, and scratched behind Dolly's ear. "Well— I 'spose she might miss us, a little. She always did seem to understand things— in her own way."

Jason chuckled, and held the sugar against the waiting muzzle. "Reckon she knows us both pretty well." He patted the great neck. "There's only been three women in my life, Id': You, Ween and Dolly. I'm glad I never had to choose twixt you."

"Jason!" Ida scolded, softly. "Don't ever let anyone hear you say that. They might not understand, like— like I do..."

Her pause heralded recollections of a time when she wouldn't have understood, and the big man leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Understandin' is a wonderful thing, Id', most near as important as love—I reckon."

Ida's smile embraced both emotions, as she said: "Can't be much of one without the other."

In the months following Jenny's wedding, Anthony Carlson (Kramer) grew in a normal, healthy fashion. The love, Winifred and Osgood felt for Anthony, became as deep and abiding as that of the Carlsons; and, in a short time, the two divided households were nearly inseparable.

On several occasions, during those months, Osgood had made trips east. This was not at all uncommon, but there seemed to be an air of mystery surrounding these. Subliminal at best, this was noted more in things left unsaid than in clandestine or suspicious actions. Upon returning from one such excursion he presented Rowena with two official documents: A marriage license, properly signed by a presiding Justice of the Peace, and the birth certificate of one Anthony J. O. Kramer. Both bore official stamps; and dates, which representing a very proper interval between marriage and conception.

Although the initials J. O were not of Rowena's choosing, and had been assigned no names, the intention was obvious. Viewed as one of Osgood's *benign* highhanded liberties, it was allowed to stand uncontested, and so became his *secret* victory.

The forging of legal documents, however, was not something the elder Carlsons considered proper. Even so, while they entertained some misgivings, the circumstances provided sufficient reason to acquiesce, albeit reluctantly.

CHAPTER THIRTY

In the year since Jenny's wedding, she and Rowena had corresponded on a regular basis. Jenny not quite as regular as Rowena, but with good reason, as her letters illustrated:

Dearest Ween,

I can't believe that another month has passed. We have been so busy. Yesterday, we bought two-dozen chicks. Stuart fixed the old incubator, and with any luck—the good kind, we'll have a start on our flock. I did tell you we'd planned to raise chickens? The college will buy our eggs, and we think we can sell the biddies, those we don't eat. Anyway, once we get started, we won't need to buy chicks anymore—although, we might need to get a good rooster. Who knows, we may even get into selling fryers.

I've been trying to make sense of what books Stuart kept, but I'm not having much luck. The way it looks, if the chickens don't work out, we'll have to find something else, or we won't be eating regularly. We grow almost everything we need, but some things we have to buy. Money! I wish we could get along without it.

Ween, I want you to know how much your letters mean to me. I love the farm, and the work, but I do get lonely—once in awhile. It's wonderful to get a letter, and feel so close to everyone. Thanks, many, many times!

Sometimes, dear one, when I think of how lucky I am to have Stuart, my heart just breaks for you. Stu is such a wonderful man, and I love him so much. I don't think I could go on without him.

Oh, Ween, it just isn't fair for me to have so much, and you... Forgive me; I know that isn't right. God knows best, but, ooh, I wish he would help me truly believe that.

I'm sorry, dear one; I've run on terribly, and now I must go. It's time to milk and feed; Stuart's in the field, so it's all up to me. Usually, I'm with him, and we come in a bit earlier, but I always bake on Monday, and today I had washing to catch up on, too...

Please, keep writing, even if I'm not very good about getting my answers off.

As ever, dear sister, all my love.

Jen

Even though the next mail carried Rowena's answer, two more were dispatched before Jenny's next missive arrived at the Carlson home:

Dearest Ween,

Well, I've done it again, haven't I? Another over a month since I last wrote, but my dear, sweet, patient sister never gave up on me. Thank you, again. I can only repeat how wonderful it is to receive your letters.

Our first brood of chicks didn't make it. It was heart breaking to find the dear little things all dead, but the old incubator quit working. Stuart fixed it, but we might not need it,

because we have two biddies setting. I sure hope these make it. If they don't it will be a long time before we can try again.

Remember the big question in your last letter? Well, you don't need to worry any longer. I haven't been to the doctor yet, but I'm pretty sure. It's been almost three months, and... Oh, Ween I'm so excited. I told Stuart the day your letter came. I thought he would burst. It's so wonderful. I know he wants children as much as I do, and we've tried—I mean **REALLY** tried! Oh, Ween, I know it's wicked, but..

Rowena had been left to guess at what would have followed; however, there was little question in her mind as to what it was that Jenny couldn't bring herself to write about.

Surprisingly, in the months to follow, Jenny's letters came regularly, and more often. This was due, apparently, to Stuart's overly protective edict limiting her chores, and eliminating work in the field. Even though Jenny and Stuart saw theirs as a rather primitive existence, their proximity to the creature comforts of *civilization* was such as to leave little chance of Jenny giving birth while walking behind a plow.

In reading Jenny's description of Stuart's concern, Rowena had giggled at the image of Stuart, as the fiercely protective husband and father. In those same words, however, she had also found sense of peace and security in coming to a better understanding of the gentle, loving man Jenny loved so dearly.

Rowena had fallen asleep re-reading Jenny's latest letter. One in which she told of Stuart's ongoing struggle to keep the ancient windmill working; of entering her ninth month, of how she and Stuart were marking off the days, and how thrilled and excited they both were. The chicks had made it, and they were on their way to being poultry ranchers.

"As big as a house," she had said, and she was grateful that, being near full term, it was unlikely she would get any larger.

Rowena woke with a start, not certain of what she had heard. The soft gray light was that of waning night, and a dawn not yet fully awake. The sound that had wakened her remained a mystery, but that of excited voices down stairs brought her out of bed, with a sense of something being terribly wrong. There was a jumble of voices. One, shrill and youthful, she thought to be Ira's, then her mother's; and, finally, her father's, all overlapping, one on the other; then a sudden silence, and her mother's sharp cry.

Having thrust herself into robe and slippers, Rowena was running for the stairs. At the landing, she heard the front door close, and heavy steps racing across the porch then down the path. Taking the stairs in twos, she was in the lower hall in time to hear the gate slam. As she burst into the front room, the rattle of buggy wheels, and clatter of galloping hooves mingled with the mournful wail of the five fifteen whistling its way into Garwood.

Rowena came to an abrupt halt, shocked at what she saw. Her mother, tears streaming down her cheeks, huddled in her father's arms, the affirmation of Rowena's worst fears mirrored in her expression.

"Mama! Who was that? Wh- what happened?"

Jason, unable to restrain his own tears, reached out to draw her near. "There was a telegram from Winton..." He faltered, unable to continue, and lowered his head.

On the verge of hysteria, Rowena cried, "PAPA! MAMA! PLEASE!"

The big man struggled to speak, but no words came.

Ida, her gaze firm with resolve, drew herself erect, and took Rowena's hand in hers. "Stuart— Stuart was killed last night..."

Rowena was uncertain of the scream's source, but it spoke of the agony she knew and, in that, became hers. All of the pain, misery and anguish of Anthony's death, as real as the day it had first entered her life, was hers through her love for Jenny. As she would confide to Jenny, much later: "It was though my heart were going to burst from my body!"

"Jenny, Jenny, Jenny." Again and again her torment found voice in the sobbing repetitions of her sister's name. She was aware of her mother's arms about her; and, from a great distance, her soothing voice singing softly: "She's the lily of the valley, my bright and shining star; the fairest..."

The remaining words were lost as they and Rowena drifted into a different dimension. She was falling with no sense of doing so, and it made no difference, for it promised release from the grip of reality

Rowena awoke gazing up into her parents' troubled faces. Gradually, with the sensation of returning life, she realized she was on the couch, her feet propped up on several cushions.

"Mama, Papa?"

Then, in a terrifying flash, the protective cloud vanished, and a wracking sob burst from her throat. "Oh, Mama, Papa, I've gotta go to her, I've..."

Her mother bending low, whispered: "Hush, now, child. You aren't going anywhere. Anyhow, the train's already left. Carlos and the boys are on their way. They'll bring... They'll bring Jenny an- and Stuart back on the evening train."

With mention of Stuart's name Rowena's marginal self-control deteriorated to a point dangerously near that of non-existence, and Ida and Jason began to pray.

Standing on the station platform, wedged between her parents, Rowena shivered. It had not been until she had found some sense of composure that her parents had told her of Jenny's baby. The irony of the situation was beyond reason. How could two lives have found such a bizarre parallel?

Immersed in her sister's suffering, Rowena perceived her total inability to ease it. As her despondency deepened, she wondered if it might be better to run, now, while there was still time.

The engine's whistle, at the far crossing, ended her moment of indecision; she remembered the gleaming treasures made of rusty horseshoe nails, and her sorrow became secondary to Jenny's need. She, better than anyone else, understood the depths of Jenny's suffering. She would be the one to offer a sense of direction, something to cling to— a reason to live. In her, perhaps, Jenny could see herself, and find reason to go on. Rowena prayed for guidance— and a miracle.

* * * * *

In the same year that Stuart would celebrate his first birthday in February, Anthony turned three the following April. That summer Osgood announced that it was time for his grandson, and any others who wished to accompany him, to see some of the world. When questioned as to just how much of the world he was considering, he mentioned, rather casually, London, Paris and

Rome. With the "short war" well into its second year, however, and the memory of the Lusitania precluding ocean travel, he was forced to settle for an extended rail tour of the United States and Canada. Osgood's commanding holdings in several major railroads made it obvious that the trip, be it for six, fifty or several hundred, would have no impact on his financial situation.

It was Osgood's business aplomb that saw Jason and Ida's decision to stay home, as one wisely based on the needs of their businesses. Winifred, however, whose marriage offered no viable argument against spending long periods away from one's spouse, found it difficult to understand why Ida would choose to stay home.

Rowena's reluctance to go was rooted in Jenny's need, and it took a sustained effort by Jenny to change her mind. In time, it was decided that she would accompany Osgood and Winifred. The fact that Anthony's going was tied to hers had never occurred to Osgood.

Osgood's surprise, in learning Jenny was not going, was not shared by anyone else. Although the invitation had been extended to the entire Roblés family, the acceptance of any was not anticipated. Jenny's emotional condition and Stuart's estate, primarily the farm, were difficult problems to deal with, even within the protection and security of family and home.

The proposed use of Osgood's private railcar was seen by all as ostentatious, all except Osgood; who would not be dissuaded. "Comfort," he said, "is the heart of enjoyable travel. We **will** be comfortable!"

That Ida and Jason were not in complete accord with the plan, they managed to keep to themselves, for they recognized it as a wonderful opportunity for Rowena to broaden her horizons; and, perhaps, begin to think of a life that included a father for Anthony.

Prior to the time the world took to the air, in those days when extended automobile trips were more ordeal than pleasure, America moved behind great steam locomotives on gleaming steel rails. If there were those who didn't reside reasonably close to a rail line, it was because they were atop a mountain, or in the middle of a forgotten desert. Even a few of those self-styled hermits were served by some, less than grand, narrow gauge, hauling ore, logs or other commodities purloined from Mother Nature. A byproduct of this huge volume was wrecks. Most, not news worthy, were more an inconvenience than a threat to the passengers' well being; but, occasionally, a wreck of catastrophic proportions occurred. When it did, the eyes of a nation were focused on it. Thus it was with the train of which Osgood Kramer's private car was a part.

First word of the crash came to Jason via Clarence Hays, the station agent. He had been tracking Osgood's car since it had become part of an excursion train out of Chicago. Now, as the Carlsons sat at the kitchen table, Jason was struggling to recount the little he knew of what had taken place in a mountain pass not far from Denver.

The details of what transpired in the next few months will not be explored in depth. Those having lived through such a crucible need not be reminded of the anguish, the utter helplessness that not knowing involves. Those fortunate enough to have escaped such an ordeal should be grateful for an imagination incapable of propelling them into suffering of this dimension

One of the last survivors found, Rowena lay comatose in a Denver hospital for several weeks, with Jason, Ida and Jennifer her constant companions. When she regained consciousness, and it could be established that she would recover, Jason made regular trips to and from Garwood. Later still, Rowena was moved to Des Moines for her final weeks of recuperation.

Because Osgood had been certain the family name would be perpetuated, he had purchased a large family plot for the present and future generations. It was there that the child, Anthony, was placed between his father and his grandparents. It was there that the Kramer dynasty ended.

The legal entanglements, of Osgood Kramer's will, were of legendary proportions. Simply stated, they were many and diverse, but this falls well short of depicting the convoluted monstrosity concocted by Osgood, and several well paid attorneys. A generous portion of the estate was designated for the formation of benevolent trusts — bearing, of course, his name — dedicated to medical and scientific research. Also mentioned were several scholarship funds; and, recent addition, a little known, New York City organization that cared for unwed mothers and their babies. The remainder, thanks to Anthony's will, which Rowena knew nothing of, and Osgood's determination to not be saddled with an illegitimate grandson, would leave Rowena a woman of, literally, undeterminable means.

For Jason and Ida, the loss of their grandchild had been overshadowed by the weeks of not knowing if Rowena would live. During those weeks, it was nearly impossible for Jenny to find a positive focus for her life. So consuming was her malaise that her family saw it as a threat to her well-being. When she was forced to leave Rowena's bedside for a short time to care for her son during a minor illness, they sought to ease her mind by offering words of wisdom, and love, with the hope of bringing her out of her melancholy. Well intentioned as they were, beyond reinforcing the bonds of family, their efforts fell well short of their mark.

When Stuart's cold had dwindled to little more than an occasional snuffle, Jenny prepared to rejoin Ida and Jason in their vigil. Because it was no longer right, or possible to shield Rowena from the truth, Jenny had accepted the awful responsibility of telling her that her son had perished.

It was late in the day before she was to leave. Having seen Stuart securely tucked in bed, and Emma Lou alerted of her intentions, Jenny had gone outside. As she often had, since her mother's death, she found a reassuring peace in the quiet of early evening.

Beneath a full moon, and with no thought of destination, Jenny walked slowly along the drive. As she neared the roadway, Dolly greeted her with a soft nasal whistle. Jenny moved to the fence where the animal waited expectantly.

"Oh, Dolly, I'm sorry. No sugar, but--" she reached up to scratch behind a drooping ear, "I can scratch your happy place."

Stroking Dolly's neck, Jenny spoke quietly. The words were of little concern to Dolly, but the rhythm and tone of their delivery was, and she responded in kind with her own inarticulate mutters.

Even in the quiet of their communion a sound from the barn did not startle Jenny. Being reasonably certain of its source, however, the peculiar sensation it stirred did surprise her— a little. It was a trifle strange: the time, the place, Dolly's presence, and her state of mind, was it only coincidence? As the sound of footsteps along the drive drove the tingle deep into her spine, she dismissed coincidence, and waited, almost expectantly.

Several times during this brief visit, Jenny had noticed that Thad shied away from the flood of positive attention heaped on her by the family. It hadn't been in the nature of callousness, but more as one ill at ease with the direction, or misdirection, of the mission.

The moon was bright enough, and the footsteps close enough for easy identification. "Evenin', Thad."

"Wup? Oh, Miss Jenny. Evenin'. Mighty fine one at that."

"You takin' Dolly in a bit early?"

"No'm— well, maybe a might, but it'll be cool tonight, and the old girl is beginin' to feel her age."

He was beside her now, barely an arm's length. "You know, Miss Jenny, that's not so. I ain't no good at story tellin'. It is early. I come 'cause I see you walkin' this way."

If Jenny's smile wasn't visible in the soft light, it was evident in her voice. "Well, should I be flattered, or afraid."

Before the word had left her lips Jenny regretted having used it; and, even as she was framing her apology, sensed the hurt in Thad's voice.

"Oh, Miss Jenny— I could never... I- I kinda hoped that was forgot. I..

"Thad!" Jenny grasped his hand, speaking forcefully, but kindly. "Forgive me, please. It was a silly— stupid thing to say. It- it had nothing to do with us— um, then. That *is* forgotten. I swear, Thad, those were two different people... No, not even people, just children! It was stupid and wrong of me to hold that anger for so long!"

She could feel, if not see the relief. "Let's start over. Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yes'm— yes'm there is. I- I been watchin' and listenin', an- an... Now, don't take me wrong, I know'd they was only tryin' to help, but I— well, Ma'n me, we didn't see it doin' no good."

Jenny shook her head. "No, it was only knowing that it was out of love, and their wanting to ease my hurt, that kept me from running away from it."

Jenny did not release his hand, nor did he attempt to pull away. "Miss Jenny, you are needin' help. Don't seem possible— for sure it ain't right, that two such fine ladies should be put through what you and Miss Rowena have, and neither of you findin' anyone to help carry the load."

Her other hand closed over his, and she smiled up at him. "Oh, Thad, that's sweet, but I haven't been looking for anyone to help, and I don't think Ween has, either. I- I don't think there's anyone who can help. We'll just have to work it out, as best we can."

"Yes'm, that'd be fine, but— well, you ain't. An' I don't see no way you're gonna be able to— 'less you can stop lookin' at good as always bein' somethin' you like."

The inference caught Jenny off guard, and she stiffened. "Thad, I..."

Withdrawing his hand, Thad poked at the earth with the toe of his boot. "I was 'fraid I'd do that. I- I don't have no business tryin' say somethin' important. Even if I write it down... An-an- I've tried that; but it never comes out the way it should."

Jenny found his hand, again. Squeezing it gently, she said: "Forgive me, Thad, you go ahead. You're right. I'm ready for help, and maybe it shouldn't be something I like."

"Miss Jenny, I- I— well, I ain't never been a church goin' person, but Ma and me done a heap of readin' in the Good Book. An' you know, no matter how good it says it's gonna be, seems there's always a mess a hurt that comes first. But there's some words..." He paused, searching for the scripture. "Aw, I never could remember them numbers! It's in there, though, and it says, plain as anything, that all things work out to somethin' good, if a person loves the Lord. Now, Miss Jenny, reckon I don't know anyone that's got better connections with the good Lord than you— well, 'cept maybe your papa. Mister Carlos, he is the prayinest man I ever knew. An- an' when there's trouble, an' he prays, I just know the Lord is listenin'— an' fixin' to make things right. Your papa ain't never stopped prayin' for you, but 'specially, since you an' Mister Stuart got married.

"Miss Jenny, you said weren't no one could help you. I- I reckon there is. I figure you been hurtin' so bad, and tryin' so hard to help Miss Rowena an' her mama and papa, that you maybe just forgot somethin' that you knew all the time."

The peculiar glow, first kindled in the sound of Thad's footsteps, having forsaken its original source, was now a flame. It enveloped her in what Jenny felt must be a blanket of shimmering stars. Its warmth engulfed her physical self from the top of her head, to the tips of her fingers and toes. Within her spiritual being, it filled her heart with a joy for which there seemed no reason; or limit, and yet, being instinctive, it was as natural as breathing. For the first time, since the night a storm had taken Stuart's life, she could see beyond the moment. Instead of a terrifying challenge, tomorrow beckoned as a treasured goal. She sensed a glorious need to see it, be part of it, and rejoice in it.

"Thad Henessey," she whispered through her tears. "You are the strangest lookin' angel I will ever see, but I thank God for you!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Rowena's stoic acceptance of the tragic news was as one might have expected; any attempt, however, to explicate or describe what lay behind this facade would be foolhardy. Whether her demeanor was the result of absolute control, or her inability to react in any manner, was never known. It remains for one who has lived the experience to truly understand.

For the young, particularly, the very young, a parent's death is a terrible, traumatizing experience, one whose mark will remain, no matter what follows. Regardless of which parent survives, half of that child's support system, half of its very life, is irretrievably gone! In the child's eyes nothing will ever be the same, if any future is foreseeable. Losing one's spouse, at any age, alters—very nearly destroys that which one has come to see as the past, present and future. But the death of a child—the death of a child represents a loss the dimensions of which are unfathomable. A child is meant to perpetuate. A child, whether we admit it openly, or not, will be there when we are the ones to be cared for. Adults know their parents' death, no matter how painful, is an expected occurrence. Even spouses are allotted a similar status, but no such provision exists for the death of one's child. Very simply, a part of you that was to have been forever—is gone. Nothing, absolutely nothing can change that!

Once Rowena's recovery was assured, and her strength such that the move was advisable, the Carlsons brought her home. Milestone that it was, it had little affect on Rowena's health, mental or physical, but it did offer Jason and Ida an opportunity to begin reestablishing the norms of day to day living.

Jason called Dave Fausel, Garwood's only lawyer, who contacted a law firm in Des Moines. They, in concert with the board of directors, and legal department of Osgood's parent firm, began the business of unraveling the mass of legal yarn, connected with the finalizing of the Kramers' estate.

For Jason and Ida, the loss of their grandson was a tragedy; but their daughter had survived, and through the ordeal they had grown closer, and their marriage stronger. Although it appeared that Rowena's physical injuries would leave no lingering disabilities, it was soon obvious that those were the least of her concerns.

In the weeks following a delayed memorial service, Ida and Jason prayed, and watched hopefully. Jenny, having been blessed with a wellspring of faith, and positive assurance, was Rowena's near constant companion, but despite her efforts, her friend continued slipping deeper into her self-imposed exile. Becoming more and more reclusive, she ate only when hunger pangs overpowered the pain in her heart. For her, all that remained, of what had become her life, were a few precious memories, and an emptiness that nothing would ever fill.

For Rowena to have recorded those first years, following the tragedy, would have been impossible. At best, it could have been no more than a jumble of events, none seeming to have bearing on the other, with her pending wealth serving only to deepen her gloom. Granted, making plans for sharing it would have been, much needed, therapy; but, as a grotesque reminder of why she was alone, Rowena saw the money as a frightful burden, capable only of breeding and incubating evil. It was the reason she would spend the rest of her life without her beloved

Anthony's; and she would have rid herself of it in an instant, had all the legal proceedings been finalized.

For Jason and Ida, the following spring came as a welcome respite to a winter that had seen Rowena bedridden most of the time. An unexplained fever, and relentless, racking cough had so wasted her body that, at times, the elder Carlsons had thought of re-admitting her in the Des Moines hospital. Finally, Jenny, whose transformation had been such that she seemed incapable of accepting defeat, had agreed that professional help, perhaps, even psychiatric care, might be the only option left.

Loosed by winter's waning grasp, the lioness of March roared from her lair threatening to devour Garwood. Her appetite, however, being less formidable than her bluster, was quickly satisfied, and April tiptoed across the barren land, offering promise of her lovely sister, May. Midway through her reign, word came from Des Moines that Anthony's will, that portion involving what was his before his parents death, had made it's way through probate. Conversely, Osgood's was still floundering amid its own entanglements. The exact date at which distribution could begin, lay obscured in legal fog.

The most recent correspondence from Des Moines, affirming the finalizing of Anthony's will, revealed that Rowena was, by virtue of this will alone, wealthy. Among the lesser holdings was a farm in Kansas. In light of the vast wealth that would someday be hers, this marginal bit of ground seemed inconsequential to Ida and Jason.

What it was that a Kansas farm represented to Rowena remains her secret, but that it ignited a spark could not be denied. With the arrival of June, she astounded her parents by announcing that she would be traveling to Kansas to view her accession.

Immediately, upon Rowena's return, a change was obvious. Her parents were heartened to note that she was eating regularly, and seemed brighter of spirit. However, even though the situation was nearer normal, their limited conversations with her lacked any discernible reference to what might be responsible for the change.

As grateful as they were, the change was becoming a source of deepening concern for Ida and Jason. Though far from subliminal, its true nature remained undefined. To the degree, already mentioned, it was positive, beyond that, it could only be described as pensive. Even that assessment left a troubling unknown, for there was something else; something elusive, something that defied identification.

As was already well known to Ida and Jason, pondering another's thoughts, based on one's own interpretations of them, could be dangerous, certainly unwise. None-the-less, they discussed those unknowns with growing concern.

Two weeks, following her return, when Rowena still had offered no more than a general report of the farm, in depth descriptions of the train trip and several traveling companions, their anxiety intensified.

As the information blackout slipped into its second month, even though Rowena was eating and sleeping much as she always had, to her parents it seemed she had, again, begun to withdraw. Because of this, they took considerable pleasure in her decision to visit the farm; something she had not done since Anthony's death.

Ida's frown was thoughtful. "They'll be pleased to see you. After all the times they been here to visit, and all them weeks Jenny spent holdin' your hand— I 'spect they're feelin' like you been ignoring them."

Rowena nodded. "I know that Jenny and Papa Carlos understand, I just hope Emma Lou and the boys do."

Ida's frown deepened. "Well— I hope so, too, Lord knows, I don't, I..."

The words, and the ease with which they had come, startled her. Somehow, she had perceived herself as being above that. Now, with their utterance she was sharply reminded that she was still a work in progress.

"Oh, Ween, I'm so sorry! I..."

Rowena's understanding smile stayed her mother's apology. "No, Mama, you gotta right to be upset, both of you, as well as most everyone else. It's just... Well— I... Oooh! There, you see; I still don't have the words. Maybe- maybe later— when I understand, myself."

Ida slipped her arm about her daughter's shoulders. "When the time is right for you, honey; not before. And don't you worry none about your papa and me. I guess— I guess we're still learnin', too."

Carlos was just coming from the barn as the rig turned in at the drive. By the time it had come to a halt, he was there to assist Rowena to the ground.

"Ah, my little one," he chortled, holding wide his arms. "How good it is to see you..." He paused, eyeing her carefully. "And, I am happy to say, looking more like the young lady I saw off to college— just short years ago."

Rowena slipped into his embrace, warmed and renewed by the love that was so much a part of her life. "Oh, Papa Carlos, I hardly remember that girl, but- but I'm still the same—" she paused. Then, shaking her head. "No! No I'm not, and- and I don't think I ever will be!"

Gently, the big man pushed her back. "My, such serious words— but, of course, I understand. One does not suffer the pain, of living through what you have, without knowing great change."

He moved to one side, offering his arm. "Come, let us go to the house. I regret, Emma Lou and Jennifer are off tending to a new addition at the— uh..." He searched his memory for the name. "Weyford?"

Rowena smiled. "Not Weyford, not for along time. It was Brightmore, last I knew, but I'm not sure what it is— my, another one?"

Carlos nodded. "It seems that young lady takes very seriously God's admonition to replenish the earth."

He chuckled at some thought, he did not offer to share; and, holding the door, motioned her in. "The boys will be sorry they missed seeing you. They are repairing fences on that quarter-section just beyond the creek." He drew a deep sigh. "Ahh, but it is good, so good to see you. Ahhnnnd," by elongating the word, the question mark was in place well ahead of his actual query, "good that you are here, I think. You have come to talk, yes?"

She smiled up at him. "You read me very well, as always."

His sly wink punctuated his own knowing smile, and his attention seemed to focus on a point well beyond the immediate, perhaps, beyond time itself.

"Love." He spoke the word reverently with a slow exhalation. "Love embraces many things, not all comfortably or happily, but it endures. It evokes emotions far beyond those of everyday life, beyond what we feel we are capable of. With love, comes an inner knowledge, a silent voice that speaks when one is alone, and to others when the need is great, and words are inadequate.

"You are as my own daughter, closer in some ways than my Jennifer, and," his eyes danced with a teasing smile, "in *many* ways, easier to understand."

Carlos drew a chair from beneath the kitchen table. "Come, this room is where great thoughts are born, where secrets are exposed, where love is allowed free expression. It is where Lorraine and I always talked, where we counseled our children and, even now, where Emma Lou and I come for serious conversation. It has a warmth, yes? It is the heart of the house. In a manner of speaking, the center of our family's universe."

As he settled on the chair opposite her, she gazed into his expressive eyes; and, even seeing nothing but love, understanding and kindness, knew it would not be easy. The right words still eluded her; but now, at least, she was ready to try.

"I- I feel guilty, coming to you first. I know it will hurt mama and papa, but there are things— things that aren't part of their lives, that I must know about."

Her expression was pleading, almost as though she expected him to supply answers before questions were formed. "Papa?" Dropping *Carlos* was such a natural omission that neither gave it note. "Was it hard for you to marry Emma..." She caught her breath. "Oh..." Her hand darted up to cover the offending lips. "That's not wh... Oh, Papa— what's wrong with me?" I..."

Carlos shook his head. "No, no little one, do not be disturbed. It is all right. I understand." On the table he thoughtfully traced the outline of one hand with the index finger of the other. "You need to understand that there was never any thought of forgetting Lorraine. She is the mother of our children, a part of me— a part of our family that nothing can replace. Emma Lou is not part of that, and she understands. We, Emma Lou and I, talked at great length about this; in fact, she suggested, um, *required* that Lorraine remain a part of our lives."

He smiled understandingly. "I know this is of little help to you, for you ask concerning your own future, but it will help. You have questions— questions concerning marrying again. But if you remember Anthony's love, you will know that he would want you to marry. You will never forget Anthony. No truly caring man would expect you to. Nor in loving another will you be unfaithful to Anthony, or his memory. You will be reaffirming— validating his love."

She nodded. "I understand; and I think I have come to grips with my sense of guilt, but I don't think I could ever love again."

Carlos nodded thoughtfully. "It is well that our thoughts have little to do with God's plans. Fear not, little one, what God has for you is not yet yours to know, but it will be— in the time allotted."

She nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes! I believe that with all my heart, and that's another part of my reason for coming, the most important."

The great brows lifted slightly. "It is a question I have yet to discern."

She smiled warmly. "Papa, do you believe that Jesus talks to us?"

Relaxing, his countenance grew less serious, and a gentle smile accompanied his thoughtful nod. "Without question!"

"How do you know when it happens?"

The smile continued, lifting the outer reaches of his mustache even higher. "I think, dear one, you already know; but it is something that cannot be explained. When God speaks, we hear. Whether we accept it as God's word, and act accordingly, depends on many things; God's will, being foremost."

Rowena sat quietly, considering the wisdom, the far-reaching ramifications of his words. Carlos responded by dedicating several moments to quiet meditation. Then, with the smile replaced by a more serious expression, he said: "Would you consider sharing what has prompted this question?"

She nodded. "Yes, mm-hmm... I think God wants me to dedicate my life, and my money, to helping those who have no one to look out for them."

He brought his fingers together in a manner that placed them just off the tip of his nose. "Ahhh, a mission."

"A mission?"

"Some refer to such callings as ministries, but terminology is of little consequence, it is God's will that is important. It would seem, as your mother reminded me— so long ago, when we found Mister Dooley's treasure: God has already answered your question. A way has been prepared. What better to do with your wealth?"

Rowena's smile was one of *nearly* complete relief. "But how will I know what to do?"

With tears in his eyes, Carlos nodded. "Have no fear, if it is God's will, you will know! He nodded, again. "Yes— you will know."

Reaching across the table, she caught his hand in hers. "Oh, Papa, thank you! I- I just knew you could help."

"For this, I give thanks to our God."

As he blessed himself, his other hand closed over her two and he said, "Let us give thanks." Lifting his eyes heavenward he began to pray. "Gracious, loving God, we offer humble thanks that you have chosen our dear daughter to tend your sheep, those who might be lost, those who are in need. Grant, oh Lord, that her heart might hear your voice, so that she may always know your will. At this time of decisions, grant that she not be troubled by doubt, and guide her steps that each will be pleasing to you. This we ask in the name of your son, our Lord and Savior, amen."

They shared several moments of quiet reverie, each savoring in a special way the mysteries and wonders of being close to their creator.

Finally, Carlos fixed her with a quizzical smile. "I must ask, for I too see the hurt this may cause your parents. Why did you feel they could not respond, at least, to your second concern?"

"Because I don't think they're very close to God."

He nodded, thoughtfully. "And why is that?"

Rowena shrugged. "I don't know— really. Twice, both times with mama, I- we knew that Jesus was with us. We could feel his presence, but later, when I would try to talk about it, mama seemed nervous, and changed the subject."

"And your father?"

"I- I don't know, I... You know, I don't think we ever talked about God, not in that way. We pray, and ask God for help— and that's nice, but it- it's different, it..."

Again, her face reflected the silent plea. Gazing out the window, Carlos nodded thoughtfully. "Ah, my little one, I would never suggest that you deceive your parents, but it would be a mistake to tell them of our conversation, unless it is inescapable. If it should ever come to a place of being necessary, sometimes a slight omission is the most loving sin one can commit."

Anxiety hung about her eyes as she spoke. "But isn't that being dishonest?"

"In the strictest sense, you are correct, but..." He gave a moment to quiet contemplation. "Ah, do you remember the packages of food and clothing your parents sent regularly to our home at the dump?"

"Yes mm-hmm."

"Your parents knew we could not accept charity, so they offered none. They simply saw to it that there was a good reason for those packages to be sent. We knew and, in my heart of hearts, I think Ida and Jason knew that we did, but we never mentioned it. Was there deception? Yes, but it allowed us dignity, while giving your parents the blessing of giving in the way God asks we do: With no thought of recompense.

"Deception, dear one, is not *always* the demon we see it as."

* * * * *

They were still seated at the kitchen table following the evening meal. Rowena sat toying with her teacup. "Mama, Papa, something happened in Kansas that I need to tell you about."

We are not privy to the thoughts that filled the elder Carlsons' minds, but fettering one's imagination in any way, would leave much unexplored.

Ida looked questioningly at her daughter. Beyond Rowena's original sketchy description of the farm, and later a detailed account of the grand house, she and Jason knew little else. She had wondered, but now her imaginings had become fearsome, and her voice betrayed her emotions. "Ween, honey, what is it?"

"I- I met a man..."

Nothing they had heard or thought had prepared them for this. Ida and Jason's attempts to disguise their surprise were less than successful, but they said nothing, and Rowena continued. "He's the pastor of the church, there in Cinappa..."

From within her thoughtful pause, she cast her father a quizzical glance. "Papa, have you ever been to Cinappa?"

Jason rubbed his cheek slowly. "Nooo...Not really 'been there.' Gone through it— on the train; it's just a flag stop; don't have a station. By the look of it, maybe a hundred people— um, give or take..."

Rowena nodded. "Few more, bout a hundred and fifty... Farmin' town. From what I've heard, my farm was one of the best in the area. The owners had several children, but none of them were of a mind to farm. When the old folks died, the heirs, bein' at such odds, pretty much ruined the place. Borrowed money against everything, sold all the stock, and... That's when Osgood's bank foreclosed. I don't think Anthony knew anything about it, and I have no idea why Osgood deeded it to him. There hasn't been anything done to it in nearly ten years..." Her eyes rolled upward. "Oh, Papa, it's in terrible shape, but- but I think it could come back. It would be good for the area, plenty of folks needin' work, and- and... Oh, I don't know— I- I just gotta feelin'!"

The elder Carlsons, sensing Rowena's request for response, but unable to comply, stirred nervously in uneasy silence.

Rowena smiled. "Mama, remember when Hilly died, an- and that other time? Jesus talked to me— I know he did..."

Response to the supplication, this pause petitioned, was evident in her parents' more relaxed demeanor, and the love reflected in their smiles.

Relieved, and more confident, Rowena continued: "I just know that I'm 'sposed to go back to Cinappa. It probably won't help many folks, thereabouts, but maybe there are other ways. Maybe I can help lots of people, and- and I don't know why, but I think that farm is where I'm 'sposed to start.

"I've talked to Pastor Sterkey and Lottie, that's his wife, we've— we've prayed about it, an- and I know there's something I need to find out— something I need to do, maybe something I need to learn..." She paused, seeming to gather her courage. "I know the Lord is tellin' me I should go!"

Neither of her parents made any attempt to hide their tears, and they moved to their daughter's side. Ida spoke first. "I do remember those times, honey, and I know what you feel is right. Sometimes the Lord closes a door, and leaves us in the dark, so that when he opens a window we can see real clear what's out there. It was a mighty dark room you were in, and you were there an awful long time; but, thank the Lord, I think you're back in the sunlight!"

Jason smiled warmly. "Don't know if this is *exactly* what we've been prayin' for, but we do know the Lord knows best. You have our blessings, darlin'! When you get settled, your mama, me and Carlos'll come out to help you get started. You just start small, let it come along gentle, and everything'll be fine."

Rowena smiled thoughtfully. "It isn't like I'll be runnin' out of money..." She interjected a strange little laugh. "'S funny, I never had any mind to do anything with it before, but now... Oh, Mama, Papa, thank you! I-I just knew you'd understand..."

Ida patted her daughter's shoulder. "Course we understand, honey, Carlos told us about the talk you and him had, and..."

"But, Mama, Papa Carlos told me not to mention it to you."

Ida's nod accompanied a knowing, motherly smile. "Course, he did, but he knew you would. He figured you'd get so mixed up with your feelings of love, loyalty an' not wantin' to hurt us ... Well, he figured there was no tellin' what would come out..." Her pause was extended and thoughtful. "But I'm not bein' quite honest. We- we want to understand— and we do, in a way, but- but Jesus ain't never really talked to us, an..."

Rowena slipped her arms around her mother's shoulders, and drew her close. "Oh, Mama, he will— I know he will, but..." She pulled away to embrace them with her gaze. "Until he does, you just gotta believe."

Jenny, Carlos and the rest of the Roblès family had left; and the station platform was long abandoned. In the distance, the train's whistle was little more than a soft moan, as Jason and Ida made their way toward the car. At the head of the stairs leading to the parking area, Jason paused, his eyes fixed on a point in the distance where the train might be, were it still visible.

Ida tugged at his hand. "Penny for your thoughts."

He glanced down into her smiling face. "I was just thinkin' 'bout that night I first saw Ween, here at the station. I hoped I'd never see that much fear and hurt in- in anyone's eyes ever again— but I did, in hers an an'— yours"

Ida nodded. "I know," she sighed, "but I honest think she's going to be all right..." She squeezed his hand gently. "And I know I am!"

Her wandering thoughts introduced a break in the conversation, and they were silent for several moments before Ida spoke again.

"Seems a lifetime, don't it?"

Jason looked down questioningly. "A lifetime?"

"In-between, I mean."

"Oh... Yep— um, maybe two... First one we- we pretty much wasted, but the second..." He responded in kind to the gentle pressure of her hand.

"Id'?"

"Mm-hmm."

"You do think she'll be all right?"

Her nod was lost in the shadows, but her answer came with quiet assurance: "No question about it, Jason. No question at all!"

They walked a few feet farther in silence, then:

"Id'?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Do you think he— um, do you think Jesus will ever talk to us?"

Ida stopped and, turning to face her husband, moved close enough to gaze deeply into his eyes; the emotion in her voice revealed even more confidence than moments before. "Oh, Jason, I believe he already has. We just haven't learned to listen. But that will change— I- I know it will! I just know it will!"