

Chapter Seventeen
A Safe Haven

“Think it’s safe yet, Red?” Henry Torbeaux asked the big tabby cat. “Reckon they’ve gone yet?” At the front window Henry threw open the wooden shutters and looked up and down the wagon road to make sure that the three men had really left. “Hoodlums, Red, young hoodlums, and I’m glad to see them away from here.” Henry then went to check the back. He wanted to see if he could locate his coyotes.

Yesterday after he had filled the bucket and left it for them, the three men had come riding in. Henry ignored his coyote friends, not wanting the strangers to be aware of them. He knew their kind. They would find nothing wrong with amusing themselves and passing time by taking shots at the little canine family. Better he leave his neighbors to fend for themselves until the men went away. Now it was almost four o’clock in the afternoon and he was worried that the coyote family had not been able to find water elsewhere. They had come to depend on his daily offering.

“Look there, Red,” Henry said, breathing a sigh of relief. “They’re all out there right now, drinking at the trough. Must’ve waited for the men to leave and couldn’t wait for my bucket. They’re so thirsty. They’re smart, Red ... those coyotes. They know danger when they see it, lucky devils.”

He thought about the three men, wondering why he had so disliked them. They had been polite enough, but most people who came by the station house – people on their way somewhere or coming from somewhere, had definite traveling plans. These three Henry pegged as drifters with no particular destination or purpose that he could either determine or sense. Henry recalled how they had ridden in early yesterday afternoon and asked permission to stay the night to rest their horses. They brought their

own bedrolls, refused his offer of bunks and had bedded down on the front porch for the night. Henry never got a good feel for why they had come or where they were going even though he did hear one of them talk about heading east. He had also heard the older one mention the army a couple of times. Henry considered whether or not the three were Union soldiers recently discharged. He figured Union. When they did find it necessary to speak with him, they used a phony southern accent ... at least it was not one Henry had ever heard before. Perhaps they were afraid that he would not welcome them if they were Yankees, this being Texas. Anyway, they were gone now, riding north. Henry was glad to see them go. Time was close for the stage to come in and Henry looked forward to good company tonight, Scatter and that new man, Charlie O'Donnell. Henry set about making his usual supper of beans and hot biscuits to be ready when they arrived, tired and hungry.

Dark fell and still no stage came. Henry grumbled to the big red cat, "Scatter's late. Wonder if he had a wheel break. Think I should ride out to see?" The big red cat curled up close to the fireplace and did not respond. Henry continued, "I'll give him another half hour – then I'll go." Just as he said that he heard a strange noise that put him in mind of thunder. But he knew it wasn't thunder. "What in hell?" he yelled to the cat and ran to the front door. He threw it open. "What in hell?" he repeated. "The damn thing's a runaway!" he shouted as the stage roared into the yard. Henry was afraid that the lathered horses would not stop and he ran out, waving his arms and yelling "Woah! Woah! Woah, there!"

The horses knew where they were and stopped just as Henry ran up to the lead gelding and grabbed its bridle. When he had the team under control he looked up to the driver's seat. No Scatter or Charlie. Instead he saw the strangest driver ever ... a tiny bit of a woman, slumped over, her forehead resting on her crossed arms.

"What in tarnation's going on?" yelled Henry. "Where's Scatter?"

The woman looked down at Henry. She pointed at her feet. There lay the new shooter, Charlie.

"I think he's alive," the woman whispered to Henry in a voice so hoarse and weak that he could barely hear her. She slumped off the driver's seat and knelt beside Charlie.

"What happened?" Henry asked.

"Shot," she answered. "In his side and his leg is broken."

"Scatter?" Henry asked.

"Inside," she whispered again. "Dead. Mr. Drake too."

"Drake?" Henry asked as he struggled to retrieve the wounded shooter from the top of the coach and laid him on the ground as gently as he could. He checked for a pulse. It was faint ... but there. "He's still alive," said Henry. Leaving Charlie, he opened the door of the coach and saw the two bodies piled inside. One was Scatter and the other, sure enough, was Drake. Henry knew about him from Scatter ... an army man even though he never wore uniform ... served in some special unit or other. Henry also knew that Drake always accompanied payroll to Ft. Larson.

"I have to see if there's anything I can do for them," he said to the woman.

"Dead," she said again, "they're dead."

"I have to make sure."

First he felt for a pulse on Scatter's throat and then went to Drake. It was as she had said. Both of them were dead. Leaving the two bodies inside the coach, he went to Charlie and knelt. With some effort, he managed to gather Charlie in his arms.

"We better get this one inside. Need to see if he's got bullets in him." Henry turned to look at her and saw that she was near to fainting. "Don't you go fainting on me, little lady," he ordered. "I need you."

Sarah tried desperately to get a grip on her emotions. All through the wild ride she had thought that if only she could get the stage to the station house, she could lie down and rest and let someone else take charge. But no, she couldn't rest yet.

"I'm all right," she murmured and followed Henry inside.

"How long ago this happen?" he asked.

“What about the horses?” she asked, ignoring his question. “Shall I do anything? They’re hot and lathered. They need water.”

“Not yet, they don’t. First they have to cool off. They drink too much now, they’ll colic or founder – or worse. They’ll be all right where they stand. First we care for Charlie.” He asked again, “How long ago did this happen?”

“Maybe two hours,” she said, “or maybe three. It’s hard for me to say.”

Inside the station house, Henry lay Charlie on a bunk and, examining the crude splint, he asked, “You set this?”

“Mr. Charlie helped me,” she answered.

“He was conscious?” Henry asked.

“He was in and out and until the drive. He passed out for good and I was so afraid he would fall off.” Her voice broke and she almost cried again.

Henry took a good look at her for the first time. In the lamp-light, she looked a mess ... her blond hair loose and tangled, her face smeared with dirt, blood and tears ... her dress torn and bloody. She was a lady by the sound of her voice and her ways. Her gray dress was so near to being ruined that it was difficult to ascertain its initial quality, although Henry could see that the cloth was plain, not exactly the choice for ladies. Was she a lady down on her luck? He decided to figure that one out later. He had enough on his hands right now.

“I have to get water, Miss. I’ll be right back.”

Henry went out to the back porch and came back in with a basin of water. He set it on the floor beside the bunk and then went out again with the kettle, which he filled and put on the stove to heat. Then he came back to Charlie.

“You do this too?” he asked, unwinding the bandage around Charlie’s middle.

“Yes, sir,” she replied, her voice regaining some of its strength.

“Well, he’s alive and the bleeding’s stopped. Blood’s sticky and drying. Two bullets hit him close together,” Henry said after looking closely at Charlie’s wounds. “He’s lucky. They both came

out the other side. Wounds go all the way through. I have to cut off his clothes, Miss. That going to bother you?" Henry asked.

"It won't bother me," she said, but her cheeks turned a bright pink under the grime.

Henry began to cut Charlie's shirt and pants.

"How'd you get those men inside? Charlie help you?" Henry asked as he worked carefully, trying not to do additional harm to Charlie's leg

"He kept bleeding and losing consciousness," she tried to explain.

"You mean you got those two men inside by yourself?" Henry asked with disbelief.

"Yes, sir, I did," she replied. "I don't know how long it took or even how I managed to do it."

"You were afraid," he said. "Fear gives us more strength than we ever knew we'd have. Down home, I know of a woman who got a dead horse off her boy. Horse dropped dead and fell on the boy. That woman pulled it and pushed it all by herself until her boy was clear. No way she could do that except from fear her boy would die."

"Yes, I was frightened," she agreed. "More frightened than I have ever been. All I could think of at first was that I was the only one alive and that they might come back to kill me. And then when I found Mr. Charlie alive, I was afraid that he would die."

"And then you tried to hold those runaways?" he asked. "You ever drive a team of four before?"

"Never," she replied, shaking her head.

Henry washed some of the blood off Charlie with the cool water. When it was dark red with blood he took it to the back, poured it on the ground and returned.

"You tied him up real good. Probably what saved his life." Henry fetched the kettle and poured hot water into the basin. Then he took a bottle out of the cupboard. "Whiskey," he said. "What do you remember about what happened?" he asked as he opened a drawer and took out two thick towels to use on Charlie's

wound. He did want to know what happened. Also, talking would take her mind off their chore. He didn't want her to faint.

"There were three men. First, I heard shots and shouting Mr. Drake opened the door and tried to climb out to help. They shot him. Then the stage stopped and one of the men came to the door and told me to get out. I did — and that's when I saw Mr. Charlie, Mr. Drake and Mr. Scatter down. There were just three young men ..." she stopped as her voice broke.

"I'll be damned," Henry said angrily. "Sorry, Miss, didn't mean to cuss, but I think I know them."

"You know them?"

"Well, not exactly know them. They must be the same three who came here earlier and left late this afternoon ... they was just hanging around."

Henry finished washing Charlie's side wounds and poured some of the whiskey directly onto the open gashes before binding them tightly to prevent more bleeding. Charlie hardly moved throughout it all. Then Henry turned his attention to the broken leg. As he began to remove the splint, Charlie started to come around.

"Don't move, Charlie," Henry warned, pressing his hand on Charlie's chest to prevent him from trying to sit up. "You keep still while I fix this leg. You'll be all right eventually. Little lady here did a good job on you."

Then turning back to her he said, "I'm Henry ... what's your name?"

With just the slightest bit of hesitation Sarah answered, "Anna. I'm Mrs. Anna Morgan."

Henry noticed her hesitation and tried to draw her out, as much to steady his own nerves as hers.

"Good thing you're a married woman, Mrs. Morgan. Is there a Mr. Morgan, Ma'am?"

"Not now. The war, you know," she glibly lied. It was becoming easier, this new identity.

"Come closer on over here and hold Charlie's hand tight. I have to take off this splint to see if the leg is set good and it's going

to hurt him," Henry said as he placed a blanket over Charlie out of deference to her modesty. Even married women shouldn't have to see other half-naked men.

"Sorry, Ma'am. As soon as we finish, I'll put one of my night shirts on him."

Sarah did as Henry said, grasping Charlie's big rough hand in one of her small, bruised and blistered hands. She laid the other on his feverish brow.

"Where did you get on the stage?" Henry asked, trying to keep her mind occupied. He had examined the break with his fingers and found that it had not been well set. He would have to pull it apart and make sure the bones were correctly meshed for a clean knit. He was grateful, though, that the bones had not pushed through the skin of Charlie's leg

"I got on in St. Louis," she said. "He's feverish."

"Not surprised," Henry replied. "We have to get your hands seen to when we finish here."

Charlie opened his eyes and looked up. The first thing he saw was Sarah's face. He made a strong effort to smile up at her.

"You keep smiling just that way," Henry commanded Charlie, trying to be as light humored as he could. "You stay with him, Mrs. Morgan. I know where there're some slender pieces of wood to use for splints ... out in the barn ... left over from my tomato plants. I'll be back in two shakes," he said as he hurried out the back door and ran to the barn.

"Mr. Charlie?" Sarah called gently. "Are you awake? Mr. Henry thinks you'll be all right. He says he knew those men. They were here." She squeezed his hand and felt his weak response.

He said something that she didn't understand. She leaned closer to place her ear next to his lips.

"Thirsty," Charlie whispered. "Thirsty."

"Water, I'll get water." She stood up and looked around the large one-room cabin, wondering where Henry had gotten the water.

Just then Henry came back inside with a handful of long slender sticks and sat down beside Charlie.

“He’s thirsty, Mr. Henry. Where is the water?”

“Better to give him that whiskey. He’ll need lots of it tonight.” He helped Charlie to drink almost a full glass of the stuff and then set the bottle back down on the floor. ***“We’ll keep this handy tonight,”*** he said and then went back to Charlie’s leg. ***“This will hurt,”*** he warned, and without hesitation, he took firm hold of the broken leg and pulled hard.

Charlie screamed and came halfway off the bunk. Henry finished as rapidly as he could and was surprised that neither patient nor nurse had fainted. Charlie’s face was beaded with sweat and his jaw was clenched, but he had remained conscious. Beneath the dirt on Charlie’s face, Henry could see that he was at least two shades paler than he had been when he had first come through with Scatter on their run north.

“Where’s the water?” Sarah asked, feeling a sudden need to get away from the bedside. ***“He’ll need more than whiskey to drink.”***

“On the back porch – in that bucket – there’s a dipper hanging on the side. Fill it half full and bring it in.”

Sarah went out the back door into the pitch-dark night. There was no moon and only the faintest glow from the lamp inside told her where the porch ended. She had to feel her way around to find the bucket, finding it on a large shelf at the end of the porch. The dipper was hanging where Henry said it would be. She filled it half full and brought it back inside, careful not to spill a drop. Together they helped Charlie to drink. There was nothing more that they could do for him tonight. Henry laid him back on the bunk.

“Soon as he’s ready to eat, I’ll get some broth into him. He’ll need it after losing all that blood. I reckon you’re starving too, Ma’am? I had supper cooked for y’all a long time ago and it’s cold. It just needs heating up.”

“I really don’t know if I could eat,” she replied. ***“I think I’m too tired. If I could clean up first?”***

“I’ll get something hot real soon,” he said. ***“You want to clean up, there’s a little place with a bunk on the other side of that cur-***

tain.” He pointed to the far side of the cabin where a long gray curtain hung on a rope from one wall to the other. “There’s a basin and a pitcher in there that you can fill up out back and wash up,” he said as he bent over the large iron pot in the fireplace. He added wood to the still red coals and stirred the beans. “I wish I had some rabbit broth for Charlie,” he said.

Sarah found the pitcher and confidently went out on the porch again to the bucket, knowing this time exactly where it was. She had just picked up the dipper to fill the pitcher when she saw the many pairs of gleaming eyes in the yard. She thought they were wolves. She screamed. The glowing eyes quickly disappeared into the darkness.

Henry ran to the door. “What’s wrong? Those men back?”

“Animals!” she cried. “Wolves maybe!” She was frightened even more than she had been of the three men.

“Oh, those were my coyotes,” Henry said with a gentle chuckle. “They come up to drink from the water trough. There’s a mother coyote with three pups and you probably frightened them as much as they did you,” Henry explained. “Here let me take that in for you.” He took the pitcher from her trembling hands and led her back into the cabin.

Her body was shaking from the new fright and from exhaustion. She covered her face with her hands, stifling back sobs.

“You’re worn out,” Henry said soothingly, “plumb tuckered. You’ve had about as much as you should handle for one day. Go on and wash up. By the time you finish, I’ll have supper warmed up.”

Later, they managed to get another half glass of whiskey down Charlie’s throat and some more water. They left him to rest. Henry sat her down at the table and placed a plate of beans, bacon and biscuits in front of her.

“Ma’am,” Henry said, “I’ve got to see to the team now. I’ll leave you here to eat something. I know you’re tired, so after you eat, why don’t you climb into that bunk behind the curtain and go to sleep.” He smiled at her with sympathy. “Charlie’s going to be

all right I believe ... I'll stay up with him tonight. Right now, I have to see to the horses. They've been out there long enough.

"You'll need me to help," she said, instantly getting up from the table.

"No, Ma'am, I'll do this myself. Anyway, with those hands of yours all torn up there's not much you'd be able to do. You eat your supper."

"What will you do with them? I mean Mr. Drake and Mr. Scatter?" she asked. "Will you bury them? I could help."

"No, Ma'am. Not much I can do for them except make sure they're locked up tight. We can't bury them here. Have to leave them in the coach tonight and take them into Larson early tomorrow. Scatter's got no family that I know of and town people will want to bury him down at the churchyard. Sheriff Johnson'll need to see about sending somebody out to the fort about Lieutenant Drake.

"Lieutenant Drake?" Sarah asked, all her defenses alerted. "He is a lieutenant? In the army?"

"Yes, Ma'am, Drake is ... was ... army, although most people don't know it," replied Henry. "Always dressed in civilian clothes."

"Then how do you know he was army?" she asked, her face gone white with fear.

"Scatter said. He figured Drake wore regular clothes, not wanting to draw attention to himself, especially when he was with payroll," replied Henry. "He usually came down on the stage with a couple of other men when payroll came to Fort Larson and on south." Henry paused and took a close look at Sarah who was obviously upset by this news. "Guess he didn't tell you?" he inquired, at a loss to understand her distress.

"No, he didn't tell me. I didn't know."

Sarah was alarmed and frightened. Why had she not known? Why had he not told her? Had he been taking her to the fort ... escorting her there for Timothy? Had what she feared earlier about him been true? Now she knew that she must compose her-

self lest she give away too much. Whatever or whoever he had been, she was still free. She gripped the table edge and kept silent.

Her discomfort was obvious to Henry, but he couldn't know the reason. He continued with his explanation.

"In town I have to explain to Artie at the stage office and the sheriff about what happened – they'll want me to tell them all I know. And you too." He looked at her hands gripping the edge of the rough wooden table. "There's some salve out in the barn. I use it on the horses – you know – cuts and all? It'll be good for your hands. I'll bring some back with me. Maybe then you'll tell me some more about what you remember?"

Taking a pile of blankets out with him, he left her alone with Charlie, and her fears.

Sarah sat still trying to settle her emotions. She had respected Drake and it was difficult to think of him as having been her enemy. Knowing that she shouldn't dwell on this now, she lifted her fork and gingerly picked at her supper. She was simply too exhausted to be hungry and after eating only a few bites she pushed the plate away and set aside her fork. She wearily placed her head in her hands. Too tired to eat, too frightened to cry, in an emotional state close to not having any feeling at all, she sat – unable to get up and go to the bunk. She knew that she would not sleep this night. Maybe she would not sleep again – ever. Had she jumped from the frying pan into the fire? Was this better or worse than regular beatings? Bandits and guns, wild animals in the yard, dust, dirt and now the army – had she made the wrong decision? Why had she come here? Why had she not stayed someplace civilized where cooks prepared beans with molasses in a nice brown pot? But she knew the answer to all those questions. A civilized place is where Major Truesdale would search more diligently for her. Had he almost found her?

She felt Charlie's eyes on her. She met his gaze. There was something about his expression, his eyes as dark as night and as compelling as an eagle's stare, that caused a shiver to run down her spine and an unfamiliar feeling to stir in the pit of her stomach.