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SON OF RED EARTH OR THE GEORGE STORY:

NOVEL EXCERPT

By

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Prologue:

Black Hawk, Colorado. The streets of the town cut into hillsides, the houses balanced on stone wall foundations, stair-stepping toward the sky. Gold and silver mines have made it the place to be and people settle into their homes with what feels like permanence, but deep down they know it won't be. Ovando Hollister reports, "The bordering hills were densely wooded when the mines were discovered, but the trees were small, and few now remain within five or six miles around."¹ What begins as a stroke of luck, gold found in 1859, and mining camps, becomes a bustling center that boasts homes of politicians and military men, drawing people by the hundreds and in 1864 it officially becomes an incorporated town of Colorado territory. Some come for the mines, others for the business opportunities a newly sprung mining town affords, others come for the scenery, "Neither pen, pictures, or photographs do justice to the scenery," they like to say.

Territorial Governor John Evans makes it his home, building a mansion on the East side of the canyon, looking up Chase Gulch. The mansion is spacious, two-stories, and a roofed porch along the front. The porch railings and the trim is whitewashed, the rest of the house painted blue and filigree curves and curls like ivy along each eave. Evans builds his house beside the house of businessman Peter Merchant and others of the ilk follow his example, making the street one of grandeur and stature.

Tales of Indian warriors gathering and attacking settlements slip into Black Hawk as it is reaching a peak in population and prosperity and people become nervous, whispering rumors on the streets, until many are sure their town will be the next victim of an Indian raid. They beg the

¹ *The Mines of Colorado*, 1867.

Governor to protect them, to protect the helpless settlers beyond the limits of the town. Governor Evans appeals to the government to let him raise a 3rd Colorado Cavalry, but the government doesn't see an urgency for such an act, more pressing matters of civil war taking precedence. "The government has forgotten us," citizens tell each other, begging Evans to find another way and Evans listens, unable to see how he can protect the people of his territory without some kind of military group. He raises a private militia under the command of Clinton M. Tyler. The men in this militia will be volunteers, receiving no compensation, provided only with a blanket and a few food rations that will last barely half of the time they are in commission. These men will serve purely by conviction. Many will leave paying jobs, claims, and families behind, and will leave pieces of themselves in this barely dry town they've come to love and call home. They will be called Tyler's Rangers and they will be nearly forgotten.

Executive Department, Colorado Territory, United States of America.

To all unto whom these presents shall come, Greeting: Know ye that, reposing special confidence in the patriotism, integrity and ability of C. M. Tyler of Black Hawk C.T. & John Evans Governor of the Territory of Colorado, in pursuance of and by authority vested in me, do hereby appoint and commission him Captain of the 'Tyler Rangers' Colorado Volunteer Militia Cavalry. And I do authorize, empower, and require him to execute and fulfill the duties of the office, according to law; and to have and to hold said office, with all the rights, authorities, privileges and em-blem(?) thereunto appertaining, for and during two years. In testimony whereof, I have hereinto set my hand and caused to be affixed the Great Seal of the Territory. Done at Denver, this eigh-

teenth day of August in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-four. Jno.

*Evans.*²

Clinton M. Tyler will agree to it all, even though he has no military background. He is an investor, a businessman, but he has visions of a safe place to bring up his children. He has always been a dreamer, taking on partnerships in mines and sawmills throughout the mountains and gulches from Black Hawk to Nederland to Boulder and keeps two houses, one on Merchant St., Black Hawk, one on Pearl St., Boulder. Being captain of a volunteer militia is a way to try something new, show what he can do and that maybe he is more than a businessman and can protect his family just as well as any frontiersman. Tyler came to Black Hawk for the mining opportunities, but he finds more than he ever thought he would; he finds a chance to prove himself among men that don't blink at threats of attack, pushing into places of danger without a second thought.

John Atkins does the same. Only he doesn't come for the mining prospects; he comes for the building opportunities, bringing his family, wife, teenage sons, and young daughters with him. They come from Illinois by way of Denver, and in this new town, John's hands itch with the need for brick and two miles up Chase Gulch along a crystal spring-fed creek, he builds a brickyard. The stone building he erects is Arthurian and will be seen as magnificent, but he sees it as his workplace where he will teach his boys to press the clay, sand, and straw into the wooden mold and fire the bricks in the kiln. These bricks will make the main buildings of downtown and the walls of the Methodist church where John and his family will pray every Sunday morning.

² Italics directly quoted from original document.

John will be one of the first aldermen as Black Hawk enters town hood, setting standards that his two eldest sons will strive for throughout the course of their lives, while his third son will be broken by widowerhood, the fourth son a victim of the Spanish flu and the fifth will have feet that wander just enough to make his ventures fall short, failing to prosper. John takes his family into the company of people who will forever change the life of at least his second son, George, if not all five of his sons. He builds a brick house at the corner of Merchant and Horn, just a quarter mile from the governors, directly above the Methodist church, and across from the opening of Chase Gulch. The house is modest, but elegant, and there isn't another brick house in all of Black Hawk, though many of the board-and-batten houses boast more beauty and will be remembered longer.

In this prospering mining town George enters manhood. In the summer of 1864 he is eighteen and has become a skilled brick maker himself, no longer needing the supervising eye of his father. He moves in two circles, one of elite politicians such as Governor Evans and careful businessmen like Clinton M. Tyler, and one of young miners who gamble their pay on poker games and buy crackers and candy for girls they are trying to impress. George likes his life, the repetition of daily tasks interrupted by new faces as people come and go on promises of wealth, the smell of the kiln fire and clay that never seemed to leave his skin, and he doesn't believe he'll ever want something different. The rumors of Indian uprisings are distant in his mind and the mustering of volunteer rangers he gives barely a second thought until his brother, Jack, presses a flyer calling for volunteers into his hands saying, "We can finally do something for our country."

Chapter one:

From the sitting room of the brick house at 102 Horn St., George could stand at the window and look across the spire of the Methodist church into the gulch where the brickyard breathed. In the early morning minutes of August 19th he pressed his forehead on the window frame and stared into the predawn light. He could just make out the church spire and he fixed his eyes on it, thinking he'd say a prayer. "We can finally do something for our country," Jack had said when he'd pressed the flyer calling for volunteers to quell Indian uprisings into George's hand. Jack was eager to join the fighting and everyday brought news of another battle; the battle of the wilderness, of Port Walthall Junction, of Cold Harbor, of Fort Pillow, of Atlanta, the siege of Petersburg, the battle of Mobile Bay. With each one, George wondered if his childhood friends were there. Which side were they fighting on? Jack said they had cheated or been cheated of the chance to prove themselves, manhood, loyalty, living so far west of it all, but George wasn't so sure. The right and the wrong of it all, the urgency, blurred with distance. Who could say which side they'd have fought if they'd been there in the thick of things? Jack's certainty frightened George in a way he couldn't describe, almost as if he and Jack would have been on opposite sides.

This was different though, a different kind of fight. They'd fight savages, at least that's what the papers said. He'd heard the stories of mutilated families, read the accounts of the Hungate massacre that had flooded through the papers all summer, his stomach clenching. This would be what the rangers would put an end to, the recruiting poster promised. Volunteering he'd be protecting his loved ones, the new life they'd made. He could see a purpose, to keep those he loved from harm, and yes, maybe he could prove to his father he was every bit a man as Jack. He

could be strong and do what had to be done and here was a chance to prove that. He'd take it. The house behind him was quiet, peaceful, and blissfully unaware of the decision George had made.

The town clock began to strike the hour and George counted each chime, "One, two, three, four, five," in a voice just below a whisper and as the last chime echoed down the canyon he whispered, "In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."

"I'm here to volunteer," George told Clinton Tyler later that morning in front of the Methodist church.

"You understand there is no compensation?" Tyler asked and George nodded. Tyler passed him a piece of paper. "Make your mark," Tyler said.

Holding the paper in his hands made George's heart pick up tempo and for a moment he just stared at it, the words bleary and blotted as though the ink used had been lumpy and cold. The words cleared and George read, "I hereby swear to uphold the office of a private in the Colorado volunteer militia known as Tyler's Rangers for a total of 100 days, during which I will act to protect and serve The United States of America and the Territory of Colorado, under the command of captain Clinton M. Tyler."

Under these words scrawled a dozen or so names, most of which George knew and under the last name there, *James Dobbs*, he signed, *Geo. W. Atkins*.

"Glad to have you," Tyler said, gripping George's hand.

"Thank you," George said, unsure if that was the appropriate response and before Tyler could engage him in any conversation he ducked away and walked up the street his body feeling

strangely light, while his heart felt like it had dropped to the bottom of his stomach, leaden. His body had somehow separated in two and half of him watched while the other half felt.

The sun came out from behind the final misty clouds and brightened the streets of Black Hawk, while a pod of girls in bright calico came onto the street from Rhoads' Cracker Bakery and their laughter stopped George's steps. A sudden sensation of relief slid over him. At least he wouldn't have to say goodbye to any sweetheart, grateful that he hadn't asked Rosie McEllen to walk out with him. He'd thought about it often enough, almost asked a time or two, but something had always stayed him, as if he knew somehow he would be leaving Black Hawk.

Rosie broke away from the other girls and came towards George, smiling. George wanted to back away, run, he'd stood too long and now he'd have to talk to her. He forced a smile, "Miss McEllen, how are you?"

"Well, thank you," Rosie answered. "Do you have the day off?"

"No, just a lunch break," George answered. "I should be heading back now." He made as if to turn, but he waited, not wanting to be rude.

"Go," Rosie said. She smiled and George thought he caught some wistfulness in the smile.

"I joined the new rangers," he said, "the ones Tyler is leading."

Rosie nodded. "I knew you would," she said.

"I didn't," George said. It felt good admitting it, admitting that he almost hadn't joined and with the admission came the realization that he really was going to leave this place, that he really was a ranger now.

“What man wouldn’t? How else will the Indians know they cannot get away with massacre?” The color rose in Rosie’s cheeks when George didn’t answer. “My apologies. I’m afraid I crossed a line,” she said.

George shook his head, but still didn’t respond to her questions, instead he changed the subject, wanting to hold onto the illusion that he wasn’t going into battle anytime soon. “Do you want some taffy?” George asked.

“I’d love some,” Rosie said, taking his offered arm.

They walked back up the street without speaking. Swallows, glinting in the sun and flashing near-fluorescent teal on their shoulders, darted between the buildings and swooped to overhanging rocks on the canyon walls where they plastered their mud nests. In spring their white chests gleamed with newness, like the first snowfall, but now their feathers had dulled to an off-white that made George think of a handkerchief used too long. As he watched the swallows, with the warmth of Rosie’s arm on his, he could almost forget he was leaving and that he had to somehow break this news to his family, to Sarah. But in the back of his mind Rosie’s convictions floated, persistent and waiting for answers.

George didn’t remember much about his mother, but sometimes he could feel her. A warmth and softness like a wool blanket tucked up under his chin, a voice singing lullabies without any words, and glimpses of satin strands of blonde, or taffy brown, or maybe the color of cherry wood. Sometimes he thought he remembered bursting into giggles as the hair brushed across his face; that was all. George, though, did remember Sarah coming. She came when George was five and fit into the household like a foot into a warm slipper.

At seven George understood that Sarah was his stepmother; that his father had married her after his real mother died. “Do you love Father?” he asked.

She ruffled his hair and laughed. “Of course.”

“As much as my mother did?”

Sarah’s eyes went soft, their brownness deepening. She handed him a cookie rich in raisins and nuts. “Your mother was a special woman,” she said.

George bit into the chewy sweetness.

“I was just a girl when she was alive, so I didn’t know her well.” She paused, listening to hoofbeats in the yard, then nodded slightly, confirming she recognized them. “But I knew she was a special woman. You didn’t have to know her well to know that. She loved you all.”

George finished his cookie as Sarah stepped to the window and pressed her hands on the sill. “But yes,” she said, “I love you father as much as I’m able.” Her voice became quieter and when she looked back at George her face was flushed. “Now,” she said, “how about you going to fetch some water so I can get dinner going?”

Now, eleven years later, George stood in the doorway of the kitchen watching Sarah mix biscuits. Her hair, starting to gray around the edges, framed her sharp cheekbones and the veins on her hands were more visible then they were when she married his father. George tried to remember what his mother looked like, but standing there watching Sarah he realized that she really was his mother. The woman who gave birth to him was just a soft feeling in the back of his mind.

“Sarah?”

She looked up and smiled. “Georgie boy, stick another log in the stove will you?”

“Mmhhh.” He pushed a log into the flames and watched it catch fire.

“Something on your mind?” Sarah dropped sticky lumps of biscuit dough into a cast iron pan. The dough sizzled when it hit the hot melted butter.

George poked the fire. “I’ve joined Tyler’s campaign.”

Sarah paused, her hands above the bowl, dough sticking to them. “Your brother put you up to this?” she asked.

“No, no, maybe, I don’t know,” George said. He stood and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Only, I thought maybe it’d be something, something I could do for once.”

The fire cracked. Sarah dropped the rest of the dough into the pan, then slid the pan into the oven. She scraped the dough from her hands, cupped them around her mouth and called through the open door, “Skip.” The white and brown dog bolted across the barnyard to her. She dumped the biscuit scrapings on the doorstep and watched him lick them up.

“I can’t tell you not to go,” she said, “but I wish you wouldn’t.” The cast iron clattered as she shoved it into the oven. “War doesn’t make a man, kindness does.”

George saddled his lanky gelding the next day, tying his bedroll atop his saddlebag. He tried not to think about when he would ever be standing in this barnyard again. Beside him, Jack saddled his own horse, pulling the cinch sharply tight.

Sarah tucked biscuit and jam sandwiches, made with the last of last year’s chokecherry jam, into their saddlebags as they said their goodbyes. Their father, John, shook first Jack’s hand, then George’s. “Take care of yourselves,” he said gruffly. George caught his eyes and saw them

moisten. He looked away before a tear could drop, hugging Sarah and hugging his young sisters and brothers, wishing for time to pause and stay in their warm arms for just a moment longer.

“We should go,” Jack said, already settled in his saddle.

George looked back just before the farmstead passed from sight and saw his sister, Aurora, still waving, her hair bright red in the sun.

They rode the mail routes through the remaining summer and into fall, scouting the South Platte, to discourage Indian uprisings. They patrolled Bijou Creek, camping at Douglas Ranch, then on to Godfrey’s, following the Platte River Road into O’Fallon’s Bluffs. For weeks Indians were only seen in the distance and at times George wondered if he was doing something or if he was just avoiding the real conflicts of the country. Were they fighting for the Union or the Confederates in their chase of Indians through an unaligned territory? He liked the evenings and the mornings though, when things were still except for fires snapping and smoke rising. He’d sit and watch the sun set or rise, sipping on bitter coffee that tasted more like dirt than anything else. On one of those quiet mornings he met Jimmy Dobbs, finding in him a friend who could raise the spirits of the lowest man. Jimmy was as steadfast in his convictions as a compass pointing north and his north was decidedly a girl named Lizzie.

Jimmy never seemed to worry. He took everything as it came, declaring what man wouldn’t fight for security and that each day brought him one step closer to Lizzie. “She’s a peach,” he said grinning.

“She’ll really wait for you?” George asked, thinking that the uncertainty of their lives could barely warrant asking a girl to wait, the wait indefinite. What girl would agree to that?

“Yep. See men leave, women stay, and if no one ever waited our race woulda died out a long time ago,” Jimmy said.

He had a point, but George was glad all he had left behind were Sarah and sisters and that was hard enough. If he’d had a girl, he never would have left. Unbidden, Rosie came to his mind and the walk they’d taken after he’d signed up and for a moment he could still feel the warmth of her arm, the way her questions had struck him silent. He brushed the memory away.

“When this campaign is over, we’re gonna get married,” Jimmy continued.

“Thought you hadn’t asked her?” George said.

“Near enough have, she’s waiting for me, ain’t she?” Jimmy laughed and swigged coffee. “That stuff is the devil. I figure I’ll build us a little place out back of the smithy, she can keep up her seam-stressing and I can work with my daddy. She gave me this watch.” Jimmy snapped open his silver pocket watch and showed it to George. He had already shown it, but George didn’t mind. There was something strangely soothing about the way Jimmy rattled on about Lizzie, saying the same things he said the day before and the day before that. It made George believe that they would all make it back without even a tale of a skirmish to tell, that the campaign would stay peaceful and bloodless.

At night Jimmy liked to tell tales of places he’d heard about and he’d get as caught up in these tellings as he did when he talked of Lizzie. Sometimes the tales were so elaborate, that George knew Jimmy had to be exaggerating, but sometimes the tales sounded as real as the ground they sat on.

George pulled a blanket around his shoulders to keep the wind from getting through to him. “Feels like snow,” he said. The other men around the fire didn’t answer, not even Jack, but George knew they felt it too. Jimmy came to the fire and hunkered beside George.

“Quiet ‘round here,” Jimmy said, then barely pausing for a breath, “heard of this place down south, that looks to be ruins of a city.”

Jack, ever the cynic, shook his head. “Couldn’t be a place like that,” he said. Jack never believed tales that bended toward magical. Hard facts, unembellished, he believed. George remembered even as children Jack questioning tales told at the hearth. If the teller hadn’t seen it, it couldn’t be true. This never seemed to bother Jimmy. He skipped over Jack’s comments as if they were merely pebbles in the road.

Jimmy raised his eyebrows. “They say there’s walls and rooms, several storied houses, all linked together, regular cities built of masoned stone. The city is built along cliffs, built into cliffs, built on cliffs, some buildings suspended above a canyon. They figure thousands of people lived there once.”

Jack laughed, disbelief hanging on the edges of the sound. The fire crackled, sending sparks into the cold, dark sky. “You’re full of beans, Jimmy,” he said.

“It’s the truth!” Jimmy insisted. “What you think, George?”

George took a slow, steady sip of coffee. It was hot, too hot for drinking really, and tasted of old socks and bacon grease. “Can’t say I’ve heard of this place,” he said, “but don’t see why it can’t be true.”

“There you go, Jack.” Jimmy looked pleased. For a moment there was silence as though their conversation had ended. Their breath formed clouds of steam in front of them even with the warmth of the fire.

“But he ain’t heard of it ‘cept from you, same as me,” Jack said after a while.

“It’s true though. The army has a map, some general mapped it. Some of the houses were circular, the doors low and arched, all seeming to face in the same direction. There must have been a reason for that. Maybe it was to let the light in.” He rubbed his hands together over the fire. His grey wool gloves were worn, his fingers showing through the fraying yarn. “Do you suppose it was some kind of ritual, or way to pray? Maybe they knelt there in their doorways, ya know, like we do at an altar.” Jimmy’s imagination took root and grew. “Suppose the people were like us? Suppose they worshiped, watched sunrises, warmed themselves by a fire.” Jimmy poked the fire with a stick, drawing in the ashes. “What ya s’pose happened? Why ain’t they still there? Where’d they go?” He mused, his voice sounding almost lazy.

Jack grinned at George across the fire. “He sure is full of questions. How’d he get in this campaign with a mind like that?”

George laughed. “Guess it takes all kinds,” he said, trying to make light of it, but wanting to hear more, wondering where this place was, if there really was such a place. Those who’d lived there, would they have been ancestors of the Indians the rangers sought?

“Just think about it a minute,” Jimmy said. “Shucks, if I had spent the time and energy to build a city of masoned stone, I’d sure as hell stick around. By gum I would. The rest of the world ain’t much to see, least it ain’t what it’s made out to be. I say if you take the trouble to

build a home, you better stick it out 'cause you never know when you'll get a chance to build another one."

Jack and George were silent. Something floated in George's coffee cup, a leaf maybe, or a fly. He watched the object spin in the hot liquid. Maybe the people had been forced out of their stone houses, set adrift on the prairies like the Irish that came in desperation to Black Hawk. The fire cracked, a burst of sparks flew up. One landed on George's knee, burning a small hole in the coarse blue fabric of his uniform. He extinguished it with his fist, leaving yet another black smudge. Jack turned a glowing ember to black nothingness beneath his boot heel. He cleared his throat loudly. George glanced to see Jimmy staring into the fire, his face sheened with dancing colors of orange and red firelight. George felt a strange catch in his throat, as though somehow the colors dancing across Jimmy's face were a prophecy.

"Just think if there was such a place," Jimmy said, "a place built hundreds of years ago, by unknown people, built from stones they shaped, tall walls rising into vast sky, rising too high, impossible height, room after room, wouldn't you want to see it?"

As August drifted by, the company of rangers split in two, half staying at the base camp, while the other half rode down river. George and Jimmy were assigned to ride, Jack stayed at camp. The bushes along the river were just turning orange, a burnt orange as if they had been scorched. The river ran clear and cold, autumn-like and George thought of times he and his brothers stood calf-deep in water tossing lines into the current, waiting for a fish to strike. "We used to fish on days like these," he said.

"Catch much?" Jimmy asked.

“Sometimes,” George shrugged.

Jimmy smiled and George knew that Jimmy knew it wasn't always about the fish caught. Halfway into the first day they came upon a trail of hoof prints, half-moon scuffs in the dirt showing the horses moving at a trot.

“Unshod,” Robert Denton said, but he may as well have said “Indians.” George understood and he side-glanced at Jimmy and from Jimmy's wide, furtive glance back George knew Jimmy did too. George wished they hadn't found the tracks, but then as the company picked up pace and his horse lengthened strides beneath him, he got caught in the exhilaration of movement, his spirits lifting. Strange how the strides of a lope could make things different.

The company rounded a corner and were able to look down into the river drainage. Yellowing willows lined the bank and a dozen Shoshone watered their small, short-backed mustangs at the rushing edge. The Indians relaxed astride their ponies, their backs bare and tanned, ribbed in muscles, and their hair thicker and glossier than George had ever seen. One Indian placed a hand on his pony's rump and leaned back, scanning the sky, a familiar gesture of checking the weather or hawks or just simple enjoyment. The ponies drank, then lifted their heads, shaking their manes. Drops of water sparkled on their coats, on the painted yellow and black stripes and circles over their rumps. George wondered what the markings meant, but the thought was fleeting, driven away by the rangers drawing arms and the whooping of the Indians, driving their ponies across the river in sudden awareness of the rangers present.

The ponies' strides strong and light, in a kind of athleticism that could only come from being raised on the rough terrain of sagebrush prairie. The rangers spurred their own horses into pursuit, George among them, caught again by the exhilaration of speed. The rangers rode thor-

oughbreds, horses of war, horses with long legs and long backs, bred for speed. George gave his mount his head and leaned over the whipping mane. He imagined outrunning them all, the long strides of his thoroughbred pulling him across the land and outstripping each Indian pony and leaving them all to breathe in the dust and sage in his wake. Water rose in clouds of droplets around them, drenching the horses' legs, chests, and sides, and soaking the rangers' pants until they clung tightly. They followed the Indians up a brushy hillside, curving around protruding rocks, the Indians fixed upon the bare-backs of their ponies as if they'd grown there, leaning into each turn with the fluidity of water. The ranger's horses began to breathe sharply, but they kept going, cresting the ridge and dropping down the other side, the Indians already at the bottom. George felt his horse sink onto his haunches, digging his hooves deep into the dirt for stability. George urged him on, wanting to see the astonishment on everyone's faces when he won this race.

The horse in front of George slipped in the loose soil and stumbled so that George was forced to pull his own horse up. Lance, the ranger riding the stumbling horse, shortened his reins, trying to enforce balance on his mount, but it only threw it off-balance more. Its back legs tucked sideways and then it went down on its knees, jerking to a stop so suddenly that Lance was thrown from the saddle, but Lance's foot caught in the stirrup, so when the horse rolled it took Lance with him. Horse and ranger hit the bottom of the hill with a thump and a whoosh of air expelled from both set of lungs. The horse thrashed, cutting at the brush with its hooves, and Lance tried to roll away, groaning.

George jumped from his horse, race forgotten in the urgency of a horse in trouble, and grabbed the bridle of the thrashing horse. "Shhh, shhh," George said, reaching to cover the

horse's eyes. In the darkness behind George's hands, the horse calmed and Jimmy was able to get close enough to pull the cinch loose, letting the saddle slip off and releasing the horse from its binding situation. George took his hands away from the horse's eyes and let the horse get to its feet. By then Robert Denton had turned back, along with the rest of the rangers, the Indians disappearing on down the gulch. George couldn't see who, but one of the rangers fired a single shot after the dust kicked by the Indian ponies as if to say, "we could still come after you."

George held Lance's horse, letting the animal shake off the impact of the fall, before catching his own mount who had come to a halt at a thick bunch of grass. He tied the two horses to a scrubby pine and went back to where Lance sat. Robert slid the saddle away, taking care to not pull on Lance's leg. George took the saddle from Robert, as Jimmy hunkered beside Lance. "Do you think you can stand?" Jimmy asked.

Lance shook his head, but then said, "I could try."

Jimmy took one of Lance's arms and Robert took the other and they helped Lance to his feet. Lance cried out.

"You're not going anywhere," Robert said. Robert was brusque and efficient, giving orders to make camp, hobble the horses close, start a fire, make an inventory of supplies so that in the morning he could discern what the next step for the company would be. The exhilaration of the chase drained from George and left him feeling tired, hollow even, but in the way of one now used to soldier duties he set about making camp with the others. Everyone moved separately, and yet together, subconsciously aware that everything they did was for the good of the company and no single man alone.

Around the fire that night, Jimmy offered Lance his blanket. "Don't want you catching a chill on top of this," Jimmy said.

Lance nodded his gratitude and closed his eyes.

Morning came with an explosion of sparrow song and Lance no better. The fire had nearly gone out and George shivered as he shifted his rifle in his lap. Glancing around the camp, he saw others stirring and soon the camp was as alive as the sparrows fluttering in the bushes. George left his post and gathered an armload of sticks. He blew the coals of the fire back to life. Jimmy came back from filling canteens at the river and put a pot of the water over the flames.

Over a breakfast of coffee and cornmeal mush, Robert laid out the plan. "We'll split into two parties," he explained. "Half will stay here, while the other half will go for help. If we can get a wagon in here, we should be able to get Lance out." Robert swirled his coffee and took a gulp. "There are only enough provisions for two days, so those of you staying must ration them carefully, and those of us going will only take enough to get through the day. We should make it back to basecamp in two or three days and hopefully will come across another camp before then."

George watched the group of rangers ride away, wondering how long it would be before he saw them riding back.

"There they go and here we stay," Jimmy said, then he laughed. "Who's in charge here now?" No one answered his question, but it wasn't really a question to be answered. The hierarchy would sort itself out by the end of the day.

By afternoon, the camp had settled into quietness, almost a laziness. The soft air of fall moved through the camp. It crept across George's skin as he cleaned his rifle and gave him goosebumps, not because of being cold though. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was like an allusive memory that left your hair on end as it slipped away before you grasped the fullness of it.

A ranger at the edge of camp jumped to sudden attention, and the rest of the camp followed, as a man on a large sorrel horse came into view. The man brought his horse to a halt and pulled a white kerchief from his pocket. The rangers lowered their rifles and the man introduced himself as an Indian agent coming from Fort Laramie.

"You following those Shoshone heading down river?" The agent asked.

"We were," Jimmy said, going on to explain how Lance's horse had fallen and the rest of the detachment had gone to get a wagon to get him back to basecamp.

"They're friendly Indians," the agent said. "They stole five of my horses a few days ago. They're friendly."

"Stealing is a sign of friendliness?" George couldn't help asking.

"Yes." The agent dismounted without further explaining how Indians could be friendly and thieves at the same time. It was one of those frontier rules that was never explained and only made sense to a select few. The agent went on to inquire what the rangers trouble was, and someone began to fill him in on the situation, but George was too caught up in the unexplained laws of horse stealing to hear the discussion. If stealing was friendly, how were they supposed to know which Indians were the savages they were mustered to quell and which ones weren't? He

remembered the way the one Indian had leaned back to scan the sky. A gesture as friendly as a smile or a handshake between old acquaintances.

“Tether my horse?” the agent said, putting the reins into George’s hand. George nodded, as the agent slapped dust from his hands and said brusquely, “Let’s see what I can do to help you get to basecamp.”

Three weeks later an account of the accident appeared in *The Daily Mining Journal*. “Doodles” wrote in extensive detail, and poked fun at the “real militia,” but his accounts were truthful and aimed to give those at home a taste of life as a ranger.

*This will give you some idea of the extent of our scouting, and the severity of the duties which our boys cheerfully perform in their desire to open this road for traffic, and to avenge the atrocities committed by the red-skins. The man (Lance) who was hurt is rapidly recovering. He received no injury except the shock and will be in the saddle again in a few days...The road is now perfectly safe and you may rely upon our keeping it so. If confidence could only be restored, there is no reason why mails and freight should not at once come through by the Omaha route. It appears to us with proper representations this might be done. There are at present no trains on the road. There is one camped at Cottonwood, and that starts for Denver, to-day.*³

³ Italics directly quoted from *Daily Mining Journal*, Black Hawk City, Gilpin County, Colorado, Tuesday, 27 September, 1864.

At the beginning of November the rangers were issued new horses. George's mount was a rangy black gelding with a scar down his right hind leg. "Honest eyes though," George said, "call him Abe."

"Hey, boys, better write the president, he's got an ugly beast as a namesake," Jimmy said.

George stroked the gelding's nose. "Pay him no mind," he said. He fed Abe the soft center of his piece of cornbread. The gelding worked it with his lips, crumbs dropping into the dirt.

"Mount up!" Tyler cried down the line of rangers. "We've got a long ride."

The rangers mounted and spurred their horses east at an even trot. Abe had an easy gate, despite his rangy appearance and George settled into it, knowing he could ride it for a long time.

"Where are we heading?" George asked Jimmy who rode beside him.

"No idea," Jimmy said, "feels good to be going somewhere though."

For the past two weeks they had been stationed at a fort on the west edge of Colorado territory. There had been rumors of Sioux warriors terrorizing settlers, but the whole time the rangers were stationed there they didn't see a single Indian. Captain Tyler sent them out in pairs to scout the area everyday to no avail. The Indians had disappeared in the sagebrush and now the rangers were riding east again. George could only assume that rumors had started in another place and it did feel good to actually be going somewhere.

Chapter two:

“To Sand Creek!” Chivington cried into the frosty pre-dawn outside the walls of Fort Lyons. His mustache twitched, ice visible on the edges of it, his sword drawn and extended in front of him. He spurred his horse forward and his cavalry, the bloodless 3rd, fell in behind him. The cavalry horses pushed against each other. Snorts and whinnies filled the air and then the pushing, the impatience, the noises stopped as the soldiers fell into place.

George felt uneasy as his company fell into line. The rangers were supposed to receive their discharges upon arrival at Fort Lyons, but instead had been greeted by Colonel Chivington, a zealous Methodist preacher who had taken a forceful command of the Fort. His men, too, were about to be discharged and hadn't seen any action. They were restless and tired of being mocked as useless. Chivington knew where the Cheyenne were camped along Sand Creek. “Indians,” he said, “who are leaders of the dog soldiers.” With his sword drawn, he'd asked Captain Tyler to join his march on the camp, bring the Indians to justice, and Tyler had complied. George wondered if Tyler had agreed out of fear of the Colonel or out of conviction that the Indian camp was hostile. If Chivington would draw a sword on a fellow soldier, what did he have in mind for the Indians? What were these Indians supposed to have done and didn't justice mean a fair and unbiased trial? He had a feeling this was not what Chivington had in mind.

George's horse bumped against his brother's. Black against grey, black into grey, then just black. His horse matched pace with those around him. A bitter taste, like the green chokecherries he had eaten as a boy on a dare, settled on George's tongue. He felt as though he were carrying out a dare now, remembering the round, smooth cheeks of his brother when they were boys. He glanced at Jack's face and thought he saw that boy's face in the windburned skin.

“Young soldiers make good soldiers,” George remembered his father saying once. “Or scared ones,” Sarah had answered.

“Hey George,” Jimmy rode up beside him. He grinned, easy as always, childhood still marking his eyes and lips. “Think we’ll live through this?”

George shrugged, “I guess.” He tried to sound at ease, but he heard someone mutter, “I don’t like this,” and the uneasiness persisted, like a cough.

“When we get back I’m gonna take me a nice hot bath,” Jimmy said, “and then I’m gonna walk down the street and ask my Lizzie to marry me.”

“Hope she don’t turn you down,” George said, concentrating hard on being cheerful. “Good thing you’re taking a bath before and not after.”

Jimmy laughed. “Christ it’s cold! I think my fingers dropped off miles ago and my feet certainly haven’t been around the past couple of days.”

“Quiet in the ranks!” Tyler barked.

Jimmy fell silent after one last grin at George. George managed a smile back, but he didn’t feel like smiling, the chance of seeing real action too present in his mind. He’d been glad of the prospect of discharge and returning home, with just tales of chases through sagebrush and rocky gullies, skirmishes where the worst injuries were sprains and scrapes. The rangers had been a presence on the roads and he believed they’d established safe routes for travelers. There had been a sense of accomplishment, but now, everything felt upside down and no one seemed to understand where they were going and why.

The morning faded into a grey afternoon and any gaiety that had existed in the men was smothered by the flurries and drifting snow. George tried to blow warmth into his fingers, but even his breath was made cold by the winter wind. He scanned the company. Everyone stared ahead, as though they were afraid to look at each other. George saw Lieutenant Silas Soule riding steadily on the edge of his company, but something about the slope of his shoulders made George question the Lieutenant's surety, especially after the exchange he had heard the night before.

"They're peaceable," Soule had said.

"There's no such thing as a peaceable Indian," Chivington answered.

"Sand Creek camp is and you know it!" Soule insisted. "They don't want trouble."

"You just don't have the stomach for the army." Chivington spat into the dirty snow.

Now, Soule slowed his horse and said something to Tyler. Tyler nodded. They rode together, their horses matching pace. George watched them. What were they discussing? What mission were they really riding out to execute? Soule glanced back at the company, his eyes clear and sad as they scanned the ranks of soldiers and rangers. George followed his glance, and saw everyone's shoulders hunched against the wind, their eyes cast downward.

As the cold seeped into George's body, any accomplishment he had felt fell away, leaving him with nothing but questions of what he was doing. What was the point? What were they really out here to do? Why did he enlist? How could he really be certain which Indians were capable of the savagery, had committed the savagery he had volunteered to protect against? Sarah had asked him if it was because of Jack and then he hadn't been sure, but now he knew that Jack was part of it. He hadn't wanted Jack to be the only one doing something for the country, the only one proving he was something, and he hadn't wanted Jack to go alone. Somehow it was better that

two went instead of one, as if it doubled the chance of them coming back. If he could do things over he would join up again, still he would have given anything to turn Abe around and head home.

The snow come up higher on his black mount's chest. How far they were riding? How far could the horses go in this snow? His toes were numb from cold as his boots filled with snow. His eyes stung and as he blinked the ice from them, a mirage of home floated in front of him. He wanted to touch it, and his body ached. Jimmy shoved a flask into his hand. "This'll warm you up," he said. The whiskey burned and the sun sank lower, but still they pressed on.

The horses were tired. The men were tired. No one talked. No one whispered. The only sound was the breeze in their ears and the strained breathing of their horses. It was a quiet, like the quiet right before the sun breaks the horizon. George felt it, heard it, and tasted it. He remembered Jimmy's face a-sheen with firelight. "Brick walls into the sky." A prophecy or maybe just an odd feeling to be discarded, forgotten. His horse snapped a twig in the snow, dull to his ears, but loud in the deafening silence. He tasted bitter on his tongue.

They rode up a hill into copses of young bare-branched cottonwoods. Commanded to halt, they waited uneasily for the next command. The ground in front of them sloped gently, then steeply to a winding creek bed. Tepees dotted the bank, amongst brown peach-leaf willows, and desiccating saltbush stalks. The sun gone from the sky and they waited. Soule's horse stamped. Soule looked grim and old. George shifted in his saddle. Adventure traded for fear. Fear a bitter, friendless companion. He looked at Jimmy. Jimmy stared into the village below them, no emotion breaking the surface. They waited and watched until the sun came to the eastern horizon.

Chivington raised his hand. His men snapped to attention. Tyler and Soule didn't make a move. The rangers shifted, confused. George and Jimmy exchanged glances, Jimmy's hands placed in readiness to urge his horse directly into a gallop as soon as Tyler gave the signal. The camp remained quiet, except for thin threads of smoke escaping through the tops of teepees, signaling the start of morning fires. George imagined kettles of water being hung over the flames, hands being held to the warmth.

Chivington dropped his hand. "Charge!" he shouted, "Don't leave anyone alive!" He spurred his horse hard in the ribs. The horse plunged down the slope. Chivington's men careened after him, both horseback and on foot. Blue coats littered the snow splashed ground as soldiers stripped them off to lighten their load. Battle cries filled the air. Soule's men moved forward in the rush and confusion. "Halt, Company, halt!" Soule screamed, his face red, his arm high in the air. His men hesitated. Most stopped, but a few went on by, following Chivington's company, too caught up in the cries to hear their commander.

Beside Soule's company, Tyler held his rangers at a halt. A gunshot sounded. One single shot searing through all thoughts, all cries. George's ears exploded. He covered his head. Vaguely he heard Tyler shout, "We have to stop him!" The rangers moved, racing down the hill. Shots splattered the ground. Soldier's battle cries. Screams. They were almost there, the rangers. Tyler swept around the corner of Chivington's company. He turned his horse into the oncoming fray of soldiers. The rangers followed him, hesitation gone. All they knew was to mirror their leader. Side by side, George and Jimmy turned their horses into the wave of the 3rd cavalry.

The oncoming soldiers didn't stop. They continued their charge into the village. Tyler stood in his stirrups, both arms in the air, high above his head. His commands to halt went un-

heard in the clanging din of shots and horses' hooves. Fires had started in the village, flames licking at tepee walls, tepees bursting in sprays of sparks and leaping flames. The village was fire-light and into that light the soldiers streamed. The pounding of horse hooves reverberated in George's ears, until all he wanted to do was let his horse run and he did. Dropping the reins on Abe's neck he allowed the gelding to turn with the flow on his own accord. George felt warmed by Abe's long strides striking the ground. Maybe he could get ahead of the other soldiers, somehow turn the tide if he just rode fast enough. He saw Jimmy still beside him and for a moment their eyes locked. George thought to tell him they should turn back and turn back others with them, but another soldier came between them and Jimmy disappeared in the swirl. The village came closer, blurred by speed, but he made out a woman with a child clutched in her arms running between two burning teepees and a man with long grey braids standing as though lost while soldiers rushed in. This was no warrior encampment. George's eyes stung from the smoke and speed and he reached down the reins close to his horse's bit to pull the black gelding around.

Before he could change directions, George's horse fell, first forward, then to the side, sending George out of the saddle. Hitting the ground, he lay still, his breath gone. Abe's large black side heaved once and watching the final breath leave his horse, George felt cold once again. His mind cleared, knowing his horse had been shot, and he pushed himself up to see where he was, finding himself on the edge of the village. Flames danced and hooves churned around him. He crawled to his horse. His chapped hands cracked open leaving blood on the snow behind him. He huddled against his dead horse, feeling the last of Abe's body warmth. Abe's eyes stared, large and dark, into a sky grey with dawn and George desperately tried to close the eyelids over their blankness. They wouldn't stay closed and he turned away, pulling his pistol

from his holster as if doing so would remedy it. Anger rushed over him and he pulled the trigger, sending a shot aimlessly across the prairie.

Tyler shouted, he bellowed to his men, “Retreat to the ridge! Rangers retreat! Retreat to the ridge!”

To George his voice seemed far away, almost out of a dream. “Retreat!” The word hit him again and he turned to scramble up the slope, which his horse had come down so easily. A Cheyenne, a boy no older than himself, faced him. The Cheyenne held a long knife, poised to strike. George leveled his pistol. The Cheyenne boy stared, coolly, unblinking back at him, his eyes as deep and unfearing as Abe’s had been. Minutes seemed to go by, hours even as the two stared each other down. The boy yelled, leaping forward and George pulled the trigger, but his hand shook and he missed his mark. The boy’s knife grazed George’s arm as the boy fell to his knees, George’s bullet having passed through his hand. The smell of crushed silver sagebrush potent and the sound of small arms fire rang in George’s ears. He could taste the violence. Fear was better. He could like fear. He stumbled forward, back up the slope, alongside other rangers obeying the call to retreat. Most on foot, a few still in the saddle. George saw the light tail of Jack’s horse go by. He reached for it and fell to his knees, his fingers brushing the end of the white, his hand plunging against the frozen ground, bleeding again, leaking a color like embers. George pushed himself up and scrambled on.

They made the ridge. “I should never have tried,” Tyler said. No one answered him. George’s eyes mortared to the scene in front of him. Blood froze on his arm and he scanned for the Indian. He shouldn’t have missed, no, he shouldn’t have shot. Cavalry horses ran, crashing through tepees and fire rings. Fire engulfed all in its path. A girl stumbled, fell and was still.

Braves fell fighting. Red. Fire red. Blood red. A soldier slid from his horse. A pile of blue among crumpled brown that almost disappeared in the ground. Back to the earth. Full circle. Orange. Sunrise orange. Fire orange. An American flag, a white flag, snapping in the breeze in the middle of it all and they still fell, the soldiers giving no heed to either flag.

George felt as though he was watching from another world, another time and there was no fear, no sadness, no anger, just nothingness. He couldn't turn away, couldn't speak, couldn't think. He stood and watched as though it had nothing to do with him, but an immense guilt fell as if to smother him. He didn't look when Jack came to stand beside him. The fire continued and the sun broke bright over the horizon.

Wearily the rangers made camp. It was early, only just after two. George watched Tyler pitch his tent with a force only anger could bring. Three rangers were dead. They had buried their bodies on the ridge. Those who were wounded bandaged their own wounds. George wrapped his bleeding hands in strips torn from his blanket. Jack offered to help, but George didn't respond, intent on his own hands. He heard conversations around him as if through a rock wall, muffled and hard to understand.

"Captain Tyler?" a skinny ranger by the name of Thomas Young said.

"Yes, Young?"

"All men are accounted for except Jimmy Dobbs," Young told him. "He's missing."

Tyler's shoulders sagged. "Thank you, Young."

When George heard Jimmy's name, words around him became clearer. He stood still. Again the scene of Jimmy at the fire, flashed through his mind. The flames were the same as the flames that ate the tepees.

"George?" Jack looked closely at his brother. "You okay?"

George nodded and bent to tie a tent rope to a stake. It was Jack's tent, his own still down on the hillside, tied to the saddle on his dead black horse. He thought about Abe. He had liked him, an honest horse. He shivered and finally looked at his brother. Jack's shoulders were hunched. Jack met his brother's eyes. Neither one was all right. They saw it in each other and in their minds acknowledged it, but they didn't say anything. Words of comfort would be too empty, because they had no comfort to give.

George watched Tyler move restlessly around camp. He wondered if Tyler was thinking about Jimmy. Where was Jimmy if he was still alive? He stared at the campfire. The flames danced and parted like curtains on a stage. Blood and fire became one. Tepees glowed and people ran. Families just like the families the soldiers came from. They fell, tripping against the embers and lying still. Had the young Indian with the collected gaze found his way out of the chaos? Surely he had, he had to have. George kept thinking of how his father taught him to never leave an animal wounded and here he'd left a man.

A pot of beans on the campfire boiled over. The juice hissed and sputtered against the heat like rattles of a snake. George moved it in a painful, slow gesture, then scooped a spoon of beans onto a blue tin plate. Some of the beans clanked on the metal, not quite cooked, but George didn't care. He handed a plate to his brother. They ate. Rangers around them ate as well, consuming a meal of undercooked beans and stale hardtack. George wasn't hungry, probably none of

them were, but eating was a routine they knew, so they did it, weighting their already weighted stomachs.

Young lost his dinner as soon as he had eaten it. George handed him an under-brewed cup of coffee. Young drank and lost it. He crawled into his tent, not bothering to wipe the drool from his beard and lips.

The sound of a single horse walking into camp alerted George, and he saw Jack's hand go to his side. George brightened a little as he recognized Jimmy, and moved with the other rangers to greet him, plates left forgotten by the fire, spilling their contents onto the frozen ground.

Jimmy slipped from his horse. He had a gash above his right eye. Blood, like firelight, washed down his cheek. His eyes swept over his fellow rangers, seemingly unseeing, not even pausing on George. He undid the cinch and pulled the saddle from his battered mount. The horse wandered toward the few other horses tethered to a high-line. George wanted to say something, but words disappeared from his mind like smoke into the night sky. Jimmy said, "I killed a baby," his voice quiet and loud all at once. He let his saddle drop to the ground and stood, hands limp at his sides. His eyes stared, wide open like a dead man's. He dropped to the ground and hunched against his saddle. George stood, unable to move and no one else moved either. The night was so quiet that George thought he could hear their hearts all beating slowly like a funeral procession. Someone finally moved and went to tell Tyler.

Jimmy rocked slightly back and forth. "He was so small, only this big." He held his hands about a foot apart. "So small."

Someone, George wasn't sure who, draped a grey army wool blanket across Jimmy's shoulders and said, "Take it easy, Jimmy."

Jack offered him some whiskey. Jimmy didn't seem to notice. "He was a pretty baby."

"I want you all ready to move early morning," Tyler said, appearing for a moment, then disappearing again into his tent. The rangers heard him, but only a few acknowledged him with slight nods.

Jimmy looked up at his companions, catching George's eyes. George looked away. "He had brown eyes." Jimmy said.

"Shut up," someone said.

Chapter three:

* * *

Jimmy's body swung as if in a stiff wind, but George had never felt air so still. Everything was breathless. Jimmy's boots tapped together with each swing, making the only noise in the dawn light. There was a skiff of fresh snow covering the grayness of old snow and as the sun rose it made the ground sparkle. George kicked at the snow until it lost its luster.

* * *

"George," Jack's voice intruded into George's thoughts. His focus came back to the brown ears of the horse he rode across the expanse of snowdrifts back to Fort Lyons. In summer it could be done in a day with a good horse, but the horses the rangers rode were tired and the snow slowed them. As his horse's breath became increasingly labored, George thought three days of riding would be more likely. The horse he rode had belonged to Jimmy.

"George," Jack said again.

"What?" George responded.

"Nothing, just checking."

Checking what, George thought, but he just gave a short nod. The brown horse stumbled. He pulled on the reins, jerking the horse's mouth, forcing the gelding to raise his head, whose steps continued to falter in compensation. George dug the horse with his spurs. The horse fought against the reins, trying to respond to the cue to move faster.

They rode into Fort Lyons the following night at what George guessed to be midnight. When he pulled the saddle from the brown horse's back, sores on the withers opened, leaking

trickles of blood. The horse moved away from George, his head low, his steps stiff. George watched him, almost turning to find some grain, but before his feet caught up to the thought he had pushed it away, leaving the gelding in the cold dark, and found his way to the barrack.

George lay on his back on the musty mattress. His pistol dug into his side, but he didn't move. Jack dropped his boots and gun-belt on the floor, the sound loud, as if the pistol had fired and George flinched. Jack moaned as he stretched out on his cot, then he cleared his throat. George waited for him to say something. The barracks creaked. A horse whinnied and wasn't answered. Jack's breathing slowed to the even pace of sleep and George lay listening to it. The sound reminded him of home, of sitting on the rug in front of the fire with Aurora leaning against him, Sarah, in her rocker darning a sock, his father and Jack talking about masonry, Aurora's head becoming heavier on his shoulder. He tried to hold onto the memory, but he could feel it slipping away. It had been too long since he had sat at the home hearth. He focused on Jack's breathing, trying to bring the memory and feeling back, but it sounded like the rope rubbing the branch from which it hung.

* * *

Jimmy's horse had gone back to stand with the rest of the horses, one rein trailing in the snow, the other snapped off from him stepping on it. He flinched when Jack caught him and touched his shoulder. The hoof prints beneath Jimmy had barely been covered by the snowfall.

* * *

New mounts were issued to the rangers for their ride to Denver where their campaign would come to an end and they could go back to their lives. George stood along the fence, watching the mounts being run in. They were an odd assortment of plow-horses and Spanish

ponies, gaunt in the ribs and above the eyes, but they moved with the ease of horses that were rested.

“Catch a horse, saddle up,” Captain Tyler called down the row of rangers, “we’ve got a long ride afore nightfall.”

George shoved his hands further into his pockets and hunched his shoulders against the chill of morning. The sun filtered coldly through a film of high grey clouds, that would burn off by noon, but the sun would remain at a distance barely warming the air. As the other rangers climbed the fence with ropes, George backed away, finally turning to the corral where their mounts of the days before huddled, their heads low and eyes glazed or half-closed, whorls of ice that had once been sweat matted their backs and chests. Jack’s grey stood on the outside of the group, ribby and slack-jawed, but his back was straight and his legs still had muscle. A week of rest and he’d be ready to go again. Jimmy’s brown wasn’t visible from where George stood. He knew though, that the gelding would be worse off than Jack’s and almost felt relief that he couldn’t see him. Yet, he did want to, just once before they left.

“George!” Jack shouted, “Horse! Let’s go!”

Jack flung a rope at his brother, on the other end an unconcerned chestnut mare. George led the mare to where he had dropped his saddle, throwing one final glance over his shoulder at the huddled horses. Jimmy’s horse still wasn’t visible. George tossed the saddle onto the mare’s broad, plow-horse back and pulled the cinch. She flattened her ears, tossing her head and reaching around to nip at him. He moved out of the way of her teeth and didn’t bother to scold her, tying his pack behind the saddle as quickly as his numb fingers could work, and then swung into the seat.

Jack came up beside him on a bald-faced bay. “Get yourself together,” he said. His brow was furrowed and his unkempt mustache made his expression unforgiving.

Tyler shouted for the rangers to fall in and before George could glance once more for the brown gelding, the company moved off, his mare awkwardly jogging between a trot and a lope to keep up with the speed of the horses around her. Her back hooves clipped against her front hooves with every other stride.

* * *

The hammer struck the nail, piercing through the leather of the tops Jimmy’s boots. The sound rang along the ridge like a bell striking the hour. The boots were worn, cracked across the tops, the soles thin and flapping open. George put Jimmy’s watch in his pocket and walked away. No one looked back.

* * *

Chapter four:

A wind blew down Black Hawk's main street, as Tyler's rangers returned. George had dreamt about arriving on this street, picturing the sun on red bricks two and three stories high, white awnings reaching freshly painted into the street and covering plank sidewalks, where crowds assembled to cheer and welcome them home. He'd imagined the rangers smiling, himself smiling, eager to catch sight of loved ones. Instead, here they were gaunt, shoulders stooped, eyes bloodshot, and no crowds to greet them. George saw a ranger to his left manage a thin smile as slowly people began to appear out of the shops, brought by the noise eighty horses made on the street. George searched for his family, but instead he caught the eager eyes of a girl that he recognized as the Lizzie McMechen of Jimmy's photograph. A lump rose in his throat and the watch in his pocket became the weight of lead. He turned his horse down a side street, unable to face her. He rode back streets, letting the mare take her time and pick her way, letting her breathing slow from the final push to make Black Hawk before dark. George supposed he was violating a code by breaking from the others like that, but he was too tired to care and would be done with the rangers by nightfall, so it really didn't matter all that much, did it?

* * *

The rangers had parted ways with Chivington and the 3rd, who were now no longer bloodless, outside of Denver. It had been a silent parting, Tyler grimly saluting Chivington, Chivington eager to parade his men through the streets of Denver. They'd been raised to fight the Indians and now they had and they'd won. No one needed to know anything else.

“We were victorious,” Chivington shouted, turning his company and leaving the rangers.

George shivered at the words and in silence the rangers moved on, following the flow of Clear Creek into the mountains to the canyon where Black Hawk waited for their return.

* * *

When the house came into view, George pulled the mare to a halt. The house looked the same or else he had forgotten what it looked like so the image of it now inserted in as his memory. The brown shutters were closed, the flower boxes filled with snow, and smoke spiraled from the kitchen chimney. Sarah must be stoking the fire to cook dinner. George could imagine her arranging root vegetables around a rump roast, kneading dough together for dumplings, and setting a bowl of cold butter on the side of the stove to warm. He imagined Aurora coming in with a foaming bucket of fresh milk, laughing as milk splashed on her shoes and Sarah gave her a soft side-glance.

The chestnut mare relaxed, her ears flickering loosely, her hip sloping gently to the left. George rubbed her neck and watched the spiraling smoke. Three hens came squawking around the corner of the barn, scattered by Spot running. Aurora came behind them, shaking her red hair as she smiled over her shoulder at a boy in a blue coat. Suddenly he felt uncertain, not sure what he would say to his father, to Aurora, to Sarah. The boy caught hold of Aurora’s arm and she turned to face him, the milk in the bucket she held splashed into the snow. Spot came wiggling to her feet, lapping at the snow and bumping against their legs. George watched them laugh and the boy rub the dog’s ears. He felt like an intruder and picked up the reins to turn the mare from the scene. She startled, having been woken from a doze. Her breath came out sharply, cloudy in the

cold. George rode out of town, asking the mare to lope easily. He needed a moment alone, with just the sound of the mare's breath.

George tethered the mare beside Jack's horse at the hitching post in front of the house. He scratched her cheek for a moment. A waver of heat had replaced the smoke coming from the kitchen chimney, showing the fire burning hot. He wondered what Jack was telling them about the campaign. He could see them all sitting down around the table already, his father asking Jack how many raids they quelled, how many skirmishes they were involved in, saying, "You did right, son, by your country."

George took a deep breath, the deepest breath he had taken in a long time and had a strange feeling that he had just begun to breathe again. The feeling lasted him to the door, but as soon as he put his hand on the latch and pushed the door open his chest tightened.

"George, there you are," Jack said.

Aurora ran to him and threw her arms around him. "I missed you," she said into his jacket.

He kissed the top of her head, then shook his father's hand. John didn't say anything, just gripped his son's hand tightly, but George thought he saw tears in the corners of his eyes. Sarah came through the kitchen door with the roasting pan. She hastily dropped it on the table and hugged George, not bothering to check her tears. She touched the back of her hand to his forehead as if checking for a fever. "You're thin," she said, "are you well?"

"Better now," he said and forced a smile.

She laughed, "Get on." She squeezed his arms, then wiped the tears from her face. "Hungry?" When she said this she looked around the room as if including everyone in the question, but George knew it was mainly directed at him. He nodded. "A real meal'll taste good, huh, Jack?" He caught Jack's eyes across the room and something in them made George uneasy. Had Jack been saying something about him before he came in?

"It will," Jack said. He smiled. George felt pity in the smile. Ever since Jimmy's hanging he had felt pity from Jack.

John carved the roast and passed plates around. George's mouth filled with saliva and he held his hands tightly in his lap to keep himself from wolfing the food before grace was said. The grace hadn't lasted this long since he had been ten, coming in after playing all afternoon in the creek.

"Thank you for this food and the nourishment it brings to our bodies. Thank you for providing us with health and the warmth of home. Thank you for bringing my two sons home safely. Thank you for helping them with their work and showing them the way. Bless everyone sitting at this table and all our family and friends. Bless this country and may it be delivered from turmoil. By your word and your son, Amen." John spoke the grace slowly, in a low voice like a minister, drawing the amen out.

Everyone echoed the amen except for George. He wanted to say it, thinking it would make him feel as if he had come home, as if he had never left, but somehow the word got stuck in his throat. He coughed and picked up his fork. The roast fell apart in his mouth, buttery, and he closed his eyes to savor it. He could feel the richness of the broth enter his veins and his muscles

relaxed along with his thoughts. This was good, being home, savoring a home cooked dinner, watching as Aurora cut her potatoes into small squares before eating them.

“Still the potatoes,” he said, breaking the quiet that always seemed to descend when first starting to eat a meal.

Aurora laughed. Her laugh had become wider as if encompassing a bigger world and it almost surprised George, it had been so long since he had heard the sound.

“Hear you cleaned up the Indian trouble over by Fort Lyons,” John said. His voice carefully neutral, like he knew how his son would respond, but maybe he was just innocent of what the real events of the days by Fort Lyons were.

George swallowed and ate another forkful before answering, “I guess.”

“Told them about the braves we caught scaling telegraph poles,” Jack said. He looked directly at George. George relaxed again.

“That’s right,” George said, remembering the two young braves they apprehended along Adobe Creek on their way across the territory to Fort Lyons. There was a scuffle, but the braves were only armed with knives, having left their other weapons on their sleek ponies grazing close by, so it didn’t last long and no one was hurt. They took the Indians into the nearest town where they turned them over to local law. The Indians’ faces remained stoic the entire time and George admired their fortitude. He couldn’t help but wonder what was going on though under the surface, behind the black stripes painted over their strong cheekbones.

“Tyler a good commander?” John asked.

“Good, good,” George said, unsure what his father really wanted to know.

“Men respect him?”

“Yes.” George ate a carrot, hot and sweet, then added, “I did, I do.”

“He’s a good commander,” Jack agreed, “knows how to keep men in line. Never had trouble with anyone and never had to raise his voice, never had to single a man out.”

“There are new kittens in the barn,” Sarah said, changing the subject with an easy and quiet manner.

“Cold for kittens,” George said, grateful that the conversation had moved to things more sweet and innocent. These were the things he wanted to think about, not the Indians they pulled off of telegraph poles, not the long, cold rides through snow, not attacks on villages, or broken horses, or broken soldiers, or the Indian boy with Abe’s eyes. Kittens, kittens were all he wanted to occupy his mind.

“Yes, but the barn is warm, lots of straw. Of course they were in the kitchen for a week. In a box behind the stove.”

George felt a smile spread through his body. Sarah hadn’t changed, not at all. He wanted to hug her for it and keep her this way forever. “How many?”

“Five, two black, a calico, and two orange tabby. One of the blacks has a white splash under his arm.”

“He’s Ma’s favorite,” Aurora added, bouncing slightly in her seat. “He snuggles up under her chin every time she picks him up. The calico is sweeter though, she’ll lick anyone’s hand.”

“And the calico is yours.” Once George would have laughed as he said this, gently teasing his sister, but now he didn’t even feel a laugh rising. Had he forgotten how to laugh? What if he never laughed again? He smashed a potato under his fork and swirled it in the broth.

George pressed the bellows of the kiln until the fire roared. His face grew hot and he stepped back, staring at the flames. They leapt, licking at the air. He remembered how the flames licked at the night sky while the rangers sat around campfires drinking the last sludges of coffee, while Jimmy told his tales. *Walls into the sky*. He wondered if the people who built the city Jimmy talked about fired the stones they used. He had an urge to find Jimmy and ask him. Jimmy would know or if he didn't he would make something up and it would feel so much like the truth that no one would dare to question it. Closing his eyes and in the darkness behind his eyelids he remembered that he couldn't ask Jimmy. He pressed the bellows again and listened to the fire crack. It sounded like sagebrush under horse hooves or distant pistol shots. George's heart sped up and his breath came irregularly.

"See your boys are back," a man said from the front of the masonry.

"Yes, glad to have them," John answered.

"Busy times, busy times."

"The city is growing."

"About time. We might just catch up with California."

"Might, might not. A growing city'll always need brick."

George listened to the conversation, letting it push the sounds of the fire and the memories out of his mind. His father firmly believed that brick-making was essential to human existence and always had been, fond of saying, "We'll always need bricks. Anything can be built with brick."

"That's true," the man said, "Let's hope it keeps growing."

"Even if it stops we'll always need bricks," John said.

George caught Jack's eyes over the top of the kiln. Jack pushed bricks into the oven with a paddle like he was baking bread. "He hasn't changed," Jack mouthed.

"Come on back, talk to the boys," John said.

George wondered if they would always be "the boys" no matter how old they got. They had both long passed the age of boys.

"George, Jack, you remember Harry Burns, don't you?"

George nodded, simultaneously with Jack saying, "Yes, how are you, Mr. Burns?" Jack shook hands with Harry.

"Quite well," Harry answered, "Good to see you, Jack, and George." He turned with his hand extended to George. George shook it. "Wanted to thank you both for what you did with Tyler's campaign," Harry said.

"Couldn't let our country down," Jack said, his tone light, casual, as if discussing weather or a church picnic.

"You put the Indians in line."

"We tried." Jack paused a moment to peek at the bricks being fired and motioned to George to wake up the fire. George was grateful to go back to the bellows, but he made sure not to turn his back on Harry; a gesture that would have been a slight. "We didn't see much action. It was quiet out there," Jack continued and then like slipping a note under a door he turned the conversation. "How's Mrs. Burns? And your daughter, Emily, is it?"

Chapter five:

“Did you see the news?” Jack tossed the *Rocky Mountain News* onto the dining room table.

George read the headline: *Lieutenant Silas Soule Contests Ethics of Sand Creek*. He grabbed the paper. It read, *The case of the Sand Creek attack has moved to the Supreme Court. It is being taken under advisement that this attack was against the morals of the army and this country. Lieutenant Soule is ready to testify that Colonel Chivington was not acting under orders. The attack he ordered on a village of Indians camped along Sand Creek is being called a massacre, which is out of line for military duties.* George stopped reading as the words began to swirl in front of him.

“We were a part of this,” he said quietly.

“We stayed on the ridge,” Jack said.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter.”

George shook his head. Not all of us stayed, he thought, that makes us all responsible. The tightness in his chest grew. “Soule knew, Tyler knew.” George couldn’t stop staring at the headline of the paper, but he wasn’t seeing the words. He saw the rangers lined along the ridge, holding back horses that danced, rearing and stamping in the grey snow. These were horses trained for war and with every shot fired their blood ran hot and they yearned to run the slope. He saw the flags raised and flapping in the middle of the village, one the stars and stripes, the other white. George flung the paper across the room. It hit the doorframe flatly. Sarah stopped

short in her entrance, one hand touching the wall to steady herself, the other hand pressed to her heart. The clock clicked as the hands counted the seconds going by.

Sarah bent and picked up the paper. Her eyes moved across the headline, then she looked up at George. “Georgie boy,” she said, “come into the kitchen with me?” She inflected her words like a question, but she wasn’t asking, she was demanding that he come into the kitchen with her.

Without a word, George followed her.

Sarah moved the kettle onto the stove and put a round piece of wood into the fire. “Talk about it?” she asked.

George pulled a chair out from the table, digging his fingernails into the wood, then he pushed the chair back. It slammed against the table, making the bowls sitting atop it rattle together.

“You’re a good man, George, only doing what you thought was best. It’s not your fault, none of it is.”

“You don’t know what happened,” George said.

“Tell me.”

“Tyler ordered us to stay, we didn’t attack, but the chaos...” He shoved his hands in his pockets, something he had started to do frequently, and went to the window.

Sarah started peeling potatoes. The peels dropped onto the floor.

“It was easy to get caught up in it. I should have seen it. I didn’t.” George listened to the rhythmic sound of the peeling, thinking of the race down the hillside. “My horse was killed there, you know.”

The peeling stopped. “I didn’t. I’m sorry.” Sarah put her hand on his shoulder. George almost shrugged it off. It had been so long since someone had tried to comfort him that it felt strange and somehow he didn’t feel he deserved the comfort.

“It’s fine. It’s war, right?”

“Doesn’t make it hurt less.”

“Father needs me at the masonry.” George left the room, but he didn’t go directly to the masonry. Instead he went to the barn. It was warm and musty and reminded him of his childhood, playing pirates in the hayloft. The cows below were sea monsters and the cats were sailors, mewing around the mast, pulling open imaginary sails. An old grain sack served as a flag, hung out the window. Jack insisted they paint crossbones on it. All they had was charcoal, so each time it rained they had to redraw the image.

George climbed the ladder into the loft and found the kittens. He sank into the straw and let them crawl into his lap. The calico licked his hand, just as Aurora promised.

Chapter six:

Winter days slipped into a rhythm as a new year came and began to blow by with the wind off the mountains. George stopped reading the paper. He wanted to be in a world unmarred by the outside, why should he care about what a court was saying about a case when he knew the truth? Whatever was ruled wouldn't change his life any. He ate his meals hurriedly, leaving the table before Jack and his father could comment on what they had read or heard. At the masonry, he stayed by the kiln and did his best to avoid conversation with customers. In the heat of the fire he could forget the outside world and sink into his own mind, but his mind was so full of memories that it wasn't any quieter. He had this thought though, that the heat of the kiln fire would melt his memories away.

George took the silver watch from his pocket and clicked it open. Five-twenty, another twenty minutes before he could leave the masonry in good conscience. He put one last log on the fire, just to keep the room warm, brick firing was done for the day, the order stacked along the furthest wall until morning when he and Jack would load them onto the freight wagon. He hoped to take the wagon himself, through the Black Hawk streets up to Central City where there would soon be a Catholic Church sending spires into the clouds. There was something in the damp March air that he wanted to be part of, as if he could catch the air between his fingers like a sheet on a clothesline and pull it to reveal another view behind it. March had never been his favorite month, but this year he understood it somehow, as though it were a reflection of himself.

John came in the back door with a bag of sand over his shoulder. “More in the wagon,” he said, jerking his head at the door.

“Yes, sir,” George said.

As George grasped a bag and flung it over his shoulder, he breathed in deeply. A musty smell met his nostrils that reminded him of Sarah’s root cellar lined with jars of pickled and preserved vegetables and fruits and piles of potatoes packed in straw. As a boy, back in Illinois, he’d hide there, sitting with his back against a barrel of salted meat, watching spiders crisscross their webs between the round, pine beams of the ceiling. One time Sarah found him there in the early days of her being part of the family. His presence startled her as she entered for a jar of pickled beets.

“Give a body some warning,” she exclaimed, laughing at herself, and lightly scolding him.

“Didn’t mean to,” George said. He got to his feet, feeling as if he had intruded where he shouldn’t have. “I’ll go.”

“No, no, didn’t know you were down here is all. Do stay.” She put her hands on her hips, closed her eyes, and breathed in audibly. “Smells good, doesn’t it? Smells like everything good and comforting. Sometimes I think I could just stay down here. And it’s warm too, even in winter.”

George nodded. He reached into the potato pile beside him, rubbing the rough skin of one with his thumb until the dirt was brushed away and the potato became smooth.

“This must be what it’s like to be a badger,” Sarah said, “or an earthworm.”

“I’d rather be a badger,” George said.

Sarah opened her eyes and smiled at him. “Me too.” She put her hand out as if to tousle his hair, but then she stopped, letting her arm drop by her side. “Stay as long as you want,” she said. She found the jar of beets and went to the door where she turned back. “It’ll be our secret,” she said, “and when you’re ready, come into the kitchen. I have raisin cookies in the oven.”

“George, keep it moving,” John said, breaking into George’s remembrance. They stacked the sand beside the clay, tan beside red. The bags were dusty, letting off puffs like smoke. John coughed.

“I’ll get the last of them,” George said.

“Thanks, son, then head off for the day. We’ll start mixing tomorrow.” John went to the front of the shop and pulled out the books. He ran his finger down the orders, checking amounts and payments, writing notes in the margins. George didn’t know how he kept all the numbers and names straight in his mind and he wondered what his father wrote everyday when he checked the books. The bookkeeping felt private, as if it were John’s journal. In all likelihood there wasn’t anything secret written in the corners of the pages, but George never opened the ledgers, as if it’d be an intrusion into his father’s mind.

As George entered with the final bag of sand, a woman’s voice met his ears. With care he stacked the bag and glanced to see who it was. The woman was young, blonde hair bleached nearly white, wide set eyes, dark and luminous as if tears were ready to pour from them. George knew who she was even as she identified herself to his father.

“I’m Lizzie McMechen,” she said and not waiting for John to reply, hurried on, “I heard your sons rode with Tyler and I...I wanted...wanted to ask did they know Jimmy? Uh, Jimmy

Dobbs?” She fumbled with the button of her purse, “I...I have a...a picture.” She succeeded in opening her purse, but George didn’t wait to see if she found the photograph.

Shoving his hands as deep as he could into his pockets, he walked away from the masonry towards the Tivoli Brewery. His feet felt heavy, but he walked quickly, his boots collecting the slick mud of the first thaw. He took the quiet back streets. Ever since returning he had only been on the main street once, when he dropped Sarah and Aurora by the dry-goods store. He didn’t like people seeing him and asking questions. He was afraid of running into old friends. He was afraid of running into Lizzie. Back streets were safer, fewer chances of seeing someone he knew or who knew him, fewer windows in the backs of buildings where people could see him walk by.

The Tivoli Brewery was mostly brick. George remembered when they supplied Sigi with it. Sigi had wanted bricks of different lengths. He said it was an artistic project and wanted to make it mosaic. In the end he had settled for mostly bricks of the same length, but he had succeeded in giving the doorway an arch which he had whitewashed so that it stood out against the rest of the brick like an eyebrow gone white before the hair. George pushed open the heavy wooden door clad in iron under this brow and entered the dimness of the brewery. He kept his eyes straight ahead to avoid conversations with any other early comers and took a stool at the bar.

“Give me a pint,” George told the bartender, flipping a coin onto the bar. It turned over three times before landing heads up. A memory of flickered into his mind, of a time when his eyes were below the general store counter. Up, up went the silver, turning once, twice, disappearing from his sight as it landed. His father had smiled, his mustache twitching. “Heads,” he’d said, as the storekeep cursed lightly at him. George stood on his tiptoes and his eyes rose to counter

level. It was a whole world on the polished top, pieces of paper forming houses, a stub of pencil like a stage stop, the silver edge of coin as the town square. He had wanted to poke it and see if anything moved.

“Heads!” the bartender said now, as George’s father had said it then. The bartender swiped the coin off the bar and swirled a foaming mug of beer to George.

George let the beer slide down his throat in gulps, stealing away his memories. He had no regrets as he drained the last drop and asked for another.

In the dark he wandered home. The temperature had dropped below freezing again and the mud of the day had formed a crust of ice that crunched and sank under each step. George liked the sound and he stepped heavier to sharpen the noise. But it made each step sound like a shot and sent him back to a sagebrush covered hill in winter. His horse breathed heavily, steam rising from its body into the cold dawn. George leaned over the horse’s black mane and let him run, pounding towards the village. The wind in his face made his eyes water, blurring his vision, but he didn’t slow Abe’s pace. The colors of the American flag flapped into view and George blinked, trying to focus and when he did he saw he wasn’t mistaken. A man stood holding the flag high, his body straight and strong, his lips drawn together as he stared at the onslaught of cavalry, his look indomitable, almost tranquil. Hesitation slipped over George. He looked to the men galloping beside him, their weapons drawn, their faces contorted by wind or hatred or both. Then his horse fell and the others sped on in a volley of shots.

The crunch of his steps shuddered through him and he saw the young Indian man facing him again. He pulled the trigger and the Indian’s eyes widened, the pupils dark and large in the

still dim light, and they wouldn't close. Why wouldn't they stay closed? Or were those Abe's eyes that wouldn't?

George shivered in the wind that cooled the sweat dampening his clothes, bringing him out of the distorted memories. He wrapped his arms around himself and focused on getting home. When he arrived, John was sitting alone by the hearth. "George, come sit," he said.

Feeling dizzy, sick, and cold, George didn't argue, sinking into Sarah's rocker.

"Time we talked," John said. The coals glowed, as the fire died. One sparked, sending specks of light that extinguished as quickly as they appeared. "What happened?"

"Finished unloading and went to Tivoli's," George said.

"I meant with the rangers," John said.

"Nothing, we did our job and came home, that's all."

"Jack said you had a friend," John paused a moment and when George continued to stare at the fireplace, he continued, "you had a friend that died at Sand Creek."

"After," George corrected. Words felt heavy like lifting a bag of sand over his head, but then they sounded thin when they hit the air.

"What happened?"

"He died."

"How?"

Silence fell on the room like frost. George could hear his heart and it sounded too slow and seemed to be keeping time with the clock on the mantel. Maybe it was the clock and not his heart he heard.

“There was a girl, came into the masonry today. She asked to speak with you. Wondered if you knew Jimmy Dobbs.” Again John paused waiting for George to speak and again George didn’t. “He was the friend?”

George nodded.

“Damn it, George, you’ve got to talk!” John stood and faced his son. “Stop this sullenness. You went to war and came back, but it was war. Not everyone comes back, you’ve got to get on.”

“You don’t know,” George said, “it wasn’t war, it was a slaughter. I could have stopped Jimmy. I didn’t. I don’t want to talk, to you, to Jimmy’s girl, to anyone. Excuse me, sir.” George stood to leave the room.

John grabbed George’s shoulder, pulling him back. “No! Don’t you walk out on me!” John’s voice became sharp and commanding, much like it used to when George was in trouble as a boy.

George tried to shrug his father’s hand off, but John’s grip was firm and the beer still thrummed in George’s head. John gripped tighter, taking both George’s shoulders and for a moment George was glad for the steadying.

“Talk to me, son, talk to me.” John’s fingers pinched George’s skin. “I know how close soldiers become. I understand. But this has got to end!” His voice increased in volume with every word, until it seemed the whole house should be awake.

“You can’t understand,” George said through clenched teeth and jerked away, trying to free himself from his father’s grip. One of John’s hands loosened its hold. “Let go of me!” George couldn’t tell if he was speaking low or shouting. Every word hammered his head and he

felt a need to punch something. It came over him so quickly that he never put it into thought and didn't realize what he'd done until his knuckles cracked against John's jaw.

Both men stood stunned, the silence of the room total. George stared at his hand, the knuckles red, one cracked and dribbling blood. His mouth had gone completely dry and his stomach tightened as if he was going to be sick. He looked up. John had his hand on his jaw. Before either could move, Sarah came through the doorway, her eyes skipping from one man to the other. George thought he saw something like fear in them and he staggered backwards, turning to go to his room as she went to John.

"John, come with me and we'll put something on that jaw," she said.

George made it to his room, and tried to ignore the frightened looks of his brothers and sisters, as he sank onto his bed. He squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe if he squeezed tight enough it'd all go away.

With spring came the stock sale. George and Jack had gone to the sale for years, often buying a young horse or two that they'd ride over the summer and then sell in the fall for twice what they paid. It was such a long standing ritual, that neither George nor Jack questioned going, although George hadn't been speaking to anyone since the night he'd punched his father. The livery stable corrals were full of mangy colts pushing each other against the boards, nipping at each others withers. George flinched as one colt kicked another in the ribs, the sound cracking into the soft, April air. He and his brother were quiet. It had been different last year. Last year, he and Jack leaned side by side and assessed confirmation, color, and personality.

"That one has good bones," Jack had said pointing to a large sorrel.

“Lazy eyes though,” George had answered, “not enough spirit.”

“He’d spunk up.”

“Not like that one.” George pointed to a bay with black points and a wide long blaze. The colt pranced in the corner, his nostrils wide, his head and tail held high. He stamped and snorted, eyeing a man’s flapping jacket.

“Too flighty,” Jack said, “it’d take too many wet blankets to break that horse.”

George smiled. “He’s a good one.”

“You’re going to buy him.”

George nodded. “He’s got the eyes.” Over the week that’d followed, this was a phrase he repeated, every time Jack or his father made a comment about the colt being untrainable. It was his defense and after two weeks the colt had made enough progress that Jack admitted, “There might be something to him.”

“Yeah, there is, there most certainly is,” George said. He patted the bay colt’s neck that was now sleek with a summer coat. The colt stood with his head high, his eyes taking in every tiny movement around him. The saddle blanket was foamed and soaked with sweat, the edges dripping.

“That’s one wet blanket,” Jack said.

“Think I’ll call him that,” George said, “Wet Blanket.”

That had been before. Now George stood away from the fence, his hands deep in his pockets. He thought about Wet Blanket. He hadn’t ridden the colt since he’d returned, leaving him in the corral behind the house, letting his young siblings feed him with the rest of the stock. He couldn’t face the horse, those eyes, not yet.

“George,” Jack called. He motioned for his brother to come closer to the fence. Reluctantly, George moved forward. If he refused, Jack would ask him if he was okay and he didn’t want to have that conversation again. Jack pointed into the corral. “What do you think of that filly?” he asked. “The black one there in the middle.”

George nodded. “Fine,” he said, barely glancing where Jack pointed.

“She’s well muscled already,” Jack continued, seemingly unaware of his brother’s disinterest. “Could make a good delivery horse, what do you think? Seems steady too. What are her eyes telling you?”

George swallowed, looking up and focusing on the filly. Her head was turned away, but he noted the strong curve of muscle in her neck and the wideness of her chest. She dipped her head and shook, dust rose from her coat, and her movements were graceful, fluid. Despite himself, George noticed this and drew closer to catch a glimpse into her eyes. Her eyes were dark, darker than most horse’s, but in the left there was a fleck of gold, like a light seen from a distant home and it almost beckoned. For a moment he saw the brown gelding of Jimmy’s in them, watching as George left the horse wounded in the cold.

“I can’t,” George choked out and left, ignoring Jack’s calls after him.

Chapter Seven:

Jack came into the kitchen and without a word tossed the *Rocky Mountain News* down in front of George.

“Jack, you know I don’t,” George began.

“Just read it,” Jack said. The lines about his mouth and eyes were tight, his eyes unblinkingly blue, showed he wasn’t going to let George refuse.

George read the following:

Our city was thrown into a feverish excitement last evening by assassination of Captain S. S. Soule, of the Colorado First. The sad affair took place about half past ten o’clock, and was evidently coolly and deliberately planned, and as systematically carried out.

George felt as if his ribs were being stitched tighter and tighter together and he slid the paper away. Jack pushed it back and tapped on the article, indicating for George to keep reading.

In the evening he and his wife were visiting at the house of a friend and returned home between nine and ten o’clock. Shortly after, a number of pistol shots were fired in the upper part of the city, evidently to decoy him out, and the Captain started to ascertain the cause. Whilst passing along Lawrence Street, Near F, and directly in front of the residence of Dr. Cunningham, he seems to have been met by the assassin, and the indications are that both fired at the same instant, or so near together that the reports seemed simultaneous. Probably the Captain, expecting to be attacked, was in readiness, and when the other man presented his pistol, he did the same, but the intended assassin fired an instant sooner, with but to fatal effect. The ball entered the Captain’s face at the point of the right cheek bone, pressing backward and upward, and lodging in the back part of the head. He fell back dead, appearing not to have moved a muscle after

falling. The other man, from the indications, was wounded in the right hand or arm; how severely is not known. His pistol was dropped at his feet and he immediately started and ran towards the military camp in the upper part of the city, leaving a distinct trail of blood where he passed along. When the shots were fired they were standing about four feet apart, face to face. Within less than a minute after the fatal shot, one of the provost guard and Mr. Ruter reached the spot. The Captain was already dead, and his murderer had disappeared. They alarmed Dr. Cunningham, and a guard was sent for. A number of persons, soldiers and civilians, soon gathered around, and after a few minutes the body was removed to the building occupied by the officers of the Headquarters of the District.

George tried to swallow, but couldn't and despite the saliva his mouth felt dry. He thought that he was moving on from Sand Creek, that the memories were dissolving with each long day of work at the brickyard, the monotony of a rhythm he'd known before the rangers, but with the news of Soule's death they came stumbling back. He could see Soule's clear-eyes consulting with Tyler as the companies rode up the ridge above the Sand Creek village. Again he remembered Soule's words, "I won't let my men attack, these Indians are peaceful," and these words mixed with the words on the paper, as he kept reading, unable now to stop.

The excitement this morning, when the facts became generally known, was intense. Hundreds of citizens visited the scene of the tragedy, and it has formed the burthen of conversation throughout the city all day. Patrols were dispatched in every direction, and it is hardly possible that he will escape more than for a day or two. Probably he will be overtaken to-day. Of his identity we shall at present refrain from speaking, though there is scarce a doubt but it is clearly

known. The cause is said to have grown out of an arrest made by the Captain in the discharge of his duty as Provost Marshal.

Captain Soule was highly respected by his brother officers, and beloved by the men in his company. He was married in this city on the 1st inst., and consequently leaves a young wife to mourn this terrible and untimely fate. It is the hope of all that his murderer and his accomplices will be speedily brought to judgement, and a punishment meted out to them such as the base crime deserves.^{4*}

George glanced at Jack. “This is what I didn’t want to know,” he said.

“You had to know,” Jack said.

“No, no, I don’t want to know anymore! I can’t take it!” He shook the paper, his whole body trembling. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!” He felt lightheaded as if he had stood up too fast only magnified so that it throbbed in his temples and blurred his eyes. There on a hook by the door he focused on John’s pistol-belt. Striding to it, he jerked it down. “This,” he said, pulling the pistol from the holster, “this, we don’t need it. It only kills.”

Jack eased the grip of each of George’s fingers from around the pistol, taking it from him. George left the room without another word and going into his room, stuffed his belongings into a bag, then he walked straight to the corrals as if he had blinders on, past Sarah on the doorstep and Aurora coming from the barn with a pail of milk frothing over the top. He caught Wet Blanket and tossed the saddle over the colt’s back, who spooked, but it didn’t faze George. He grabbed the cinch and pulled it tight around the colt’s girth. Wet Blanket threw his head, snorting

⁴ * Italics are direct quotes from the Rocky Mountain News article printed the morning after Soule was killed, April 24, 1865.

and nipping at George. George didn't even scold him, instead he tied the bag behind his saddle and put his foot in the stirrup.

"George," Jack said, grasping George's arm, "what are you doing?"

"Leaving," George said, "I've got to go, get away."

"Think about this."

"No, I don't want to think anymore. I've got to go."

"Wait a minute," Sarah said. Her voice broke through the haze that had filmed over George's brain and things cleared for a moment. His breathing eased, as if the stitches between his ribs were being loosened like bootlaces. He knew he still had to go, he needed to be away from the places and people that made him remember.

Sarah went into the house and came back out with a cloth clutched in her hand. "Baked potatoes, some bread," she said, "to give you something to go on."

His throat tightened. "Sarah," he managed to get out. He wanted to thank her, for not questioning or reproaching, thank her for the food, but he could only say her name. He stepped into the saddle and dug Wet Blanket with his spurs. Wet Blanket sprang into a rough trot, his back rounded and ready to buck at the first snap of a stick or swirl of wind.

The land spread out like a rug being shaken and unrolled over a dirt floor. An overnight rain made the sagebrush vibrant, silver-green, and perfumed the air with a smell so fresh and fragrant it made George sneeze. Wet Blanket flinched, his skin rippling in one motion that wove into the breeze coming over the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. At one time George would

have ridden towards the Mountains, but this time he wanted something new, something different. Only difference could bring relief from the memories that chased him.

He thought about the young widow Soule left behind. He'd seen them together once. She was sweet-faced with dark curls around a porcelain face, but her eyes were deep, brown and strong, as if she was ready to take on the world. Now though, George imagined those eyes were drowned in saltwater, but then tears didn't seem right and he saw them as dry, like a watering hole in a rainless summer. Maybe though, they showed nothing. Maybe they were like an empty plot of ground.

Thinking about Soule's widow led him to think about Lizzie. Did she know what had happened to Jimmy? Maybe he should have told her, talked to her. Just the thought of telling her though, made his heart quicken, as if it were trying to come out of his chest. He remembered her eager eyes searching the ranks of rangers as they rode into Black Hawk. Those eyes wouldn't find what they were looking for, they'd never see what they sought ever again. George spurred Wet Blanket into a gallop, thinking if he rode fast enough he could get ahead of those searching eyes. The colt moved awkwardly with a stride that was at once gallop and crow-hop.

On the horizon, grey clouds dripped and George knew that it would rain again the coming night. He began looking for a place to shelter in the storm, but all around him the land spread evenly and unbroken by gullies or trees.

Chapter eight:

And then he was alone. It hit him suddenly with a realization that the rushing whistle in his ears of other people living, that reminded him of too many things he wanted to forget, was gone. He'd been riding for a week and he breathed in the aloneness that stretched before him, knowing nothing would make him turn back and knowing he needed to decide where he was heading. He let Wet Blanket come to a stop and surveyed the sky. Clouds whipped across the soft blue in a wind too high to be felt on land and he watched them pass, letting his vision blur and change them into shapes. A ship passed, followed by trailing sails, ribbons and smoke, strands of wild oat seed-heads. It'd been a long time since he had indulged in cloud watching and it joggled a memory of Illinois, laying in the meadow with Jack and watching white horses float by. Angel wings, that's what their mother once called them. George didn't see any horses or angel wings today. He clenched his jaw and shook the memory away, deciding he'd keep riding south, south to Arizona Territory. Maybe there in the red sand his memories would leave him alone.

George urged Wet Blanket on at a steady lope, keeping him at the pace as space widened between the sun and the horizon. By afternoon sweat foamed on the bay's neck and chest and George felt the need to find water. He swung down from the creaking saddle and stood looking at the land around him. Before him a wide canyon split the ground, sandy and spotted with blue winterfat and green Mormon tea. Scarlet cactus bloomed on rock outcroppings like splashes of blood, and bunches of tough browning grass grew along a gully that held the possibility of water. Holding the leather reins in his chapped hands, George headed toward that possibility.

He walked as if testing the ground for snares. Behind him Wet Blanket snatched at bunches of grass, as though nothing could disturb him. George saw the wind before he felt it. It

came from up canyon, blowing clouds of sand. Grit hit his face. The sweat on Wet Blanket dried, brown with dust, as the horse threw his head in the wind, testing the air, nostrils wide, then shied to the side. The reins went taut. George absently scratched the bay on the side of the nose until he quieted and then they walked on. The wind blew and George crunched grit. Wet Blanket danced, grass forgotten.

It was a good three miles before they came across water; a small pool, no bigger than George's hat, but water. George lay on his stomach and drank. Wet Blanket came up beside him, wiggling his lips in the water, and splashing George, then, he too, drank. George stood refreshed. He filled his canteen and said, "All right, Wet Blanket, that's it." He smacked the horse's shoulder. Wet Blanket's head went up and he snorted.

George led the horse out of the gully. He headed toward the cliffs, hoping to find some sort of shelter for the night. Lizards ran from his feet, disappearing under close growing winter-fat. Sparrows flirted around him, but there was no other sound. George turned, feeling like he was being watched, being evaluated, as if he were on trial. As he turned back to the cliffs his eyes landed on a brick wall rising into the sky.

George stared at the ruins before him. "Jimmy's story was true," he thought. He stepped forward and pressed the palm of his hand against the stone. It was warm and soft to his rough palm, but he could feel the strength of the structure. Slowly he moved along the wall, letting his fingers brush along the stones as he walked. He liked the way the grains felt. It reminded him of the bricks he made, comforting him, as if he had come home.

As the sun moved lower into the sky, the ruins changed color. They were red like the roses in Sarah's garden, then they were pink like the breast of a mourning dove. George watched as

they changed from dove pink to dove grey, to the color of slate. The ruins turned to a burnished brown like saddle leather as George followed the living wall around a corner. On the other side he saw a network of stone structures, some taller than himself, others coming just to his knees. Circular rooms, dwellings really, twice the size of any house he'd lived in, behind which taller structures expanded until they ran against the cliffs, stone meeting stone. And the doorways, small and arched all facing east, slightly south, toward a large flat-topped butte with a notch in its top. George stood in front of a doorway gazing across the canyon valley, realizing the notch in the butte was in direct line with him. An urge to pray hit him and with it Jimmy's words about the doors align for prayer. George shifted, wondering how many had stood here before him, looked through the notch and prayed, and who did they pray to? Who would he pray to? Not knowing the answer, he shook off the feeling and turned to his horse.

George hobbled Wet Blanket and turned him loose to graze, then stepped through a small doorway into the ruins. He had to bend almost double to fit through the door. He straightened and looked around him. The walls rose above his head, but only just. Small windows opened the corners of the room and he thought it was odd to place windows there. Was it for sunlight? Maybe they built fires in the corners of the room and the windows were for releasing the smoke. He wanted to know more about this place, about the people who had lived here. Thinking somehow the stones could give him answers, he again placed his palm against the stones. The stones were fit together precisely and had been shaped to serve the precision. His father would have been pleased with it. He always admonished George and Jack precision mattered most, there was never an excuse to be sloppy and lose a centuries old trade.

“A centuries-old trade,” George thought, “Pa was right.” He stood staring at the ruins and soaked in the aloneness. The wind whistled against the walls. Three ravens flew over silently, their wings beating steadily on their way to roost.

That night he slept deeply for the first time in months and when he woke the sky was clear and crisp like a freshly washed cotton sheet. He felt his aloneness and smiled. Wet Blanket quietly cropped the miniature broom tops of sparse bunchgrass. Sparrows gossiped and the three ravens flew out from their roost, talking loudly. George lay a silver coin on the doorstep as he left.

Chapter nine:

George rode deep into Arizona Territory, his memories riding tandem playing out like a drama on a desert stage. Wet Blanket was covered in a dust of dried sweat that became paste as he sweated again each day. George knew his horse needed a rest, a good long rest of a day or two or three, but something pressed him onward, as if someone was pressing a dagger in his back. He had to move forward and ease the pain. He rode deeper and deeper into the red sand. In frustration he kicked his horse into a hard run. And so, he rode into Globe.

Globe, the name that said you could see the whole world in one town. A globe, like a map of the world caught in a ball of glass, only this globe was caught between hills sloughing with silver mines and dotted with strange plants that grew stalks the thickness of a child's wrist and dropped crimson flowers to the ground. George rode the streets of the town. They were dry, dusty, and red and when rains came they'd be slick, sticky, and red. Red clay. Wet Blanket's hooves churned up clay dust. Foam fell from the corners of his mouth and covered the ends of his bit.

Dust rose in a cloud as a horse bolted towards them, riderless, stirrups flapping. A large palomino charged in after it, carrying two riders. A shot fired, the bullet whirring between the legs of the riderless horse, who sprang into a series of crow-hops, its back rounded, its head dropped between its front hooves. Wet Blanket stiffened to a halt, his legs locked, his head so high, George could barely see between the black-tipped ears. The riderless horse kept running, disappearing around a hill.

“Shoulda just shot him,” one of the riders said.

“He’ll kill himself one day anyway,” said the other, halting the palomino at the hitching rail in front of the saloon. Neither acknowledged George. The two men pushed open the doors of the saloon, giving George a momentary glimpse of the residents of Globe, men with scruffy beards and muddy clothing playing poker and fingering their firearms, women in short skirts and brightly painted lips.

The town had once tried to become something more, building a hotel, a bank, and a general store, all of which now straggled along like stray cows. The bank’s windows were boarded, the building looking as if it would topple into the jail beside it with the next storm. The hotel didn’t go for much advertising, simply stating “Hotel” in big white letters on a sign that hung crookedly from the porch roof, but the front steps were newly repaired, the red mesquite wood vibrantly in contrast with the gray of the rest of the buildings. In the window of the general store a sign advertised beans and tobacco, selling for 20¢ a lb. and 30¢ a lb. respectively, but on the door a sign hung stating, “Closed,” with an air of permanence.

George slacked the reins and Wet Blanket drank from the water trough. This was the kind of place he wanted to come to, a place where he could melt into a crowd that was always changing, never rooting, and he’d aimed for Globe with this in mind. He’d heard tell it was where outlaws stopped over, because the law didn’t care what a person’s past was as long as they didn’t cause a stir. He knew it as a forgotten town, where one could be forgotten, and he wanted to be forgotten or to forget himself. Wet Blanket tossed his head, whinnying at the row of tethered horses. Several pulled on their ropes, straining to see who the newcomer was and whinnying in reply. George tied Wet Blanket beside them and entered the smokey saloon. As he stepped in, he wasn’t sure what to do, it wasn’t like the brewery back in Black Hawk or even the back rooms of

main street businesses where he played the occasional poker game with young miners. Tables clustered together, their surfaces scarred, reflecting those who sat around them. George felt as though everyone had noticed him and every eye in the room was sizing him up.

A woman slipped her hand onto his arm. “Sugar,” she said, her voice husky with smoke, “buy a girl a drink?”

George nodded, wordlessly, and moved with her to the bar. The bartender poured two shots of whiskey. George handed one to the woman, looking at her for the first time. Her face showed wrinkles of age that she had attempted to paint over, her eyelids painted a heavy blue. Her hair fell in unnatural curls to her bare shoulders, the sleeves of her dress pulled down to show her skin, revealing a mole close to her left collarbone. The dress, a faded maroon, cut deeply in front, showing just the tops of her breasts that were squeezed together by a corset pulled too tight. George was surprised that her skin there too showed wrinkles of age and he stared. Maybe it wasn't age, maybe it was the tightness of the dress.

The woman held her shot up, “Cheers,” she said, her voice inflecting slightly, and George reached for the other shot, knocking it over in his bluster, as he felt heat rise up his neck.

“Don't do this often,” the woman said, laughing. She called to the bartender to pour another and this time she handed the shot to George. “Cheers,” she said again.

George knew he should clink his glass against hers and drink the burning liquid, but he stood there, his eyes fixed on the golden substance. He hadn't known what color it was, the few times he'd had a swallow from Jimmy's flask and the temperance of his father's house had kept any alcohol from passing over the doorstep. Would this make his memories as uncontrollable as those beers had? His mouth filled with the bitter taste he'd woken with the morning after that

night at Tivoli's. "I don't think I can do this," he said, quietly. He set the glass on the counter and dug in his pocket for coins.

The woman downed her shot, without even a small cough. "Why you here?" She asked, "You know this is where folks come to be forgotten. Sure once, it wanted to be something, but it's too out of the way." She leaned against the bar. "People don't come looking for you here." She laughed again and George thought he heard an edge of bitterness to it.

"Why?" George asked, as he glanced around the room. No one paid any mind to him or his new acquaintance, all caught up in their own drinking or gambling or flirting, as if an unspoken pact of not intruding on anyone's reason for being there had sealed them all from noticing a stranger.

The woman shrugged. "Too far from anywhere worth being," she said. "There's silver in the hills round here, but mines rise and fall. When they fall, they fall hard. Miners drink and long for women and stay around for the next rise." She took George's shot from the bar. "If you don't want it," she said and when George shook his head she tipped it back. "Thanks, sugar."

Watching her drink the second shot without a wince, George wasn't sure he wanted to belong in this place. "Does everyone here really want to be forgotten?" he asked.

"Sure, don't we all at some point?" The woman pushed her hair off her shoulders and George thought she must have been pretty once. "I followed my husband here," she continued, "sure we'd make a fortune and have something to be proud of. We got a claim and started digging, but after months had only struck enough silver to buy a turnip. Cash ran out and my husband got work in a mine nearby. Seemed like we'd make enough to get out of here." The woman paused, twirling the glass in her fingers, then looked George in the eye. George motioned to the

bartender and place another coin on the counter. The bartender filled the woman's glass, shaking his head and saying, "He's young, Ellen, have a care," in a voice so low George almost didn't hear him. He didn't care though, that this woman was duping him into buying her drinks. Even as he knew he wasn't staying, he wanted to listen to someone else's story for a moment, and maybe forget his own, at least for the time.

"But it wasn't, as they say, ordained. While my husband was working in the other mine, another man looking for a fortune started digging on our claim and hit a rich seam. 'Course my husband accused the man of stealing, which was true, but the man said it wasn't stealing if a mine had been abandoned. That logic was hard to argue with, but my husband did and soon was dead over it and I left alone with nothing to get me out of this place. So I stayed, became Ellen the barmaid, a forgotten woman in a forgotten town." She smiled and it surprised George to see no sadness in the smile. She gestured at the people around them. "Everyone here has committed a crime of some kind," she said, "but we don't talk about it. Every horse at the rail is stolen from one place or another and they'll all have new owners within the hour. We don't talk about that either." Again she laughed, the kind of laugh a person gives when they wished what they'd said was funny, but at the same time the laugh wasn't false, as if she'd come to believe her life, this town, was a kind of comedy.

Her tale finished, Ellen leaned her elbows on the countertop, accentuating her chest, and dropped her eyelids. The gesture casual, it took George a moment to understand the meaning, but when he did, he felt his face flush and found himself wishing for that shot of whiskey. On the heels of this thought came the definitive realization there'd be no way for him to forget who he was in this place. It wasn't the reinventing that he wanted. His thoughts turned to Wet Blanket,

tied at the end of the rail and he glanced at the door. "I should go," he said. He couldn't risk his horse being stolen. That gelding was all he had and after the weeks of travel, he suddenly knew that he couldn't let anything happen to the animal. Maybe he could still feel something after all. Maybe that was why he couldn't stay in a place that forgot its inhabitants.

Ellen smiled, this time soft and sad. "Good," she said. She straightened her dress and shook her curls, letting them fall once again over her shoulders, then turned laughing to a newcomer. "Buy a girl a drink?"

Once out the door, George immediately checked for the bald face of the bay gelding and relief flooded him to see it still there at the end of the rail. He looked down the row of horses tied beside his own. They were horses of all sizes and colors, some sleek, some mangy, on one George recognized an army brand, the US slanted and blurred, indicating the haste it'd been burned on.

The horse was brown, a gelding, with a scrubby tail. His hips were pointed and he sank into his back hocks in a way that was strangely familiar. George went to the army horse, clicking his tongue softly to the animal. He patted the bony hips, noted the spur-scars on the belly, ran his hands up the long awkward neck until he could catch hold of the halter and turn the horse's face to his. There were the tan-brown eyes with too much white around them that George remembered as he had forced the bit between the geldings teeth that cold morning after Sand Creek. George stroked the nose of Jimmy's brown gelding, his fingers quivering as the horse's lips. Music from a pianoforte spilled off-key out the cracks in the saloon doors, the sound of laughter rising then falling, broken and worn out. George knew with even more surety, he wasn't staying and neither was the brown gelding.

In silence he left Globe behind. Wet Blanket set an eager pace for having a companion following behind, and the brown gelding trotted, his joints moving loosely, as if hardly staying together anymore.

Chapter nine:

George followed his own trail, back into the canyons and desert mountains above Globe. He'd passed a river somewhere and he headed towards it, thinking he'd follow it downstream, south again. When it came into sight, he brought the horses to a halt and breathed deeply. The air was tangy with sage. He searched the map of his mind, and checked the placement of the sun, locating south. Wet Blanket pawed the sand, bobbing his head. George knew he wanted to graze, but he kept the reins gathered. Wet Blanket would have to wait until they camped for the night. The brown gelding nudged Wet Blanket's flank, who pinned his ears and threatened to kick.

"Come on," George said. He tapped Wet Blanket with his spurs and they continued to the river bank. He turned south, downstream and pushed on, wanting to put many more miles between him and Globe. He had a feeling that no one would come after him, but he didn't want to be close enough to be caught in case someone did.

The cliffs on the opposite bank cast shadows into the river. Shadows lengthened, the colors changing on the stones and shrubs. Yucca grew large, as tall as his horses' chests. He'd never seen yucca like this and it made him wonder if it really was yucca or if he misidentified the plant. The air cooled and George buttoned his coat, letting the reins go slack against Wet Blanket's neck. The gelding began to nibble at the coarse grass and George gave into the horse's hunger, dismounting and untying the brown gelding from the saddle. He looked into the horse's eyes, finding more depth there than he had at the hitching post in Globe. He rubbed the soft nose with his knuckles, almost harshly, and tried to remember the name Jimmy called the horse. He remembered the day Jimmy had been issued the gelding. It was the same day he had been issued Abe, the black killed at Sand Creek.

“Honest eyes,” George remembered saying, rubbing his new mount’s cheeks, “I’ll call him Abe.”

“Hey, boys, better write the president, he’s got an ugly beast as a namesake,” Jimmy had said, laughing. His joviality spread down the ranks, boosting the spirits of the rangers and readying them for the long ride ahead.

That was as far as the memory went, the laughter. George could remember the sound, but the feeling that came with the sound was lost and as far as any further conversation on names for the new mounts went, he couldn’t remember it. He wondered if he’d ever laugh like that again. What if he had forgotten how?

George hobbled the horses and went to the water’s edge. He dipped his fingers in the river finding it icy cold. He leaned against a boulder, feeling the warmth still collected there seep through his clothes to his skin. As he leaned there something softened in him. His shoulders relaxed, knots that had gathered between his shoulder blades and at the base of his neck untied, leaving him with a feeling of release. The canyon was so still that he could hear the horses cropping grass. The sound soothed and he began to drift.

George followed the river in its canyon until the canyon split in two, turning into the smaller one, the one heading more directly south, and following it to where the horses could climb the bank. Above the canyon the air was sharp and woke George. His thoughts cleared. He turned the horses south, once again, this time angling west as well. The horses stepped lightly, as if they too had been cleared of anxieties. Sparrows the color of the sand sang and fidgeted in the scrub oak, and each time one flushed, Wet Blanket snorted, tossing his head up and down. The

brown gelding remained calm. "As steady as an arrow," George thought. Arrows. He remembered Jimmy saying something about arrows and searched for the memory in the recesses of his mind.

"This is the last horse I'll ride afore seeing my Lizzie again," Jimmy had said. George couldn't remember where they were or what they were doing in that particular moment, but he could remember Jimmy's voice. "Yep, he will be my arrow home."

"Arrow," George said aloud to the empty sky and sparrow-filled desert, "that's what I'll call him." He glanced at the brown gelding. "Hear that?" he said. The gelding trotted loosely, unhinged, tail swishing at the few flies buzzing at his flanks, eyes fixed on the distance in front of them.

Chapter ten:

Another week went by and then another and George began to feel aimless. Being alone no longer felt desirable and each day he hoped to come upon a camp or dwelling of some kind, any kind. Every time one came into view though, he skirted it, fearing that encountering someone would only lead him to discover that he'd forgotten how to speak. His horses were gaunt, but their muscles had been toughened by the miles and they obeyed his demands without a falter. They were now riding through grasslands, lush and ripe for cattle grazing, punctuated by mesquite that were at once bushes and trees. Where the bark cracked, the wood showed through red, a blush of something secret, and the leaves green with a brilliance as if trying to compete with the colorful birds that lived in the branches.

Before him a mountain range, covered in low, gnarled shrubs rose and he pushed his horses towards it. He felt a draw to them somehow, as if there was someone or something calling him there. He came upon a stream-bed. A small trickle of water spilled along the rocks in the bottom, overarched with silvery sycamores. George dismounted and let his horses drink, walking to a sycamore and laying his hand against its trunk. He pulled back surprised, the bark that look smooth, hairy beneath his touch. He ran his hand over it again, feeling the texture of each hair on his palm soft, velvet-like or the way he'd always imagined a seal would feel when he saw the drawings in an encyclopedia as a child.

Both horses' heads snapped up, their ears twitching, their nostrils wide and sucking in air. George looked in the direction of their gaze. A man leading a black donkey came down the edge of the stream-bed, carefully picking their way between the rocks. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, pulled low to shade his face, and his clothes hung loose and dusty from his wiry frame. The don-

key was heavily laden, the packs covered in white canvas, and he plodded resignedly behind his master.

For a moment George thought about mounting and riding away so he wouldn't have to exchange any words with the man, but just as he began to gather Wet Blanket's reins he stopped, feeling the man notice his presence and instead of mounting he untied his canteen and bent to fill it in the cool trickle of water.

"Hola," the man called, a hundred feet still between them and despite the lowness of the hat-brim George could see the man smile, wide, toothy, and friendly.

"Hello," George answered. He didn't know Spanish, but he did know that hola meant hello. He tied his canteen back onto the saddle as the man came up beside him. Wet Blanket reached his nose to sniff the donkey, then squealed, pawing the air with his left front hoof. The man grinned and pushed his hat back, revealing a face brown and leathery.

"Ese caballo tiene fuego," he said, and then shaking his head added, "Mi burro no tiene." He laughed, a surprisingly bold laugh, that made his eyes disappear in folds of leathery skin and black eyebrows.

George shook his head. "Sorry," he said, "I don't understand."

It didn't faze the man. "Me llamo Julio," he said and then pointed to George and raised his eyebrows.

George let out a quick breath of relief, he could understand this. "George," he said.

Julio nodded and silence fell. George shifted, feeling inadequate and awkward. Julio casually checked the packs on his donkey, tightening a strap here and there. The donkey pinned his

ears and flared his lips, a partial bray escaping into the air, to which Wet Blanket responded with a snort.

“Where you going?” Julio asked.

“You speak English!” George couldn’t help but exclaim.

“Un poco,” Julio said, a smile toying at his lips. “Going to Durasno?”

“Durasno? Is it a town nearby?”

Julio waved his hand upstream, up into the mountains. “A days travel,” he said. “Minas de cobre y plata. Copper and silver mines. Soy minero.”

George nodded. A mining town. He knew about those. Maybe he could find work, stop moving for awhile. “Maybe,” he said.

“Muchas personas han encontrado buena suerte en estas montañas. Dios nos ha sonreído,” Julio said. “I make a fortune!”

“Are you leaving?” Suddenly it felt good to talk to someone and he liked the sound of Spanish as it rolled from Julio’s mouth.

“Going home to Nogales, to mi familia.” Julio squinted into the sun.

“Will you come back?”

“No, pero estas montañas son especiales.”

“What are these mountains?”

“Son especiales.” Julio pushed back his hat and grinned.

“The name,” George clarified, wondering at the same time if Julio actually had understood and was joking with him. “What are they called?” George pointed to the mountains.

“Ah, si, si.” Julio chuckled. “Se llama las Patagonias.” He too, gestured at the mountains. “Patagonias,” he said again.

“Patagonias,” George repeated. George liked the name. It sounded promising, prosperous. He wondered what the name meant, where it had come from. Who had named this range of scrub covered dirt and rock? In that moment of wondering he made the decision to try his luck in Durasno.

“Durasno,” George said, “just up the stream?”

“Follow the stream. A days travel.”

“Thank you.” George felt like he should offer Julio something, if not for the information then for the extended friendship. He dug into his saddlebags, but the only thing that could remotely resemble a gift was a white handkerchief with G.W. embroidered in the corner, Aurora’s embroidery, slightly uneven. It’d have to do. He held it out to Julio.

“No payment,” Julio said.

“For friendship then,” George said.

Julio took a small stone from his pocket, black and smooth, almost translucent in the sun, and held it out to George. “Friendship,” he said and they exchanged handkerchief and rock, both knowing that the objects held a significant meaning to the other.

“See you another day,” Julio said.

George smiled. It was the kind of farewell that would be exchanged between friends and he was grateful for it. “See you another day,” he responded and parted ways with Julio, following the stream-bed into the mountains and feeling certain of his way.

“Que el sol brille sobre ti,” Julio called after him and even though George didn’t know what the words meant, he had a feeling they were wishing him luck.

Durasno lay tucked in the center of the Patagonia mountains, at the convergence of three draws, where a spring ran from a rock outcropping and formed the stream which George had followed. It was more of a camp than a town, made up of tents and rude wooden structures, but George could see a store, a saloon, and a livery stable just on the closest end of the town. When George entered the town, the only life were three women bent over washboards, scrubbing dust and grease from shirts and trousers. The women’s long black hair shone and fell in heavy braids over their shoulders and their skirts were tied up leaving their legs bare to their knees. Their feet were bare as well. Behind them a copse of trees spread in what looked like an orchard.

One of the women straightened at the sound of horse hooves and shaded her eyes. George swung down from the saddle and tied his horses to a nearby tree, before approaching the women.

“You a miner? Looking for work?” the woman asked, before he could say anything. The other two women, who George now saw were younger than the woman addressing him, continuing washing, slapping the damp clothes on the washboard and scrubbing. Their sleeves rolled up, showed their muscles, taut and strong. George watched them flex with the women’s movements, the skin that covered them chapped and rough.

“Looking for work?” The older woman repeated.

George pulled his gaze from the young women’s arms and faced the sharp look of the older woman. “Yes,” he said.

The woman held a pair of trousers in her worn, brown hands. She tilted her head towards a wooden structure. A sign on the door said, OFFICE. “There,” she said, “they hire there.”

“For mining?” George asked, not wanting to leave the presence of these women.

“Yes,” she said, “for mines.” Her tone indicated that he should know this. After all, it was a mining community.

“Thank you,” he said and moved towards the OFFICE quickly. He knew she watched him walk away, as if making sure he went where he was supposed to. He knocked on the OFFICE door and after seconds had passed, a tired voice said, “Enter.”

George ducked through the door into the dimness of the building. The only light filtered through the cracks in the walls, casting a strange kind of light that took a moment to adjust to. Once he did, he saw that the owner of the voice was a stooped and grizzled man, who must have once been tall, taller even than George himself.

“And who are you?” the man asked, not unpleasantly, but not pleasantly either.

“George Atkins. I’m looking for work.”

“Aren’t we all.” The man went back to the papers on his desk, scratching notes on a map in cramped handwriting that in all likelihood only he could read.

George cleared his throat. “Work, sir? Is there any to be had here?”

“Of course,” the man cackled, drily. “There’s always work here.” He wrote some more notes, crossed out a few he’d already written. “What do you know of mining?”

“Not much,” George admitted, “but I’m a hard-worker and I’ll do anything.”

“Anything, huh?”

“Yes.”

“What do you know if you don’t know mining?”

George hesitated. Bricks. He knew brick making, but did he really travel all this way to just make bricks? “Bricks,” he said finally.

“Bricks?” The man raised one eyebrow. “How to build with them or make them?”

“Both.”

The man leaned back in his chair. It groaned. He scratched his beard and picked up a cigar from his desk. Striking a match on his boot, he lit the cigar and blew smoke into the confines of the building. “Might be something,” he said, “I’ll need to think on it. Meantime, you know how to work a pickaxe?”

“Yes, sir,” George said, “I could.”

The man nodded. “Good. Go find a place to spend the night. Come back at six tomorrow morning. You can go out with the morning crew.” He waved George away, turning, once again to the maps spread on his desk. He moved his finger over them and then mumbled, “Here, we could build it here.” He pressed his thumb on the map.

“You are?” George asked, pausing at the door.

“David Harshaw,” the man said, “owner of the mine.”

Chapter eleven:

Dear Jack,

I hardly know how to begin this letter, much less what to say to you. Part of me wants to say I'm sorry, for the way I left, for the way I acted. I need you to understand that I had to leave. It was too hard to stay there...

George reread the words he'd written. He crumpled the paper and threw it into the fire. It caught quickly and he watched as it turned orange with flame and then disappeared in grey ash. He smoothed a fresh piece of paper on the small table in the cramped, drafty room he'd rented at the back of the boarding house. The room had been built with haste, a last minute addition to the building, leaving cracks in the walls, but it was nice to have a roof over his head and a bed to sleep in.

Dear Jack,

I have arrived in a mining town in the mountains of Arizona territory and am working, for the time being, in the mines. The place is now called Harshaw and has recently acquired a post office, making it officially a town to be put on a map. The mines are rich and there is talk of building a twenty-stamp mill. I have hopes that my brick making skills will be needed and...

George set his pen down and sighed. His words stared back at him, impersonal, but he couldn't afford to start over. This would have to do. He bent to writing, again.

I am making plans to build a brickyard, if not here then elsewhere. I am in need of a brick mold to make this happen and I am hoping you will do a favor for me, brother, and find one for me, sending it to me here. I've included money to cover some of the costs and will send more to

cover the balance once I know just what the costs are. I will be grateful to you. I almost wrote father.

How is everyone? I do miss you all and send my love.

Your brother, George

George blew on the ink to dry it. This letter would have to do for now.

George plucked a peach and bit into it. Juice ran down his arm, leaving a sticky trail in the dust gathered on his skin. He tasted the sweetness of the fruit and the bitterness of the un-ripeness, enjoying the sensation as he did as a child, eating fruit from orchard trees, daring his brother to eat ones even less ripe.

“You know those aren’t ripe,” Marisol stood with her hands on her hips, her eyes sharp and accusatory.

“I know,” George said. Over the past weeks he’d come to know Marisol as the matriarch of the community, not only did she wash the miners’ clothes, but she fed, housed, and entertained them, running a saloon, dancehall, and a boarding house. He rented his room from her and learned to abide by her rules.

“Stop eating them,” she said. Her tone left no room for argument.

“Yes, ma’am.” George ducked away from the peach trees that had been left to grow wild and untrimmed for years, producing their fruit high in the branches, so that children were enlisted to climb them come harvest time and pick the fruit, dropping the peaches into skirts held out to receive them, keeping them from hitting the ground and bruising or splitting open.

George made his way back to the center of town. It was Sunday and he had a feeling of aimlessness, almost wishing that the mining didn't observe the holy day, but the inhabitants were steeped in the teachings of missionaries who had settled the area and planted the peach trees years ago. The men he worked with tried convincing him to come to mass, but George kept putting them off, saying, "Maybe next week," and Sundays had become days of restlessness. He wished he would hear from Jack. If he had a brickyard, he wouldn't have to stop working, ever.

David Harshaw stood outside his office, smoking. He motioned George over and offered him tobacco. George filled his pipe and waited for David to speak. He could tell the man was milling something over.

"Looks like we'll get the mill," David said finally. He tapped ash from his pipe. "That empty plot to the west, it'd be a good place for a brickyard."

"It would," George responded, knowing David had something further to say.

"I'll let you have it for a thousand bricks," David said.

George watched the smoke from their pipes rise into the clear air. Down the canyon, a woodpecker drummed on a sycamore. "Five hundred," George said. His father had taught him to always counter-offer much lower than what you were willing to pay. It gave more room to bargain.

"Nine hundred."

"Six hundred fifty."

David laughed, more of a scoff, than a laugh. "Eight fifty and I'll loan you tools for building without charge."

“Eight hundred, the loan of tools, and you have yourself a deal,” George said. His father had also taught him to never give up easily in a bargain. It earned respect.

“Deal,” David said and they shook on it, then stood in companionable silence, smoking their pipes, and listening to the woodpecker drum away, and George felt a sliver of guilt over having made a business deal on a Sunday.

The pickaxe clanged as it hit rock, gripped a crevice, then slipped, rock still intact. George lifted the tool and swung again, willing the rock to break and give way. He let his biceps take the brunt of the force, to spare his elbow joints, something he’d learned his first week in the mine. The other miners had good-naturedly pointed out his error, laughing with each other, until finally one said, “You’re swinging all wrong, you know. Keep that up and you’ll be down the mountain, crippled, with no money.”

George had stopped, mid-swing. “I’d rather stay,” he said. “Show me how?”

“Certainly.” The man lifted his own pickaxe and swung, keeping his elbows bent, his hands tight on the handle. The pick didn’t bounce. It bit at the rock, then let go as he lifted to swing again. “Use here,” he said, touching his upper arm, “not here.” He pointed to his elbow.

George swung. His pickaxe bounced, but he kept his elbows bent and the impact landed in his biceps.

“Better.” The man grinned and held out his hand. “Antonio,” he said.

Now, George and Antonio often worked side by side, matching rhythm. They did their work in silence, but it was a companionable silence and at the end of the day they went to the

creek, washing the dirt away and sitting on the bank, letting the water soak any stiffness from their limbs.

The rock shifted and a chunk flaked off, rolling to George's feet. He kicked it away and matched his swing to Antonio's once again. The clatter of a mine cart came down the shaft and the men stopped swinging, as if they were one man. They lifted rock into the cart, piling it as high as possible, and then with a shout it was drawn back out by a series of pulleys hitched to donkeys on the outside. The miners watched it go, heading into the light of day, then turned to position their lanterns and lift their tools once more.

George wiped his forehead and went back to work. Down the line, someone began to sing and others joined in. The song was unfamiliar to George, but he matched his swings with the tempo, his mind becoming pleasantly numb with the simultaneous ringing of pickaxe on stone and song.

Dear George,

Your father would never admit it, but he is pleased you are going into brick making, even if it is miles and miles away from us. He has sent a brick mold, as you requested. I know you requested this of Jack, but Jack is in California, so I took the liberty of opening your letter to him. I've sent it along to him though, with a note of my own explaining that we have taken care of your request. I'm glad you have found a place to settle down, though did you have to choose such a dangerous place? We hear such tales about outlaws down there, that it makes me worry, so do write and tell me I am wrong.

Everyone is well here. The mining has slowed. We might move back to Denver. I'll send you our new address should this happen. I can't imagine we will before next month, but you know your father.

Be well, George.

Love, Sarah

“I have a business proposition,” George said, one evening as he and Antonio washed away the day in the cool creek. “I’m going to start a brickyard. Harshaw offered me land for eight hundred brick. I’ve got a brick mold. All I’ve got to do is build a kiln and we’d be set. Harshaw’s building a twenty-stamp mill, you know. Interested in being a partner?”

“In the brickyard?” Antonio asked. He splashed water on his face.

“Yes, I could use the help.”

“Perhaps.” Antonio pulled a stem of grass and chewed the white end of it. “It would be nice to see more sun.” He brushed dust from his clothes. “Is there enough need for brick?”

“As long as towns keep growing, there will be a need for brick,” George said. The likeness to his father in the statement startled him. He could hear his father’s voice plainly, “we will always need brick.” George had heard it too many times to count, a belief ingrained in him like a trait inherited.

“I’ll think on it,” Antonio said.

“Not too long.”

“You have others lined up?”

George shook his head. “No, I just have to get building, if I want the mill contract.”

“I’ll sleep on it,” Antonio said, but George knew it was a yes and lay awake that night drawing brickyard plans in his mind.

Three weeks later, the brickyard built, the kiln rarely cooling, George and Antonio sent the first five thousand brick stacked in wagons to the site of the twenty-stamp mill. The following week they received their first payment and sent another five thousand bricks to the mill. As George watched the wagons stacked high with brick pull away, he grinned. He brushed dirt and soot from his hands on his chaps and took his pipe from his pocket. “We are well on our way,” he said to Antonio and for the first time in a long time, George felt his life moving forward.