Tall Rider

By Brad Newby

A Novella

Chapter 1

The cowboy, mounted on his horse, stood before a gate marked with a broken K. At the farmhouse ahead, an old farmer sat in his rocking chair on the porch. A double-barreled shotgun laid across his lap.

The cowboy called out, “Mind if I come in?”

“Let’s see ya guns first,” said the farmer who had raised his shotgun to a more ready position. The farmer chewed his tobacco and spit.

The cowboy spread his long duster coat to display a pair of pistols hanging in their holsters. The cowboy traveled light. He wore chaps to keep the briars and the morning dew off his pants. He wore a sheepskin vest for warmth. His bed roll contained his sleeping gear and changes of clothes. His saddle bags contained his cooking gear, supplies, and his money.

“Ya hangs them guns on the gate and ya’ll welcome to come on in,” the farmer's eyes were focused sharply on the cowboy.

The cowboy unbuckled his holster and hung it over the gate. He didn’t mind. He never liked guns and always felt more natural without them.

“Mind if I water my horse?”

“Go ahead while ya tell me about that there horse. I’ve never seen a horse that tall, and he sure is a beautiful walnut with those four white socks and that big blaze. How tall is he?”

The cowboy dismounted his horse and led him to the water trough.

“He’s 17.3 hands tall.”

“17.3 hands? That’s almost 6 feet at his withers! Ya even taller than that and sitting up there in the saddle of that big stud ya is a sight to remember. Where ya goin’, and what’s ya bidness might be?”

“I’m headed to Sulfur Springs, and my business is my own.”

“Sulfur Springs huh? Ever been to Sulfur Springs? I wouldn’t go if’n I was ya. Nothin’ but trouble there for a strange cowboy,” the farmer looked askance at the cowboy.

“Oh, yeah? What kind of trouble?”

“The worst kind. Money. Trains goin’ through just ten miles outside of town. Sheriff Bosley and his nephews, Judge Lawler, and all them bidnessmen in town own the contract to build that piece of track. Some of that money is goin’ to local folks who got work on the train tracks, but most go to them Chinamen, Injuns, and thugs they brought in for labor.”

The cowboy said, “Sounds normal to me, so where’s the problem?”

The old farmer continued, “So, all the local bidnesses jacked up them prices to keep the undesirables out of town and livin’ in their tent city out by the tracks. But they raised the prices so much an ordinary man can’t afford to live. Most things is four times what it otta be. All that gold is just linin’ the pockets of the bidnessmen and politicians. Then there was Blackie Duff. He’d kill ya just like spittin’ in your eye.”

“Was? You said *was*,” curious, the cowboy asked.

“Blackie’s the gun-slinger the town hired to keep the workers in line and out of town. Last week, Tad Wilson’s oldest got a bee in his bonnet and drew down on Blackie. Some said Wilson drew first. Some said he was just plain faster. Anyway, Judge Lawler found ‘em guilty of murder and ordered ‘em hanged. That’s what they did, and the gallows are still there. That’s why I’m nervous about ya. Ya’ll looks like the type they might hire to replace Blackie.”

“Is everyone in on the plunder?”

“Yep, all the town council is except for that whore Abigail. She owns the Gold Rush Hotel, saloon, and whore house. But she refused to raise her prices, and that has kept her bidness hoppin’.”

The cowboy mounted his horse and asked, “So how long you figure it will take me to get there?”

“Ya shouldn’t run into any problems, but still, it will take ya a hard ride to get there before dark. Just follow that trail over there.” He pointed to the right and back. “When ya come to the fork, ya stay right.”

“Thanks, Mister, and God bless.”

“Hey, what was ya name again?”

“Luke, Luke Stryker.”

Luke retrieved his holster and guns from the gate and headed down the trail.

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Luke galloped over the last ridge that overlooked the town of Sulfur Springs. He had made good time, better than expected. His steed well lathered and breathing hard. He gave him a pat on his side and turned his reins loose so he could saunter into town at his own speed. Quiet had settled over the town in the late afternoon. The blue sky started to yellow as the evening breeze blew off the heat off the afternoon.

The livery stable stood on this end of town. On the other side of the street, a church spire could be seen with a beautiful Victorian mansion next door. Luke thought *there’s money*.

Partway down the street, a small gathering of men sat in front of the sheriff’s office. Luke’s stomach turned at the sight of the gallows in the town square. The grand old Gold Rush Hotel and saloon stood at the far end of the business district.

Luke dismounted and walked his horse up to the livery where the blacksmith pounded out a new set of horseshoes, the metal clang ringing through the shop. The blacksmith, tall and burly, looked like he could pick up a horse by himself.

He said, “Howdy.” Gave one last whack to the horseshoe and said:

“Well, I’ll be if’n that’s not the biggest thoroughbred that I’ve ever seen. That’s a fine-looking stud. Big as you are, you’d need a horse that big. How tall is he?”

“Howdy. He’s 17.3 hands tall. Do you run the livery too?”

“Yeah, I run the livery too. They call me Smitty, what’s your name?”

“Luke Stryker.”

“So, tell me the truth about that horse. Ain’t no thoroughbred that stands 17.3 hands tall.”

“Well, the breeder told me that he’s a cross between a Clydesdale and a thoroughbred. From my point of view, Lightning here is almost as fast as a thoroughbred but he has a lot more stamina.”

“Well, I’ll be. I have never heard of such a thing, but I believe what my eyes are seein’. So, what can I do for you, Luke?”

“I need to lay-up my horse for a week.”

“That will be seven dollars, Luke.”

“Seven dollars? That’s a dollar a day for what should be two-bits! That’s highway robbery.”

“Take it or leave it, mister, that’s the going price in this town. Stay and you’ll find out.”

Luke lit a cigarillo, clinched it in his teeth and gave Smitty a long icy stare. He said with slow measured words, “Well, I guess I don’t have no choice.” He tossed Smitty seven silver-dollars, one at a time.

“You got a boy to wash down my horse and walk him?”

“That boy over there has a touch with horses. Freddy, come here, boy. Take care of this gentleman’s horse.”

Freddy scooted across the street and ran right up to Luke. “Yes, sir! You need your horse taken care of?”

“Well, he’s a pretty big horse. Do you think you can handle him?”

The boy didn’t hesitate, walked right over to the horse and with no fear petted him on the nose, raised his lip and checked his bite. “Never met a horse that didn’t take to me. What’s his name?”

“Lightning.”

Luke thought: This is certainly an eager lad. He seems trustworthy too.

“How old are you boy? Don’t your parents mind you being out after dinner?”

“I’ll be eleven next month. And no, they don’t mind. They’re dead. I live here in the stables, and that’s okay, I love horses.”

“I’ll tell you what, Freddy. Given the going rate in this town, I’ll give you a dollar if you wash down Lightning, walk and brush him every day and make sure he doesn’t get off his feed.”

“A dollar! Okay, mister, I mean sir.” The boy took Lightning’s reins and led him to the washing stall.

“You come to find me at the Gold Rush Hotel if there’s anything wrong. Okay?”

Luke had to smile at the young hand who so clearly had a love for horses and was a natural at handling them.

Luke knew there’d be trouble with Sheriff Bosley and figured he might as well get on with it. He threw his bedroll and saddlebags over his shoulder and walked towards the sheriff’s office. The sheriff, with his chair tilting back against his office door, looked like he didn’t have a care in the world. He wore his guns slung low like a gunslinger. Luke could sense the sheriff’s tough-guy bully attitude and wondered how many men he had killed. He had two young men in his company. Their faces looked similar to the sheriff; they were ringers for his nephews. Both had deputies’ badges and carried shotguns.

Luke tried to walk around the small crowd, but the two deputies blocked him.

“I’ll be having your guns,” the sheriff said as he licked the paper on his cigarette. “Slow and easy.”

Luke slowly turned around and spread his duster to show his pistols.

“Unbuckle them and hand them over to my nephew.”

The sheriff finished rolling his cigarette and lit it.

“What’s going on sheriff? Why the rough treatment?”

“We got a bunch of undesirables working on the railroad tracks. Until they’re gone, no guns are permitted in town. You need ‘em, come see me. Meanwhile, I need to collect a two-dollar toll,” the sheriff said.

“Toll? There’s a toll here?”

“Yep. Two dollars. That’s one dollar for entering the town and one for leaving either headfirst or feetfirst. If’n you don’t live to leave on your own accord; the second dollar goes to the McCormick brothers who will build you a coffin and bury you in Potter’s field. If’n you do live, the second dollar goes to the Children’s Fund,” the sheriff said, and the deputies laughed.

Luke took a cigarillo from its pouch, clinched it between his teeth, struck a match, and lit the cigarillo. He let the match burn down to his fingers until it had burned out. He sneered at the sheriff sending a clear message that the strong-arm tactics didn’t intimate him.

Luke picked two one-dollar coins from his shirt pocket and tossed them on the walkway, the deputies scrambled to pick them up before they fell between the floorboards. Luke turned around to leave through the opening left by the deputies.

“Wait a minute, stud. What’s your name and what’s your business here in town?” the sheriff said.

Without turning around Luke continued to walk off and said, “Luke. Luke Stryker. I plan to get a week’s worth of rest and then maybe look for some work. Maybe I’ll just move on.” Then he set-off walking toward the bank, his saddle bags and bedroll over his shoulder. One deputy made a move to chase after him, but the sheriff blocked him with his boot and the deputy fell sprawled out on the floorboards.

The sheriff talked loudly so Luke could hear him, “I think there may be more to Mr. Stryker than he lets on. Let’s just keep our distance for now and see what he does.”

Luke crossed the dirt street to the bank. A little whirlwind blew dust at Luke. He entered the bank and the man working on a ledger at the counter greeted him.

“Hello. I am Norman Woodson. How can I help you?” Mr. Woodson was dressed in a fine three-piece suit with a gold pocket watch and fob, all the signs of a bank owner.

“I need a safety deposit box for the next week.”

“Fine, fine. I am sure we have a box that meets your requirements. How big of a box do you need?”

Luke hefted his saddlebags and placed them on the counter. “I can empty out the contents if you can assure my privacy.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Our large box will handle those, and we always assure your security and privacy. Now about the fee. Since it’s only for a week or so, we charge a dollar for the initial deposit and a dollar for each withdrawal.”

“Mr. Woodson, I’ve traveled a lot and used banks wherever I go. A usual fee is two-bits a month. Do I appear to be ignorant? Am I an undesirable?”

“No. Of course not, sir. That is the rate at this bank in this town.”

“Does the town council pay this rate?”

“Yes, all new accounts pay this rate. But we honor the rate when existing accounts were established.”

Luke glared and spit towards the spittoon across the room, missing it by several feet. “Ok.”

“Now then, may I have your name?”

“Luke Stryker.”

“Just sign the ledger here and follow me.”

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Crickets chirped as the evening chill settled in the early dusk. Luke passed the gallows and headed for the Gold Rush Hotel. It sounded like a lively night inside. Luke stepped through the double-dutch doors into the noisy, smoky saloon. The stools at the bar were almost filled. A noise brought his attention to a card game being played by four men. It could be a big game based on the riotous antics of the men with every card played. Luke noticed the dealer, the only man in the saloon wearing a gun. There were two ladies that were young and cute and flimsily dressed in bustiers and long silk skirts and slippers. The young girls were hanging on the shoulders of two players, no doubt their prospective winners. A third young lady, dressed like the other two, leaned against the back wall smoking a cigarette and looking disenchanted with the action at the table. Quite young, she barely filled out her bustier.

Luke turned his attention back to the bar and the bartender. In the mirror, he saw the reflection of a sawed-off shotgun under the bar. At the other end of the bar stood a pretty lady in finer, more modest clothes than the girls wore. Her blonde hair piled high on her head, subtle make-up, earrings, and had a bustle on her backside. He admired her body. Luke knew her. They had met years ago and had a brief but intense love affair. But he didn’t know if she’d remember him right off, so he planned to play her and see how long it took her to recognize him. He stepped towards her to introduce himself and tipped his hat.

“Howdy, ma’am. You must be the proprietor of this establishment.”

“Luke? I can’t believe it’s you! It’s been ten years!”

“I thought it would take you at least a few minutes to recognize me.”

“Luke, how could I not recognize you? You haven’t changed one bit. It’s truly uncanny, but you literally haven’t changed. It’s not possible.

“Well, Abigail, you are every bit as beautiful as ever. You haven’t changed either.”

“I was just a girl. I was only nineteen. And you, I don’t know how old you were.”

“Can we sit and have a beer?”

“Of course. Barkeep, bring us two beers”

Luke took the first two stools at the end of the bar and supported her hand while she sat down.

“So, tell me, Luke, why are you in town? I know it’s not to see me.”

“That’s exactly why I am here. I would have passed within a day’s ride of Sulphur Springs, and I could never forgive myself if I didn’t stop to see you. I think of you often.”

“So, what do you do around here?” Luke asked as he perused the whole room.

“I inherited all of this almost ten years ago to the day. I own the hotel, the saloon, and I manage the girls.”

“So, that’s why you disappeared after five beautiful days ten years ago?”

“Yes, my father took suddenly ill. He died a couple of days after I got home.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear about that.”

“He had a good life. Anyway, I inherited all of this and I haven’t had a moment's rest since.”

“This may be a great coincidence. I have time to take a holiday, at least seven days. And, of course, I am going to stay in your hotel. We are sure to bump into each other.”

“Oh, that will be wonderful. I remember bumping into you a couple of nights in Dallas. Nights to remember.”

“I’m impressed that you remember. I know I recall them in great detail.”

“Of course, you’ll be staying as my guest and that includes breakfast that I rustle up myself.”

“That’s much too generous especially considering the other charges I’ve already paid today. It cost me ten dollars just to get this far.”

“Yes, sir, I bet it did. And I am pretty sure you didn’t stop in the General Store or get a haircut yet. Let me buy you a whiskey.”

“No, beer is fine. I don’t drink no hard liquor.”

“Barkeep bring us two more beers,” Abigail said.

There was a pause in the discussion and Luke took a healthy swig of his beer. They seemed to be getting along remarkably well for a ten-year-old romance. She brought up the euphemistic bump in the night, and that can’t be bad.

“Luke, are you married?”

“No, I’ve never been married, but I have been in love more than once. Why do you ask?”

Abigail just blurted out. “Luke, in the ten years that I’ve owned this place, there has never been so handsome a man come through those doors as you. You make me feel flush like I’m nineteen again.” She blushed.

“Abigail, you’re a fine-looking woman. You shouldn’t be ashamed ­”

Suddenly, the poker game erupted with noise of accusations that someone had cheated. Luke watched as the armed man collected the pot. The others were angry and making motions toward the door. The two girls who had been hanging around the table hoping for a customer had left the table disappointed. They had lost their bets too. The armed man went straight to the girl that had been leaning against the wall by herself.

“Ok Posey, you’re the one I want,” said the armed man.

“No, no. Not you. Not ever,” she cried and looked about the room for help. Panic clear on her face.

Luke turned on his stool and jumped to intercede; he planted himself between the man and the young girl. He spun about toward the armed man.

“I do believe the lady said no. Now go home and sleep it off,” Luke said.

The armed man let his hand drop down to his pistol but then seemed to change his mind.

“What business is it of yours?”

Abigail interjected, “He’s always been a ruffian, too rough for my girls, but last week he beat-up Posey really bad. You can still see the worst of it. He’ll not touch one of my girls ever again.”

“I guess that’s it then. Barred for life,” Luke said, glaring at the armed man.

The man huffed, turned to leave, but said: “Don’t think that’s the end of this cowboy.” He kicked a chair out of the way and stomped out the door.

The whole room breathed a sigh of relief and began to return to normal. Abigail slipped her hand under Luke’s arm and led him back to the bar. Luke took this as an invitation and put his hand on her hand. The poker players had already left. Looking weary, the three girls trudged the stairs to retire for the night.

Abigail announced, “It’s midnight and the saloon is closed. Let’s all go home.”

“Abigail, who is that man and why is he allowed to wear guns?”

“That’s Guy Fredricks the preacher. He doesn’t have an interest in the railroad contract, but he’s on the inside with those that do. Bosley may consider him to be an asset because he lets him keep his guns.”

“Preacher? Carrying guns, playing poker, drinking and whoring? That’s no preacher I’ve ever heard of.”

Abigail said “Well, it gets worse. He owns that gorgeous mansion next to the church, and he didn’t inherit the money. He makes the congregation tithe twenty percent of their pay for fear of eternal damnation. Then, once a week he goes up to the labor camps, preaches and collects money for the phony Children’s Fund. He ain’t no preacher. Since we don’t have a real church, most nights the girls and I read the scripture together; our own little Bible study group.”

“Abigail, you’re a good woman. By the way, I sure appreciate that compliment you gave me before the excitement broke out. I’m afraid I might have blushed a bit.”

Luke’s directness caused Abigail to blush again. She took the stool next to Luke.

Abigail said, “Barkeep, I’ll have a brandy and another beer for Luke. Then, you can go home.”

“So, Luke, how long has it been since you were in love?”

“Oh, I don’t know Abigail. It’s been a long time. A really long time.”

“Tell me about her.”

“I passed through the town of her first assignment after the teacher’s college. She had black hair, porcelain skin, freckles, and blue eyes. Just a little wisp of a thing. She was beautiful. She could laugh and loved the idea of being in love.”

“What happened?”

“As I said, she loved the idea of being in love. She didn’t have a very realistic outlook about me, and there came a day when I had to move on. I caught her off-guard like I never gave her any warning. I broke her heart, and she haunts me to this day. But, that’s enough about me. Tell me about your lost love.”

Abigail cleared her throat and took a sip of brandy.

“Well, when I inherited this place, I had a regular string of beaus. It seems like they all came and went so fast, but none of them stood up to my standards. One boy was blonde and blue-eyed, rugged and adventurous. We were going to be married, but he wanted fame and wealth and went to California in search of gold. I tried to be strong for him but inside I died. He was my first lover. He said he would send for me as soon as he got his stake. I waited for him a long time until, one day, it didn’t seem very important anymore. He’s never been heard of again.”

“Abigail, that same story has been told a thousand times. I hope you don’t feel any regret about it. You couldn’t do anything else except hold him back and that’s no way to start a marriage.”

Abigail put her hand on Luke’s knee and he put his hand on her hand.

“Luke, do you think you could fall in love again?”

“I know it. I also know how it will turn-out. Sooner or later, I’ll have to leave. So, I try to not get too involved for fear I’ll break another heart. It would have to be a strong woman before I could risk her heart.

“Luke, I’m a strong woman.”

“I know that you are, you have to be plenty strong to run this place by yourself.”

“I’m not a starry-eyed young girl anymore.”

She smiled, slipped her hand under Luke’s arm and said: “Com’on, I’ll show you to your room.”

They walked up the stairs and Abigail said that she would give him the best room at the top of the stairs where he could keep an eye on things. Luke admired the room and threw his bedroll on the bed. Abigail turned Luke around and placed her hands on his chest. She had to arch her back so she could see his eyes. She spoke in a soft voice.

“Luke, I’m afraid that’s not going to be the end of it with the preacher. I expect the sheriff will do his bidding and he’s like a bull terrier. I’ll bet that he will goad you into defending yourself so that he can throw you in jail and give you a real beating. I’ve got a shotgun behind the bar. I want you to protect yourself.”

“Abigail, I appreciate your concern, but I’ve never needed a gun before, and I don’t need one now. I’ve taken some fierce beatings in my life and they didn’t kill me. And Abigail, listen to me and promise me that no matter what happens you won’t go for that shotgun or try to interfere. I can protect myself, but I can’t be certain of protecting someone else in the midst of a fight.”

“Oh Luke, I don’t want to lose you, not again. How can you stand up unarmed against a six-shooter?”

“I have before, and I will again. God works in mysterious ways and has never failed me. Try not to worry about me.”

Abigail cupped his head in her hands and pulled him down into a kiss that expressed all the longing in her heart for this man. Luke’s hands were around her waist and pressed her body into his and she moaned. Her tongue searched out his and they tingled with the electricity of their embrace. His hands roamed over her bottom then he released her, and their kiss broke.

“I thought you felt that way,” Luke mused.

“Oh, I do. I feel every bit like that,” Abigail said almost breathless.

“I think we should get some rest. I’ve had a long day. Tomorrow’s another day,” Luke said as he released her hand.

“Goodnight,” Abigail wished.

Chapter 2

Abigail served everyone a breakfast of fried eggs, grits, link sausage, and toast. Luke, the girls, and Abigail ate together around a poker table. Luke could hardly get enough to eat. He shoveled in the food so fast he could hardly maintain the conversation.

“Abigail, you’ve found your way into my heart. I’m used to hard-tack and beans. I can’t wait to see what you can rustle up for dinner,” Luke said.

After the girls returned to their rooms, Luke and Abigail enjoyed their last cup of coffee and a chance to talk in private.

“Now, what are my options for a bath?” Luke asked.

“Well,” Abigail said, “there’s the bath-house out behind the General store, but Rudy Finch will charge you a dollar for a bath, maybe another dollar for soap,” Abigail said. “Or, there’s a nice swimming hole down at the creek. Just ride out of town to the north and when you get to the creek just turn left and ride to the third hump along the trail.”

“That sounds just fine. After I get back, I’d like to talk to the girls.”

“Talk to the girls? Whatever for?” asked Abigail looking a bit disappointed.

“I’d just like to understand why they do what they do. I don’t think they are bad girls; they’re just caught up in life’s circumstances.”

“That’s right,” Abigail said. “Two years ago, they came riding up on their buckboard like their hair was on fire. They were escaping a bad situation at a mining camp where they were treated just like prisoners. Well, I could tell these weren’t hardened prostitutes, they’re just young girls. They must make a living and, if it’s not working for me, then it will be working the streets in some big town, which is more than dangerous. I took them under my wing. We have an arrangement that’s more than fair, and I protect them and keep a roof over their heads. I keep them fed and see to their medical needs. Everybody’s happy.”

“How old are they?”

“Posey is sixteen, Josie is seventeen, and Mary is nineteen going on thirty. I know, that’s pretty young for a prostitute. But the age of consent in Texas is only fourteen.”

“Like I said, and I’ll stand on this position, they’re too young. Now I think I’m going to go find that swimming hole.”

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Another beautiful fall day. The nights and mornings could be brisk, but toasty warm in the daytime. The skies were crystal clear, not a cloud to be found, and only the slightest breeze. A good day for a swim. Luke left his duster and chaps behind and just wore his sheepskin vest with his jeans and shirt. Still, sweat dripped off the tip of his nose. Luke took off the vest.

Luke rode Lightning in a canter heading north and, in about a mile, he found the tree-lined creek filled with large boulders being washed by the currents in the stream. The slight odor of sulfur filled the air. He turned to follow the creek and rode through a field of winter wheat following the directions to the swimming hole. He found the third hump in the trail only a few hundred yards from where he had turned off the road.

Luke unsaddled Lightning, hobbled his front legs and set him free to graze. Luke gathered up his spare clothes and a bar of soap from his bedroll, stripped down and waded into the swimming hole. The water was cool and exhilarating. Large boulders outlined the swimming hole, kept fresh by a small set of rapids. It was between three and five feet deep. He would wash a piece of clothing then lay it out on the big boulders to dry. He had just finished washing his clothes and himself when he heard a buckboard coming. He spied with a little anticipation in that direction. He saw Abigail, dressed for a Sunday outing and carrying a fancy umbrella to protect herself from the sun. She pulled the buckboard up next to Lightning and climbed down.

Luke yelled, “I’ll get out, just give me a minute while I get dressed.”

“Luke, you stay right where you are and don’t do a thing. I’m comin’ in.”

Luke watched as Abigail used the buckboard for privacy from anyone approaching the creek, but Luke had an unobstructed view. She stood in the shadow of the wagon and turned her back to Luke. Abigail undressed and hung her clothes on the buckboard. She turned around so Luke could see her. Standing there naked, she blushed. She covered her private areas with her hands, as best she could, climbed down the rocks, and waded into the pool. Luke watched her. She hadn’t changed, still beautiful, and he wanted her.

“Surprised to see me?” Abigail said.

“Somewhat. You picked the spot, but I had no idea you would come,” Luke said.

“It’s all a plan, we couldn’t have you bathing in Rudy Finch’s dirty pool,” Abigail said, “besides I couldn’t join you without causing a scene.”

“No, that wouldn’t do. This is a far better solution.”

In the knee-high water, Luke stood naked and exposed. He was proud of his lean and muscular body and a washboard stomach. A bit embarrassed though, he stepped back a few feet into deeper water.

Abigail dropped her hands and waded in further. Luke admired her body. A strong woman for sure, but soft, warm and inviting.

Abigail put her hands around his neck and pulled him down into a deep kiss. Her mouth hungry, her tongue seeking out his. She released him, stretched her arms around him and pressed her face onto his chest.

“Oh, Luke. I’ve never forgotten our nights together in Dallas. I want you so much and I know we don’t have much time.

“I wanted you the first time I saw you again, but I didn’t expect this to happen. I could not be as forward as you. I’d be considered a masher. But with the hotel, saloon, and the girls, you have to be aggressive to survive in a man’s world. I’m sure that it’s your instinct.”

“Time?”

“You’re right. I don’t have a schedule, but ultimately, I’ll have to leave.”

He placed one hand on her derriere and one on the small of her back and bent her over in a deep kiss. She pressed against his muscular chest and she reached down and caressed him. Luke, bent over and kissed her on the shoulder, then on the neck. His desire for her could not get much greater, but for her sake, he feared to be reckless.

“What if you get pregnant?”

“If it’s yours I don’t care. Every woman deserves a child and I am well into my childbearing years with no children and no prospects.”

“But you have to understand that I can’t stay. You’ll be alone.”

“I’m a powerful businesswoman, Luke. I’m more than capable of raising a child by myself. Besides, I want you more than any man I’ve ever met. If you don’t take me then I will take you for sure.”

Luke laid her over on her back and somehow held her floating just on the surface of the water. He supported her backside with his hands. Abigail floated in his arms on the surface of the water, until her breath got short and she panicked a little, feeling no sensation of the ground. Luke reassured her with a supporting grasp to steady her. He was gentle but passionate. Abigail moaned and clutched him more firmly. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Her breath short, panting, she writhed trashing the water around them. Like a volcano it came, all at once and both together. And they slowed, caught in a flame of lasting desire.

Still floating on the water, Abigail encouraged him to explore her. Luke’s heart raced at the thought of Abigail wanting him again. Abigail put her arms around his neck and pulled herself up to where she could kiss him. They were deep in a kiss when Luke lifted her so that she could wrap her legs around his waist. Standing, he took her, and she gasped. Her arms were around his neck and his arms were around her waist. He rocked her until her breath turned short. Abigail swooned and Luke let them sink back into the cooling waters to revive her.

“My god I love this woman.”

Afterward, Luke and Abigail lay in the shade of the buckboard. Abigail lay against his body and caressed his almost hairless chest.

“Luke, I can’t figure it out. How old are you?”

“I am older than you and probably a lot older than you think I am.”

“How? When I look at your skin you have an almost boyish quality, as if you’ve never been in the desert or the sun.”

“I suppose I’ve been blessed with great skin.”

Luke massaged Abigail’s belly, gently circling her stomach. About to doze off, a vision struck Luke like a flash of lightning and he knew. Luke turned Abigail so he could look into her eyes.

“Abigail, brace yourself.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to shock you.”

“Okay, I’m ready.”

“Abigail, you *are* pregnant. It’s a boy and he will be a great man. You will name him Peter,” said Luke.

“How do you know when I cannot. I know how a woman’s body works. It’s not my time yet.”

“Give him the best education you can and raise him to be a virtuous man. The rest will take care of itself. I’ll be around now and then to check on your welfare and, he grinned, to see if you still love me. I’ll make sure that you need for nothing. You’ve made me very happy. I wish I could stay forever, but I cannot.”

“Oh, but I want you to stay forever with me.”

“Abigail, I can’t explain now, but someday you’ll understand. I made a life-long commitment to this cross that I bear.”

“Cross? What cross?”

“You can’t see it, but I wear a cross a surely as my heart beats in my chest.”

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Posey, Josie, Mary, and Luke gathered in Mary’s room, the larger of the three rooms. Simple and austere, the room had a single large window, a small bed, and stained flowery wallpaper. It had a large armoire instead of a closet, and a dressing table with a mirror and chair. The wooden plank floor had no finish.

The girls were dressed only in their bloomers and bustiers, but they seemed comfortable. In the early afternoon light, and without makeup, Luke could see the bruises on Posey’s face even though they had had a week to heal.

“I’m not here to judge or preach. I just want to talk openly about prostitution: how you got there and where you are goin’. How did you girls come to be prostitutes?” asked Luke.

Posey spoke up first. “At fourteen, my father sold me to a miner for a horse and ten dollars, that’s a lot for a poor dirt farmer,” you could see the longing in her face for her lost family.

“He bought me to be his wife, but he just beat me up all the time. He didn’t marry me, though he had me plenty,” with tears in her eyes.

“He just got tired of me and sold me to another miner who intended to make a regular profit on me. That’s when I met Josie and Mary,” she nodded in their direction and showed a bit of relief on her face.

Josie said, “My story is pretty much the same, except my father raped me every night,” she nodded and showed a stiff upper lip.

“I ran away without a dime or anything except the clothes on my back,” Josie said.

“A cowboy took me to the miner’s camp and sold me into servitude. I don’t know how much he got for me, but to work it off would take three years. I escaped after a year,” and finally Josie broke down and the tears flowed.

Mary, already in tears said, “I married a nice hard-working man, a miner. A god-fearing man. He got killed when a cave collapsed.”

“His friends and other men fought over me. The toughest man won me in a brawl. A nice enough guy, he still forced me to do things I didn’t want to do. I just started to think this isn’t so bad, I might learn to like him,” she sniffled and said, “he wasn’t a bad man.”

“Then, one night over a card game he ran out of stakes and put me up for bid. He lost, and just like that, I became the property of another man who turned out to be not so nice. He watched while his friends had me,” her voice quaking.

“After a while, he sold me to the whorehouse madam,” Mary expelled air in relief of her story being told.

“So, you were all sold into servitude through no fault of your own,” Luke said. “And now that you’ve escaped why do you continue to be prostitutes?”

Mary, who appeared to be the well-spoken leader of the three, responded a bit testy. “What would you expect us to do? Our only hope is to find a husband and the odds of that happening are pretty slim given our past. What respectable man, even a farmer, would marry a prostitute. Besides, we don’t intend to do this for the rest of our lives, we have a plan.”

Josie said, “Go ahead Mary, tell him our plan.”

Mary said, “One thing we have in common is that we all sew. I can even make corsets and bustiers.”

Josie interjected, “We make all of Abigail’s clothes and our clothes too. Abigail says our clothes are nicer than most of what you see in Dallas shops.”

Mary continued, “So, the three of us have gone into business together and are saving our money to open a lady’s dress shop in some big city, and Abigail is helping us. When we get a man, Abigail handles the man and the money and only holds back two-bits for the whole night, even when we get another customer. On nights when we don’t get a customer, she doesn’t charge us anything.”

“And for that, she gives us a room, food, and pays for the doctor when we need him,” Posey said.

“So how much will this venture cost?”

Mary said, “Abigail helped us work it all out. She’s good with numbers. It will take one-hundred dollars including living expenses, while we get customers. And that includes rent for a year, materials, a sign and advertising in the local paper.”

“And how much do you have?”

“Almost twenty-five dollars, but at this rate, it will take us four more years to save up everything we need,” Mary said.

“So, for seventy-five dollars you can be free of prostitution, escape your past, and be available to the best men in society,” Luke said.

“That’s our dream,” said Josie.

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That night poker players, drinkers and those looking for some female companionship crowded the saloon. Riotous noise and dense smoke dominated the room. Because of the crowd, Abigail helped behind the bar. The girls were all busy with clients either upstairs or working them on the main floor. Luke sat at the far end of the bar, wearing his best jeans and shirt. Unusually jovial, he had finished drinking his second beer. Whenever Abigail came to his end of the bar, he’d get a chance to interject a little conversation.

“Abigail,” Luke said in half-whisper, just loud enough to rise above the noise of the room.

“What are you so cheerful about?” Abigail asked.

“I’m just happy because you’re pregnant. I’m going to have a son!” Luke whispered.

Abigail whispered, “Oh, you’re still convinced. I’ll wait for mother nature to confirm that.”

Luke said, “Well I, for one, am going to enjoy the moment. Sit down and have a beer with me.”

“Well, I guess I can unless it gets busy again,” Abigail said.

“Barkeep, bring us two beers,” Abigail yelled.

Luke threw two nickels on the bar.

Abigail said, “You don’t need to do that.”

Luke said, “No matter, I want to.”

Luke whispered, “I had a great time this morning.”

Abigail whispered, “You couldn’t have enjoyed it more than me. It has been a long, long time since I’ve been with a man.”

Luke whispered, “I doubt it’s been any longer than me. I’m not a philanderer. But what I really want to say is that I’ve never felt more loved than when I am with you.”

“Luke, I love you. You sure know how to sweep a woman off her feet.”

“Posey!” someone yelled.

Luke spun around on his barstool and saw the preacher not three feet behind him. He followed the preacher’s line-of-sight and saw Posey at the top of the stairs.

“Posey! I’ve got a bonus for you tonight!” the preacher yelled as he took one drunken step up the stairs and waved a wad of money.

“Luke,” pleaded Posey.

Luke jumped up and grabbed the preacher by the back of his belt and pulled him back down the stairs. The preacher gave Luke a stare.

“What?” the preacher exclaimed.

“Preacher! You’ve been banned from Abigail’s girls for life. You cannot beat-up the girls anymore,” Luke said, “now go home and sleep it off.”

“Luke, you aren’t going to interfere again,” said the preacher.

An obviously drunken preacher drew his gun. The room went still. Luke stood at point-blank range, but the preacher’s gun hand wobbled. Luke reached out and grabbed the preacher’s gun, aimed it high towards the ceiling, gave it a twist and broke the preacher’s trigger finger. Luke took the gun away and stuck it in his belt.

“Now, I told you to go home and sleep it off!”

“Luke, you broke my finger!”

“Yeah, and I’ll break your other fingers if you don’t leave right now.”

The preacher held his finger, swayed and stomped out the door. The noise in the saloon returned to normal if not a little louder because of some laughter. Luke returned to his barstool and his conversation with Abigail.

Abigail said, “Now I’m really afraid for you. I know that the sheriff is going to come after you.”

“Don’t worry about me, Abigail. I can take care of myself.”

“You keep forgetting that they took your guns so only the sheriff and his deputies have them.”

“Don’t forget the preacher.”

“How can you stand up to a man with a six-shooter?”

“In case you didn’t notice, I just did. Abigail, you really must stop worrying about me.”

At midnight, Abigail sent the upstairs stragglers home and closed the saloon. She sat down next to Luke.

Luke lit a cigarillo and inhaled deeply. He exhaled and Abigail waved the smoke away.

Abigail faked a cough, “Don’t you get tired of that smoke?”

“Until I came here, I only allowed myself that one luxury.”

“And now?”

“And now I have you and all this beer.”

“You can’t imagine how good it makes me feel to be compared to cigarettes and beer, “Abigail joked.

“Well, have you given any thought to tonight’s sleeping arrangements?”

“I’ve thought of little else since our swim this morning. I think we should use my room; it has a more comfortable bed and the best breeze,” Abigail said.

Luke stood and held out his arm for Abigail. She took his arm and they walked up the stairs to her room.

Chapter 3

The next morning, Luke finished another fabulous breakfast and decided to take a walk. The sunny cool day had a steady breeze. Luke donned his duster and vest for warmth and protection against the wind.

Luke wanted to visit the preacher down the street and see what kind of a preacher carried guns, gambles, drinks, and whores. He couldn’t help but walk past the sheriff’s office where the sheriff sat in the walkway in his usual pose, leaning back in his chair.

“Well hell, it’s Luke. Heard you had a run-in with Guy last night. Kind of ruined his celebration. You know he could have killed you,” the sheriff said.

“I assume that shooting an unarmed man is still murder in this town,” Luke said.

“Well, you’re probably right, but you’d still be dead,” the sheriff said.

“I’ve got the preacher’s gun to give back to him.”

“Oh, no. That’s a recipe for disaster. I’ll take the gun.”

“Fine, sheriff. It doesn’t matter to me. Now, don’t get nervous.”

Luke slowly opened his duster to display the pistol stuck in his pants. He grasped it by the butt using his left hand and handed it to the sheriff butt first.

“Thank you for being so careful. I’ll make sure that he gets this back, in due time. When you come back, stop in, I’ve got someone I want you to meet.”

Luke walked down the street to the big white-steepled building next to the grand mansion. As he climbed the steps to the entryway, Freddy came busting through the doors with tears running down his face as he quickly pulled up his pants. Luke grabbed him soft by the shoulders.

“What happened boy?”

Tears still in his eyes and huffing a cry, Freddy said he’d rather not say.

“What did you do to deserve this?”

“I…I slept during the sermon.”

“Does this kind of thing happen to you often?”

“Yeah, me and some other boys too.”

“Not the girls?”

“No, that’s rape, it’s against the law.”

“Do you tell Smitty?” Luke asked.

“No, he thinks it’s my fault. I’d just get a beating for being a pretty boy.”

“Well, you go check on Lightning and get yourself straightened away before Smitty sees you.”

Freddy limped away.

Luke began to heat-up, the blood gone from his clenched fists. His teeth grinding. He finished climbing the stairs and almost busted down the doors. Luke crossed the threshold of the church and felt nothing. *He thought: this is not the house of the Lord.*

The preacher, Guy Fredricks, stood at the altar, his clothes in disarray, his finger in a splint. Luke just barely resisted the urge to tear him limb from limb. He hollered out to Guy, “No! You will not touch those boys again!” His voice, so loud and deep that the windows rattled and dust fell from the ceiling. The preacher looked very much afraid.

“And, you stay away from those girls at the saloon. I saw what you did to Posey. You’re an animal, not fit to be with a woman. Don’t think that I can’t hurt you because I don’t have a gun. I don’t need a gun to kill you.”

Speechless, the preacher's knees quaked. Luke left and slammed the doors behind him. He walked across the street to the livery where Smitty worked hard hammering something over his fire.

“Smitty?”

“What is it, Luke?”

“Did you know the preacher is sodomizing Freddy?”

“Again? I told that boy to stay away. He’s a pretty thing and a temptation to the preacher. I’ll beat some sense into that boy’s head.”

“It’s not Freddy’s fault. It’s the devil in the preacher. He’s molesting other boys too. No doubt he’d be molesting girls too if it wasn’t statutory rape.”

“I didn’t know about the other boys. Just the same, I’ll take care of it the way I think is best.”

In a low, loud voice with measured words, Luke said “No! You will not beat that boy for something that isn’t his fault. If you strike that boy, I’ll come back and strike you harder.”

Smitty flinched at Luke’s admonition and dropped his hammer. He took a step back in a subconscious retreat.

“Maybe you’re right. He’s getting too old for the strap anyway,” Smitty said.

“I think you should stop making him go to that church. That’s not any kind of preacher I’ve ever seen. He carries a gun, drinks, gambles, whores, and sodomizes young boys.”

Luke walked back towards the hotel but saw trouble up ahead at the sheriff’s office. The sheriff and his two deputies were talking with a stranger. A beautiful roan was hitched to the post. The stranger wore black pants and a black shirt with a black leather vest. His black holster slung low. His black hat pulled down in front to shade his eyes. Luke knew him.

“Hello, Cliff,” Luke tipped his hat.

“Hello, Luke.”

The sheriff said “Wait a minute. You two know each other?”

Cliff said, “Yeah. We met up in Yuma two years back. If I had my way, he wouldn’t be standing here today.”

“So, what brings you here Cliff?”

“The sheriff hired me to be his deputy, protect the citizens from ruffians working on the railroad and so forth. He said I could start with you.”

“Now Cliff,” said the sheriff, “He’s not wearing any guns and seriously, all we want is to be rid of him. He’s a troublemaker. He’s causing problems with our preacher. So just wing him and we’ll get on with more pressing business.”

“Sheriff, I remind you that I am unarmed and to just ‘wing’ me would still be assault. I don’t want to hurt your man.”

“See Luke, you’re wrong. He’s been deputized and is granted considerable leeway in determining the appropriate level of force necessary to keep the peace. It doesn’t get sticky until someone gets killed,” said the sheriff.

Cliff stepped out away from the sheriff and into the street, establishing his turf for the coming fight. He positioned himself with the sun at his back, leaving Luke facing the sun with the glare in his eyes. Cliff acted nervous, perhaps a memory of their previous encounter back in Yuma. Luke took a silver dollar from his shirt pocket.

Luke removed his duster and threw it on the sidewalk.

Cliff said, “Luke, I’ll give you one chance to leave town,” a hardly noticeable quaver in his voice.

The sheriff said, “Ah, Cliff. Don’t try to finesse this, just shoot him in the leg or something.”

Cliff drew his gun and aimed at Luke’s legs. He fired but with unbelievable speed, Luke twitched his leg and the shot missed. Cliff fired again but Luke proved to be too fast for him or maybe Cliff just had a case of nerves. Cliff stared at Luke in disbelief. He raised his aim to Luke’s arms, shot and grazed Luke’s arm. Without a flinch, Luke raised the silver-dollar above his head, the sun reflected off it and the reflection hit Cliff right in the eyes. Cliff collapsed to his knees and holstered his gun, covering his eyes with one hand and blocking the reflection with his other. Luke put the silver-dollar back in his pocket.

The sheriff jumped up and yelled at Cliff, “What’s the matter, Cliff, you must be blind to miss him at that range.”

Cliff said, “I think I am. I can’t see.”

“You’re serious?” asked the sheriff.

Cliff said, “Dead serious. He’s gone and blinded me with that coin.”

“Boys, com’on. Get Cliff over to Doc’s. Luke, this isn’t over ‘til we hear what Doc has to say.”

Luke took his duster and put it back on, turned around and walked to the livery at a quick pace. As he hoped, he saw Freddy there with Smitty. They had clearly seen the action and heard the gunshots.

“Smitty, I need to rent a buckboard for two days.”

“With the horse that’ll be one-dollar,” Smitty said. “That’s half the price I’m supposed to charge you.”

“Thanks.”

Luke flipped him one-dollar and signaled Freddy to come over.

Freddy limped over, his eyes still glistening from tears. Luke put a tender hand on his shoulder.

“Freddy, we may have some trouble and I need your help. Can you harness a buckboard and drive it?” Freddy’s eyes lightened up.

“Sure, I’ve been doing that since I was six,” Freddy said.

Luke said, “Good. We need the two-seater buckboard. Now I want you to take Lightning and the wagon down to the General Store and tie them up. I’m going to buy some supplies. Pick the best horse, we might be in for a long ride. And bring feed bags for Lightning and the wagon horse, with enough oats for three or four days.”

“Great! Are we going on a trip?” asked Freddy.

“In a day or two, not today. How would you feel about taking a long trip? Wouldn’t you miss Smitty?”

“No, except for the beatings he treats me pretty well. But there’s no love between us. Then there’s Preacher Fredricks, I’d rather go with you.”

“Even if we never came back?”

“That’s even better,” Freddy said with a smile.

“Okay, Freddy. You are part of the team, bring anything you want to take with you, but we must keep it a secret. Hide it in the buckboard and don’t let Smitty see you. We have to keep things looking normal.”

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Foul body odor struck Luke as he walked through the door of the General Store. Large and disorganized, the store had supplies and goods stacked everywhere. As soon as he walked through the door, he encountered the owner Rudy Finch, an obese man who could tip the scales at over four hundred pounds. His chest and belly were formed from rolls of fat and he waddled when he walked.

“I know, you’re Luke. What can I help you with?” Rudy said.

“I need some supplies and some grub.”

“Goin’ on a trip?”

“Just getting ready. Probably won’t leave for a few days, but I’ve got this young Freddy to help me and I don’t want to miss that opportunity.”

“Freddy the orphan? He’s a good kid. So, what can I get you?” said Rudy.

“I’ll take a bag of beans, a back of salt pork, a bag of brown sugar, two bottles of ketchup, and two pounds of coffee.”

“Well, I see the makings of pork and beans. Not a very interesting menu.”

“You’re right, give me a small bag of cornmeal, a small bag of flour and six of those big cans of peaches. I’ll take that Dutch oven, large cooking pot, that small one, a ladle, a coffee grinder, and a coffee pot. Then I’ll take these cutting knives, this batch of eating utensils, six plates and cups. Then, I need six of those blankets.”

Luke lit a cigarillo and waited while Rudy scratched some notes on a pad.

Rudy said, “I’ve got a total for you. That’ll be seven dollars even.”

“Seven? And, what if I had children’s mouths to feed? Then how much?”

“Same amount seven dollars, it’s the same price for everyone.”

“How many customers have you had today?”

“Just you.”

“How many yesterday?”

“None. Get to the point Luke.”

“Where are the locals getting their grub and supplies?”

“They buy stuff on the black market at the railroad camps or they do without.”

“And that’s okay with you? Do you think God would say you’re a righteous man?”

“I don’t care mister and it’s none of your damn business. I’ve got a stack of IOU’s that will make me the owner of six or more properties when this railroad thing is over. Maybe more if the black market can’t supply their needs and they start coming back to me. I’m takin’ care of myself and thinkin’ in the long term. Now can we conclude this business transaction?”

“You are stealing from the mouths of babes! You are stealing land from honest hardworking farmers! You are committing the sins of gluttony and greed. And, you think you’re a righteous man? Not in God’s eyes sinner,” Luke’s voice was thunderous. He pounded his hand on the counter and the plate glass window cracked from corner to corner. Rudy, white with fear, his hands trembling, fell back into his chair.

“Repent man and you will be given a seat at the Lord’s table!”

“Go! Go ahead and take it, just leave!” Rudy pleaded.

“No. It’s not so cheap to obtain a place in heaven. Here, have your seven dollars. I hope you choke on whatever joy it brings you.”

The bell on the door chimed and Luke turned around to see Freddy enter the store. “Sir, I did what you asked, and they’re tied up out front.”

“That’s good Freddy. Now, help Mr. Finch load these supplies while I go to the bank.”

“Yes, sir.”

Luke crossed the street to the bank and went in. He found Mr. Woodson behind the counter working on his ledgers. Woodson wore a three-piece suit with a gold pocket watch and fob and fancy gold glasses. He wore spats and highly polished shoes, looking very much a city dandy.

“Mr. Woodson, I need my saddlebags back.”

“Yes, sir, that will be a one-dollar withdrawal fee.”

Luke reached into his shirt pocket and flipped a silver-dollar to the banker. Woodson disappeared into the vault and brought back his saddlebags. He lifted them up to the counter straining a bit at their weight.

Mr. Woodson asked, “Are you leaving town?”

“Yes, in a day or so. Tell me, Mr. Woodson, how are you surviving this drought? I haven’t seen any customers and, given the current circumstances, I don’t think it’s reasonable to expect any. Yet, you don’t seem to be starving and you are still wearing your fancy city suits.”

“Well, we all have to make sacrifices. Besides, I have loans to manage and soon I’ll have foreclosures to process.”

“Loans to farmers and town-folk?”

“Some.”

“Foreclosures on good hardworking farmers?”

“If it comes to that.”

“And what alternative do they have? I’ve been to the General Store and I’ve seen his prices and his equal dearth of customers.”

“Of course, I have partners. All banks do. And foreclosures are necessary, but unfortunate, part of the banking business.”

“You admit that you are part and parcel to a land grab! You are starving out families who had no alternative but to borrow money from you to survive! You are a sinner in God's eyes.”

“No, no. I am just a businessman practicing his lawful trade. How can God find any fault in that?”

“No! You are guilty of greed. Repent now and save your soul!”

Luke’s hand smashed down on the counter and broke it. The vault door swung on its hinges and fell to the floor with a thunderous boom. Luke grabbed his saddlebags and left the bank slamming the door behind him. The door split down the middle and its glass shattered.

Luke found Freddy in the buckboard with Lightning tied up to the wagon. Freddy looked a little sheepish as he looked at the bank and the damage Luke had done.

“Sir, what do you want me to do now?”

“Take it all around behind the hotel and tie it up. Then go find one of the girls and see if they can make us some lunch. I’ll meet you there.”

Luke walked across the street, passed the gallows, towards the Gold Rush. He walked through the double-dutch doors and went to Abigail, standing at the far end of the bar. Abigail, dressed in a simpler dress with her hair in a ponytail. She rushed to him, throwing her arms around him and laying her head against his chest. He smelled her perfume and it reminded him of their morning in the creek.

“Oh, Luke. We heard the gunshots and then we heard the story about Cliff. Are you alright?”

“I will be Abigail. Soon everything will be alright.”

Luke sat Abigail down on a barstool and turned her to face him.

Luke said, “Let me tell you, my plan. Tonight, well after closing, let’s say 3 AM, we are leaving for Houston. It will take three or four days to get there. I’ve got supplies in the buckboard for you and the girls and Freddy. Freddy will handle the buckboard and otherwise provide some much-needed manpower. I’ve got money for the girls to start their dress store and for you to open a new hotel. So, you see, we won’t be coming back. I need you and the girls to pack any belongings you want to take with you. Everything must appear normal.”

“Oh, Luke, could this be true? We could all start over?”

“Yes. It’s true.”

Suddenly, from outside the saloon, “Luke! I’m calling you out!” the sheriff yelled from outside the hotel.

“Abigail, don’t do anything. Do not get the shotgun. I can handle this regardless of how things might appear,” said Luke.

The sheriff stood in the middle of the street. His jacket thrown back exposing his gun. He carried Luke’s holster and guns. Luke walked to the middle of the street, about thirty feet away from Sheriff Bosley and clear of the hotel.

“Luke, you’ve become an annoyance. You’ve disrupted business at the General Store and Bank. You’ve damaged their buildings and they are afraid of you. The preacher is afraid of you. You blinded my deputy. I don’t care if you’re wearing guns or not.”

“That’s murder sheriff.”

“Nope. I’ve solved that problem too.”

The sheriff threw Luke’s guns at his feet. Luke looked down at his guns with disgust.

“Go ahead Luke, pick them up.”

“I will not. You will have to murder me.”

“I don’t think any jury will find me guilty.”

Suddenly, the sheriff drew his gun and pulled the trigger. The gun made a ‘click’ sound. The sheriff pulled the trigger again and the gun went ‘click’.

“What?” the sheriff said as he held the gun up to his eye to examine it.

The sheriff let his attention be distracted by his disbelief. In a flash, Luke tackled him. With a single swing, Luke’s fist hit the sheriff in the jaw. The sheriff fell to the ground and Luke stepped on his gun hand and ground it into the dirt. The bones in the sheriff’s hand were broken and made a crunching sound. The sheriff grabbed Luke’s ankle with his left hand and Luke stepped on that hand too, rendering it just as useless.

“Arg! Luke, I’m not the only gun in this town! I don’t know how you did that but it’s not over yet.”

Abigail ran out from her hiding spot in the hotel.

“Oh, Luke. You’re alright? What happened? I don’t understand,” Abigail said.

“I guess the sheriff forgot to load his gun.”

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In the saloon, Josie served Luke and Freddy fried corn mush and hogback as Abigail worked on her preparations. It was just high noon, still too early for business. Josie giggled.

“Is it true Luke? Abigail says that you are going to stake us to our dress store in Houston,” Josie asked.

“It’s true Josie, but we have to act normal until late tonight. If you girls get any customers tonight, I’m afraid you’ll have to take them.”

“Yes, yes! Oh, our dream is going to come true. We can take customers for one more night,” Josie said.

Just then the sheriff arrived with his nephews the deputies. They kicked in the Dutch doors and stomped into the saloon. The sheriff's hands were bandaged from his fingertips to his wrists. The deputies cocked their shotguns. Luke jumped to his feet and swept Josie and Freddy behind him.

“Luke! You’re under arrest,” the sheriff yelled.

“Josie, Freddy, get upstairs. Now!”

Abigail watched from the top of the stairs.

“Sheriff, I can’t let you take me in.”

“Well, this time I checked the shotguns myself. They’re loaded and ready. You’ll either come with me or you’ll die where you stand.”

“Boys,” said Luke, “those guns are getting too hot to handle.”

The two deputies looked at each other in disbelief. Their guns began to glow red-hot. The heat penetrated their gloves and they dropped their shotguns.

“What?” exclaimed the sheriff, “Let’s get out of here.” And the three of them made a quick exit from the saloon.

Unhurried, Abigail walked down the stairs to Luke’s side. “Now that I’ve seen it, I think I am starting to understand you. You’re a mysterious man, Luke.”

“That? That was a simple carnival trick. Hypnosis that’s all.”

Luke said, “I’m afraid they’ll be back, this time with reinforcements. Abigail, if they come back, they’ll have innocent citizens with them. I’ll have to go with them.”

“Please don’t Luke. Once he’s got you in his jail, he’ll find some way to finish you.”

“Abigail, you must understand by now that they have no real power over me. I’ll only be in jail because I want to. I can leave jail whenever I want. I’m not sure how, but I’ll turn this around to our advantage.”

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At five o’clock, there was no one in the saloon. This time the sheriff arrived with a posse of five men plus his two deputies. They arrived without fanfare, and filed into the saloon with their guns holstered, exuding confidence in their ability to accomplish their mission.

The sheriff said, “Luke you are under arrest. If you don’t come with us nice and peaceful, I’ve authorized my posse to kill you where you stand.”

“What are the charges?”

“Witchcraft.”

“Now, that’s original. The last time someone was tried for witchcraft was in the 1700’s. Why don’t you keep it simple and charge me with multiple counts of attempted murder?”

“Boys,” said the sheriff. Everybody drew their guns and cocked them.

“Okay, I’ll go peacefully.”

The sheriff’s deputies stepped forward, turned Luke around, and shackled his wrists. The posse relaxed and with some jocularity, they surrounded Luke and the two deputies. The entire group moved out the door onto the street and headed down to the sheriff’s office. The weather had taken a turn for the worse. Storm clouds hung overhead, the sky deep gray. The wind had picked up, it was colder.

The sheriff’s office had a single jail cell. They escorted Luke into the cell, his shackles were removed, and the cell closed and locked. The sheriff paid each member of his posse two-bits and dismissed them, no doubt they headed for the saloon. Luke saw his guns hanging on a peg on the wall.

“I’ve got good news for you, Luke,” said the sheriff. “I’ve convinced Judge Lawler to hold your trial tomorrow since you’re a dangerous witch. He’s going to speed-up the entire process.”

“Do I get a lawyer?”

“There are no lawyers in town, so the prosecution won’t have one either. I’ll represent the prosecution. You are expected to defend yourself.”

“I don’t think there’s any point. It sounds like you’ve stacked the deck pretty well.”

“Oh, you’ll be treated well enough. I’ve sent Abigail to get your dinner.”

The sheriff sat in his chair and propped up his feet on the desk. His bandaged hands were crossed on his chest. His hands were certain to be in pain, but he had a look of peaceful satisfaction on his face. Someone knocked on the door and the sheriff got to his feet and said: “Com’on in.”

Abigail entered carrying a picnic basket. The sheriff unlocked the small door on the jail cell door so that Abigail could pass the food through. “Sheriff, can Luke and I talk in private.”

The sheriff chuckled and grinned saying, “Abigail, do you think I was born yesterday? There is exactly no chance of anyone seeing Luke before the trial.”

Chapter 4

“Come to order, order,” shouted Judge Lawler. “I call this trial to order. Sheriff, have we assembled a jury?”

“Yes, your honor. We have these six willing citizens ready to serve as the jury.”

“Good. Now, will you read the charges against the defendant?”

“Yes, your honor. The defendant is charged with six counts of practicing witchcraft.”

An audience of forty to fifty town-folk in the saloon erupted with noise and accusations. The town had never seen a witchcraft trial. They were excited. Luke, seated on the right, his hands in shackles in front of him. He showed no sign of fear and did not react to the accusations coming from the audience. The sheriff and the jury were seated on the left, the Judge seated in the center at a poker table.

Judge Lawler asked, “Who is representing the defendant?”

The sheriff started to answer but Luke stood and said, “I am representing myself.”

Judge Lawler said, “Fine. Sheriff, you may call your first witness.”

“Your honor. The prosecution calls Reverend Guy Fredricks to the stand.”

Reverend Fredricks took the chair next to the Judge. The Judge held out the bible and said, “Do you Reverend Fredricks promise to tell the truth?”

The reverend placed his hand on the bible and said, “I do.”

“Thank you, Judge,” said the sheriff. “Guy, will you tell the jury what happened?”

“The defendant visited me in the church. In an ungodly, inhuman voice he yelled that I am a sinner and had to repent. He said it so loud, in a thunderous voice, that the windows rattled, dust fell from the ceiling, and he scared me to death,” the reverend stated.

The sheriff asked, “In your opinion, could a normal human being have the ability to use his voice and cause that damage?”

“No, that’s why he scared me. I thought he was the devil.”

The sheriff said, “I have no more questions, your honor.”

“Fine,” said the Judge. “Does the defense have any questions?”

Luke stood and said, “No your honor.”

“Okay,” said the Judge, “Sheriff call your next witness.”

“Your honor, I call Rudy Finch to the stand.”

Rudy Finch waddled to the chair next to the Judge.

The Judge held out the bible and said, “Do you Mr. Finch promise to tell the truth?”

Mr. Finch placed his hand on the bible and said, “I do.”

The sheriff said, “Mr. Finch will you tell the jury what happened?”

“I own the General Store and the defendant came in to buy supplies. We got into an argument about my prices. He thought they were too high. Finally, he exploded with this voice that I will never forget. He called me a sinner and told me to repent. He slammed his hand down on my counter then the window broke,” said Mr. Finch.

The sheriff asked, “Mr. Finch, have you ever heard a voice like that?”

“No,” said Finch, “I’ll never forget it.”

“No more questions, your honor,” said the sheriff.

Judge Lawler said, “Does the defense have any questions for this witness?”

Luke stood and said, “No your honor.”

“Okay,” said the Judge, “Sheriff call your next witness.”

“Your honor, I call Norman Woodson to the stand.”

The Judge held out the bible and said, “Do you Mr. Woodson promise to tell the truth?”

Mr. Woodson placed his hand on the bible and said, “I do.”

The sheriff said, “Mr. Woodson will you tell the jury what happened?”

“Luke came to the bank to withdraw the contents of his safety deposit box. The defendant started an argument about loans and foreclosures; bank business. Suddenly, in a voice that sounded like a demon, he questioned my religion and demanded that I repent. His voice broke the door off my vault, it broke my counter in half, it split the front door and shattered the window,” said Woodson.

The sheriff said, “How much does that vault door weigh?”

“Over 400 pounds,” Mr. Woodson said.

The sheriff said, “I have no more questions, your honor.”

Judge Lawler said, “Does the defense have any questions for this witness?”

Luke stood and said, “No your honor.”

“Okay,” said the Judge, “Sheriff call your next witness.”

The sheriff said, “Your honor I call myself to the stand.”

The Judge held out the bible and said, “Do you Sheriff Bosley promise to tell the truth?”

The sheriff placed a bandaged hand on the bible and said, “I do.”

The sheriff said, “Your honor I have three incidences to report concerning Mr. Stryker. In the first incident, my new deputy Cliff had arrived in town and almost immediately, Luke arrived and announced that he knew Cliff from Yuma. Cliff got in a hissy fit and tried to make Luke dance. Luke used a coin to aim a ray of sunlight into Cliff's eyes and permanently blinded him.”

“Second, I concluded that Luke had become a serious problem. Fredricks, Finch, and Woodson were all afraid of him and all had experienced damage to their businesses. He had already blinded my deputy. As the defender of the law, this town and its citizens, I attempted to arrest Mr. Stryker. He charged me like a mad bull, and I drew my gun in self-defense and tried to fire my gun. But mysteriously my gun didn’t have any bullets in it. That’s when Luke beat me up breaking both of my hands.”

“Finally, in the third instance, I took my deputies to the saloon to arrest Luke. I couldn’t hold a gun and still can’t. When we tried to arrest Luke, he told my deputies that their guns were getting too hot to hold. Sure enough, the guns got burning hot and my boys had to drop them. That’s all I have to say, except that my deputies will back me up on everything I said.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” said the Judge. ”Does the defense have any questions for the sheriff?”

“No questions your honor,” said Luke.

The Judge asked, “Does the prosecution or the defense have any more witnesses to call?”

“No, your honor,” said the sheriff.

“No, your honor, but I’d like to make a closing argument,” said Luke.

“Closing argument? Well, would the prosecution like to make a closing argument?” the Judge said.

“No, your honor. I’ll let the testimonials speak for itself,” the sheriff said.

“The defense may issue a closing argument,” the Judge said.

Luke stood and faced the audience. “Gentlemen of the jury, men and women in the audience. I am a stranger to this town. I came here looking for a few good men. Good, honest, god-fearing, and righteous men. Instead, I found nothing but greedy, scheming, and sinful men. I found businessmen that charge four times the regular price in order to keep out the undesirable train workers. But their real objective is to starve out honest, hardworking farmers and town-folk so that they can foreclose on them and grab their land. I found a man who beats his ward when he complains about being sodomized by the preacher who also carries guns, drinks, gambles, and whores.”

The audience spoke in hushed, awed whispers.

“I found a gluttonous, foul general store owner who hopes that the black market won’t be able to meet the needs of the farmers and town-folk, so they have to return their business to him and his exorbitant prices and go further in debt. This man proudly displays the IOUs that in his own words will force six or more landowners to forfeit their properties. And, he is working in cahoots with the banker who loans the poor, starving farmers and town-folk more money than they can repay, monies that go back to the general store. The banker is already preparing foreclosure notices.

In awe, the uncomfortable audience whispered “No”.

“And, who is responsible for the Children’s Fund? Does it even exist, because your preacher and your sheriff are collecting money for it? These men are stealing food from the mouths of babes. These men are part and parcel to a land grab from honest hardworking farmers and town-folk.”

“This is why I came here, to rid this cursed town of these scheming thieving sinners. This is all I have to say.”

The Judge said, “Then I turn the case over to the jury. And, I remind the jury that we are not judging the town or its businessmen. Your only job is to determine if Mr. Stryker is guilty or innocent of performing six counts of witchcraft.”

The six-man jury whispered and gestured, and the man at the end stood up and addressed the Judge. “Your honor, we don’t need any more time. We’ve already decided. Luke is guilty of all counts and deserves to be lynched!”

The audience applauded and hooted.

“Order in the court!” yelled Judge Lawler.

“Mr. Stryker, please rise to receive the sentence. Mr. Stryker, this court in the great state of Texas finds you guilty of performing witchcraft and sentences you to be hung until dead.”

The audience became riotous, cheered, and stomped their feet.

Luke stood and said, “Your honor, may I make a statement?”

“You may.”

“Your honor, if I am to be hung then why not today? The gallows are already built and everyone is already here.”

The riotous crowd grew louder and there were calls to “hang’em today”.

The Judge yelled out, “Order in the court. Now, everybody sit down. Sheriff, is there any reason we can’t have a hangin’ today?”

“No, that would suit me just fine. I’ll volunteer to be the executioner,” said the sheriff.

Judge Lawler said, “The execution will be in one hour.”

The audience cheered and applauded; the town had become a circus. Half of the men rushed the bar and the bartender and Mary began filling orders as fast as they could.

The deputies surrounded Luke, to keep the crowd away from him. Unhurried, Abigail walked down the stairs from her observation post. She had been crying and went to the sheriff.

“Sheriff, please get him away from here. You can lock him up in my bedroom. There’s not any way out for a man in shackles,” Abigail said.

“Bad idea. It’s not going to happen,” said the sheriff.

“Can I get him a beer?”

“Hell, you can get him two beers.”

Abigail brought Luke a beer, which he eagerly drank. She brought him a second, which he barely touched.

The sheriff said, “Luke, it’s time.”

The sheriff placed a hand under Luke’s arm and led the way. The two deputies followed, leaving Abigail alone; crying.

A riotous noise rose up; the crowd in the mood for a lynching. When they crossed through the double-dutch doors, cheers of hang’em went up and became a chant. The sheriff picked up the pace, pushing Luke faster. Beside the gallows, Luke could see the black McCormick wagon that would serve as his hearse. The sky ominous with black anvil-shaped thunder clouds boiled overhead. In the distance, thunder rolled through the valley. The wind had picked up and there was a definite chill in the air.

The sheriff hurried Luke up the steps to the platform. Once on top, the sheriff put shackles on Luke’s legs.

“Luke, do you want a hood,” asked the sheriff.

“No.”

“Are you sure? The hood is meant for the audience. It can get pretty ugly,” said the sheriff.

“No, I want them to see the cost of their actions.”

The sheriff positioned Luke in the center of the drop door. He attached a rope with a weight on it to Luke’s ankle. This helped ensure that his neck would break. He put the noose around Luke’s neck.

The preacher stood to the side and the sheriff asked, “Luke do you want any verses read?”

Luke said, “What do you think? Your preacher is an evil man. If he utters a single word, I’ll make his words strangle him”.

“Well put,” the sheriff said.

The sheriff said, “Luke, are you ready? I’ll countdown from three.”

“I’m ready.”

The sheriff counted down, “Three, two, one.”

The sheriff pulled the lever, the drop door opened, and Luke plunged through the opening. Suddenly, the rope snapped tight and then began to sway back and forth. The audience cheered.

The McCormick Brothers pulled their hearse under the platform, cut the body down and placed it in a simple wooden coffin. They pulled out into the audience who cheered and spat on the coffin. Instead of taking the body to Potter’s field, they stopped at the saloon and leaned the open coffin against the wall next to the doors. A sign hung around Luke’s neck that read ‘WITCH’. It started to rain; a deluge.

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The saloon did a booming business despite the storm and, no doubt, because of Luke’s body on display. Abigail and her bartender worked hard to keep up with drink orders. Abigail kept reminding herself that everything must appear normal, so she allowed herself to openly cry behind the bar.

Two loud games of poker were underway. Mary was upstairs doing business. Posey and Josie both had men hanging on their arms as they escorted them upstairs. Abigail stood at the bar absent-mindedly toying with the money from the girls’ conquests. With tear-stained cheeks, the girls had a record number of customers. Abigail had to encourage them and remind them that everything must appear normal. Twelve o’clock midnight couldn’t come quick enough and Abigail kicked out the upstairs guests and closed the saloon.

“Girls, girls. Change into your traveling clothes and get your belongings downstairs,” Abigail said.

Abigail struggled with two Pullman cases and several hat boxes until Freddy showed up to help her.

“Freddy is the wagon and Lightning ready?” asked Abigail.

“Yes, they’re tied up behind the hotel with all the provisions. Everything’s ready to go,” Freddy said. His cheeks were stained with tears.

At 2 AM they were ready.

Freddy said, “So now what?”

Abigail said, “We stay right here until 3 AM and then we leave according to Luke’s plan.”

Freddy and the girls sat around a poker table drinking sarsaparilla. Abigail had poured herself a tumbler of whiskey. With considerable tears and emotion, the girls discussed their plans for their lady’s dress store. Freddy tried to discuss what his options were for a long-term arrangement, but only Abigail responded to him.

“Freddy, you’ll stay with me. Don’t worry about it. Besides, you can’t stay with the girls that wouldn’t be right. You’d grow up too fast.”

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The double-dutch doors creaked, drawing everyone’s attention.

Luke staggered into the room.

Everyone gasped. Luke stumbled to the end of the bar and Abigail and Freddy reached to help him. The girls were muttering “How?” and wiping the tears from their eyes in disbelief.

Abigail rushed to Luke and caught him in his last few able steps to the bar. She and Freddy supported him as he sat down on a stool. “Oh, Luke, I can’t believe you’re alive! Mary, get the first aid kit.”

Luke croaked out a few words, “Is everything ready to go?”

Freddy spoke up, “Everything’s ready sir. The wagon and Lightning are tied up out back, the supplies are loaded, the baggage is packed, and your special jobs are done.”

Luke rasped, “I knew I could count on you, Freddy.”

Mary arrived with the first aid kit. She cleaned Luke’s rope burn on his neck with alcohol, applied ointment and wrapped it in bandages.

Abigail poured a beer and gave it to Luke.

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Pouring down rain, the dark sky had low-lying storm clouds that could be seen even in the darkness of night. Thunder and lightning were in the distance, making a tremendous noise.

Luke mounted Lightning.

Everyone else piled into the buckboard and covered themselves with blankets. Freddy had the reins. Abigail sat on the front bench with Freddy. Posey, Josie, and Mary sat on the back bench. Luke led the way. The storm would do much to cover the sounds of their escape. Just the same, everyone maintained strict silence.

Hushed, the caravan walked around the hotel, passed the gallows, the bank, the general store and the sheriff’s office and all were dead quiet. They passed the church and the livery stables and there were still no signs of life. They crossed the town line and continued to the main East-West Road. Following Luke, Freddy guided the buckboard up the hill to get a clear view of the town and they stopped. Then the rain subsided.

The weather looked ominous as multiple thunderstorms boiled overhead with lightning in the distance. Tremendous rolls of thunder omened dangerous lightning conditions to come. As time passed, the intensity of the thunderstorms reached frightening levels, but no rain fell on the wagon and its occupants.

Freddy reached under the bench and produced a six-foot staff made from a live oak tree with all the limbs, bark and suckers shaved off. Luke took the staff and examined it. “This will do fine Freddy.”

Freddy pointed to the livery and asked Luke, “Is my sign, okay?”

Everyone turned around and looked at the livery which had a large sign painted on the side in red that read ‘SODOM’.

“Yes, Freddy, that’s a fine job,” said Luke, now having to yell over the noise of the storm.

“Ladies, there’s no reason to fear. You will not be harmed,” yelled Luke.

Luke and Lightning rode in a hard gallop to the distant end of the ridge with Luke holding his staff high over his head. Bolts of lightning seemed to respond and started striking the ground about Luke, which only excited Lightning more. Luke waved the staff over his head. The wind began to swirl around Luke in a funnel, growing taller and taller until it engulfed a tremendous thundercloud and spawned a giant tornado that hung in the air. Luke rode Lightning hard to the near end of the ridge; he waved the staff over his head chased by great lightning strikes. The noise of the tremendous thunder, wind, and tornado was almost beyond human endurance. The wind began to spin around Luke, the swirling funnel became larger and larger until another tremendous tornado had been formed. Two tornados hung off the ground, high in the air.

Luke loped Lightning back toward the town. He stopped at the town line, turned toward the tornados, held his staff horizontal and lowered it. Both tornados descended to the ground and began moving towards the town. Luke pointed his staff at the town and great strikes of lightning began to pepper the buildings in town. Luke and Lightning rode back to the buckboard in the deafening sound of two tornados that sounded like two large freight trains.

The wagon and its occupants were clear of the storm and tornados as if protected by a great unseen shield. Luke handed the staff back to Freddy. “Boy, keep this staff. It has powers that can be used for good. Keep it secret and close to your heart.”

Abigail jumped down from the wagon, running towards Luke. Luke dismounted his steed and took Abigail in his arms. They embraced and kissed for a long time. Abigail laid her head upon his chest and held him around his waist.

“Oh Luke, will it all be destroyed?” said Abigail.

“Only the businesses plus one mansion. None of the homes will be harmed. Tornados are funny like that, they can be quite selective,” Luke said.

“The hotel too?” asked Abigail.

“Yes, I am afraid so. That’s why I gave you enough money to escape this damned town and start over,” said Luke.

“Luke, what can I tell our son about you?” Abigail asked.

“Tell him that my name is Michael.”

“I will love you forever, Michael,” Abigail said.

“I love you too, Abigail. Now, get on with your new life. I must leave now.”

The crashing, straining sounds drew everyone’s attention back to the town. The livery stable and the church were being ripped apart board by board, the swirling air carrying the debris and wreckage far into the sky. The livery wall with the sign ‘SODOM’ appeared to be untouched. The mansion, sheriff’s office, and bank were next.

Michael mounted Lightning and rode off to the middle of the ridge. His excited steed Lightning spun around on his back hooves and he reared back waving his front legs in the air. In the sky, amid the terrible storm, a huge majestic golden stairway appeared. It seemed to go all the way to the heavens. Gabriel healed Lightning and took off up the great stairs, and they and the stairway faded away.

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Abigail turned back to the wagon and could tell from the astonished look on their faces that everyone had seen Michael’s ascent into the heavens. She turned back to the town, the storm and the destruction over, replaced by a torrential downpour of rain to wash the town clean. The wall with ‘SODOM’ painted on it stood as a wart on the town and unharmed as if it would never fall. As Michael had said, every business building had been wiped from the earth, which looked as if it had been broomed free of rubble. No homes, other than the mansion, had been affected. She thought there must have been loss of life and she wondered if that had been surgically performed also.

As fast as the storm came upon them it cleared. The sun peaked out from behind the distant horizon promising a new day. The sun’s rays were warming and felt good on their water-drenched skin. Freddy gave the horse a snick to get it started down the hill and off towards their new life.

Epilogue

Three years later…

Luke rode into Houston on Lightning at a lope. The early evening warmth was pleasant. He stopped at the first saloon he came to and rode up to an old-timer he saw there.

“Hey, old-timer. Can you give me some directions?” asked Luke.

“Damn if that isn’t the biggest horse I’ve ever seen. All black except the big white blaze,” the old-timer said.

“Well, he’s got four white socks too,” Luke said.

“Excuse me, mister, I was so busy looking up I hadn’t had a chance to look down,” the old-timer said.

“Can you tell me, where is the Gold Rush Hotel?”

“Sure, been there many times. Let’s see. Go down six or eight blocks, turn right, and it’s one block down. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, old-timer, here’s a dollar for your trouble.”

“A dollar! Thanks a lot, mister,” said the old-timer as he immediately turned around to go back into the saloon.

Ten minutes later, Luke hitched Lightning up to a post at the Gold Rush Hotel and Casino doors. From the noise level, it was clearly a hopping night at the Gold Rush. Smoke and noise spewed out of the entrance. Luke went through the double-dutch doors and spied a large room with, it seemed, a hundred people inside, most of them gathered around the gaming tables to the left. On the right, a long bar with most stools filled by patrons. Luke walked to the far end of the bar and took a stool. While waiting on his beer, a lady’s hands covered his eyes and he noticed the hands shaking. He turned around and there stood a beautiful Abigail in a fine sequined dress with tears in her eyes. Luke got off his stool, grabbed Abigail around the waist and bent her over in a deep, long kiss.

“Oh Michael, I didn’t think you’d ever come.”

“It’s been longer than I wanted but I’ve had my spies watching over all of you.”

“I still love you, more than you’ll ever know.”

“And I love you, Abigail. Please forgive me for not coming sooner.”

“You’re forgiven. Now, let’s sit before we attract attention,” Abigail said as she pulled up the stool next to Michael.

“My spies didn’t tell me about this place. They just said your business was doing well. But all this, it’s huge and it’s beautiful.”

“I paid cash and the syndicate that owned it fell all over themselves. I had to replace the interior and I turned the dining room into the casino. Now, I’ve got four poker tables, a blackjack table, and a roulette wheel, and they’ve all got their own croupier. I’ve got a cashier so everybody on the floor is playing with chips. I’ve got a floor manager to keep the croupiers honest. And, I have two plainclothes guards to protect the bank and handle rowdy customers. I’m making money hand-over-fist.”

“And what about the prostitutes?”

“I let them go two years when it became clear I could still make a profit without resorting to that and, in time, more women customers came. They like roulette.”

“I can hardly wait to hear about Peter.”

Abigail’s eyes brightened and her smile grew wide at hearing her son’s name. “Oh, he’s just wonderful, he’s almost three and he’s incredibly bright. A real ball of energy too. He’s my reason for living.”

“I can’t wait to see him. Where is he?”

“Well, he isn’t here dummy. The babysitter takes him from four until midnight. When she brings him over at night, he’s almost always asleep. So, I’ve got him all day until four, and all day on Sunday and Monday when the casino and saloon are closed.”

“You’re doing well enough that you can close for two days a week?”

“Sure, just the saloon and casino. The hotel is open seven days a week, but I don’t have to be here.”

“What about the girls? I hear they are doing well.”

“They moved out of their first store and opened one uptown with all the finest stores in Houston. Mary got married last month to a land surveyor. Josie is seeing a restaurateur, and Posey has the most dashing Army cadet you can imagine.”

“And Freddy? I haven’t any information on Freddy.”

“Well, Posey decided to teach Freddy the facts-of-life. It went on for two months before I found out from Mary. I laid down the law and made Freddy go back to school. At first, Freddy had a tough time, but he’s come around and is a pretty good student.”

Abigail said, “Now, we’ve got two hours before the babysitter brings Peter back. Why don’t I show you, my suite?”

Michael said, “You have a suite?”

“Of course, I share it with Peter.”

Abigail took Michael by the arm and led him upstairs to her room.

The End