
Lynne Cheney

Sisters

This is the transcription of the Lynne Cheney Sisters blog, devoted to spreading the wonderful book to all those who want it, but cannot find it in any of the used bookstores which were supported to meet their need for it. Please, read on, as the book finally gets what it is due.

The original transcription can be found at <http://www.livejournal.com/users/lynnecheney/>

- Chapter 1 -

On every side, there was emptiness. On every side, the prairie stretched on and on, unbroken to the horizon. Even the dome of sky was a naked stretch, swept bare of clouds by the unceasing wind. In all its vast blueness, the only interruption was the inescapable sun. She felt its heat. She saw the shadow it made, her shadow, a startling darkness in the bright and infinite loneliness.

Sudden she knew she must hurry. But which direction? Which way should she go? She scanned the landscape, her head moving in nervous jerks, but there was no indication, no hint at all, and she had to hurry! Panicky now, she grabbed up her skirts and started running. Without plan or direction she ran, the hard earth jarring her every step, the wind tearing at her until her hair fell loose around her shoulders. She ran until her breath came in deep rasping sobs, forever it seemed, but when she stopped and looked around, she still saw the uninterrupted expanse of prairie, and so she forced herself to run again.

She hadn't pushed herself like this since childhood, but she remembered the trick to it. Her body screamed at her to stop, from a place somewhere in the base of her skull, and once she identified where the screams were coming from, she bundled a quivering mass of nerves and lifted them to her forehead, to a spot above her eyes, where she could smile disinterestedly at their violent protests and go on.

But it took such an expenditure of will to keep the jangling mass suspended. She could only do it so long before it began to break loose and invade every part of the brain. Finally she knew it was too much. She continued to run, but now she was courting exhaustion, hoping for oblivion. She kept forcing herself to take one more step, then another, until at last she fell, collapsing into a heap on the dry prairie floor. The sun beat down on her. The wind whipped around her. She tried willing herself into unconsciousness, but it was no use, and so with great effort she drew her knees to her chest in a gesture of self-protection. Would it never be over? Would this nightmare never end?

Time passed. Seconds, hours, perhaps even days. She didn't know how long, and she didn't care. But gradually she became aware of a growing quietness and coolness. She pulled herself to a sitting position and found that somehow she had come into the shelter of a bluff. It loomed hugely above her, an ancient hill, striated by winds, rid of its gentle slopes, and pared to an inner core so that it rose abruptly from the prairie. In its presence she felt protected, soothed, comforted.

It wasn't long before she rose to walk closer, and as she approached, she saw that the face of the bluff was less regular than she had first imagined. Partway up, just slightly above her head, was a large cave. Where once there had been a softness in the core of the hill, the elements had carved an opening, and when she saw it, she knew this is what she had been running toward. This is what she had sought—and been terrified she might never find. Within the cave would be an embrace of peace and protection. Everything would be taken care of once she was inside, all pain relieved, all worry and fear turned aside. Although she had never seen this place before, she knew that she was almost home.

She reached up for the cave the way a child reaches up to be lifted, and she was vaguely surprised when no one bent down to help her. She began to struggle to pull herself up, clawing for a fingerhold, straining her arms until she felt the muscles start to cramp. And then, just when she thought she couldn't make it, she managed to get a leg over the lip of the opening, and with a final, aching effort she was up, rolling into the cave. She came to rest on a rocky floor, and in an ecstasy of relief, gave herself over to the darkness.

But suddenly she knew she wasn't alone. No sight or sound told her, but she knew with every atom of her being that someone or something was with her. The knowledge immobilized her. She didn't move. She scarcely breathed. Not because she thought she could hide her presence. It was too late for that. Whatever was in here had to know she was here too. She didn't even hope to be ignored; she was simply paralyzed by the stunning realization that she was not alone, locked in an unreasoning atavistic response.

Her heart pounded wildly. In a moment, she dared move her eyes, and she let them follow the floor of the cave to deeper within. Accustomed to darkness now, she saw the body. Even as the paralysis broke and she scrambled toward it, she knew who it was—what it was. Helen. She looked down at the broken figure on the cave floor and saw her sister, Helen.

Horror engulfed her, counterpointed instantly by a paroxysm of terror running up her forearms like an electric current, seizing the muscles of her neck, forcing her head up to what she already knew was there. Gleaming animal eyes. Black lip curled back to reveal white fang. Carcajou! Carcajou! Spawn of the devil. Destroyer of life. The animal screamed, and she called out its name: Carcajoooouuu!

* * *

Her eyes snapped open, wide open, the pupils too dilated to focus at first.

"Mrs. Dymond, are you all right?"

She took a moment to answer, a moment trying to shake off the nightmare.

"Mrs. Dymond? Ma'am?"

"Yes, Connie, yes, I'm fine. I was just dozing." But her heart was racing. She focused on the sound of the moving train, trying to calm herself with its rhythm. "Is it far now?"

The maid shook her head. "Not far, ma'am."

She stood, steadying herself against the train's sway with one hand on the back of the plush settee. She started toward the rear of the private car, but the maid, who chose that moment to step forward with a clothes broom, bumped into her. The clothes brush clattered to the floor.

"Oh, ma'am, excuse me—it's the dust and cinders." Connie fluttered a hand toward the ashy speckles on her employer's navy-blue skirt, then got down on her knees and groped under the settee for the clothes broom. "It was so hot, I opened the windows, and everything started blowin' in."

"In a minute, Connie. I'll be back in a minute." She walked to the rear of the private car and entered the mahogany-paneled dressing room with its white marble fixtures and green velvet draperies. Twisting an ornate tap, she rinsed her hands, then dampened a fresh linen towel and dabbed at her face. It helped her feel less hot and grimy, though it did nothing to dispel the slight nausea which comes with so many days on the train. Nor did it remedy the nightmare's lingering horror.

Quickly she shifted her thoughts. This was her third journey by train from New York to Wyoming. The first had been in 1874, twelve years ago now. Rail travel had become easier in the time since, but only because it was over sooner. Trains might be faster now, but they were as hot, dirty, and noisy as ever. She ran more water on the linen towel, wrung it out, and held it over her face. Then she discarded the towel and massaged the back of her neck until the tight muscles began to loosen.

By the time she had put fresh scent at her wrists, she was cheered a little. A nice bath could be dangerous, she thought, turning to look in the mirror. It might make her so recklessly good-humored she'd consider another long trip by train soon. She brushed at her skirt, adjusted the sash, and then moved close to the mirror to put on her hat. As she studied the image in the glass, an unexpected thought brought a wry smile. That face—she's seen it pictured so many times, it seemed incomplete without a caption. The label was missing, the tagline calling her "a beauty of the day" or some such gush. And where was the inevitable second line? The one set in smaller type that portentously declared: "Sophie Dymond commands publishing empire founded by her late husband, Philip."

Her appearance and her position were always mentioned together, and she suspected it was no accident. If she was considered beautiful, it was probably because the editor of Dymond's Ladies' Magazine ought to be. Certainly the face looking out from the mirror was unusual, striking even, but it had none of the round and rosewater kind of prettiness currently in favor. Judged by those standards, her mouth was too wide, her cheekbones too high and flat, her complexion entirely too dark. And her heavy black hair wouldn't hold the curly fringe fashion demanded. Instead it was all long and loosely waved, drawn back and knotted low on the neck.

With a fingertip she smoothed at the tiny lines radiating from the outer corners of her eyes. Was it age that was troubling her? Though few people guessed it, she was only a few years from her fortieth birthday. Could growing older account for nightmares of death and dying? She let her hand fall, thinking it was less age than circumstance. She was going to Cheyenne to see her grandfather, Joe Martin, who was dying after a stroke. Three years ago, her husband had died of cancer. Not even a year ago, her sister... Her mind tried to skitter away from the thought of Helen because it threatened to call up the dream. But why Helen? Why was her death the one that troubled above all? When she had learned Helen had died, she had been plagued for months by an unreasoning terror she would encounter her corpse somewhere. It made no sense at all. She was in New York. Helen died in Wyoming. And yet she was possessed by a fear of finding her body lying in the entryway of her brownstone in New York or thrown on the floor of her office, its limbs at odd angles, like a huge discarded doll's.

She shook her head and forced herself to the task of pinning her hat. Was it the way Helen had died? No, it was guilt troubling her more likely, regret for not knowing her sister better. For not liking her more, to be honest. Quiet, proper Helen; her careful ways had always seemed a reproach. Her caution had stirred an antagonism which Sophie had to admit she'd done little to still.

And the way Helen had died was probably far less important than the fact she'd been just a year younger than Sophie. The frights and dreams were probably fears natural to having a sibling who was such a close contemporary die. Probably it had made her afraid of dying herself, she thought, holding the eyes of her mirror image for a moment before she turned away.

Back in the observation room, she picked up Tom, her black-and white Pekingese, from the basket where he was sleeping and then sat down, letting him arrange himself on her lap. She stroked him absentmindedly and looked out at the prairie. She could see so far, it reminded her of crossing the ocean. "An inland sea," she murmured. "It's like a great brown sea."

"Oh, ma'am, that's true. I never knew there was anything like it!"

Sophie looked at the girl in surprise. Hardly aware she'd spoken aloud, she hadn't meant to start a conversation.

The girl hurried on, her eyes wide. "I mean, you keep expecting something different, but it goes on forever, and it's all the same!" She was very earnest and very young, and though she meant well, still her breathless assessment grated a little.

"Not really, Connie. Not when you look closely. It just seems the way to you because it's different from what you're used to." Sophie turned away, looking out the window again, and she saw a line of cattle walking along the edge of a dry creek bed. Ridiculous creatures, she thought. Just like human beings, the way they can move so purposelessly along without the slightest notion of a destination. And then the cattle disappeared into a draw, and she saw a flash of the dream. She saw herself running, running.

Quickly she looked away from the window. "You know, Connie, when my sister and I were small, we used to watch the wagon trains coming into Fort Martin, and the people in them always looked bewildered. We thought it was because they were tired and had come so far. But I wonder if it wasn't the prairie. I wonder if they weren't dazed by the openness of it."

"I know I sure miss the trees, ma'am."

Sophie had been talking to distract herself, not really expecting the girl to understand, but when Connie caught some of her meaning, she went on, "I remember when I first went East, the trees nearly drove me mad. I couldn't stand so many things growing everywhere. I felt as though I couldn't breathe and couldn't see."

The girl nodded, and they were both quiet a moment. Then the girl spoke. "Will there be Indians in Cheyenne, ma'am?" She half-whispered the question, contradicting the repugnance in her voice by the avid way she leaned forward for an answer.

"Connie, my grandmother was Indian. Shoshone Indian."

The girl's face reddened. Her mouth dropped as though Sophie had announced she were a native of some exotic isle or distant planet. "Oh, ma'am, I had no idea..."

Sophie turned away sharply, cutting off the girl's explanation. She didn't want to hear it. It would only annoy her further. And being angry with Connie served no good purpose. The girl was barely seventeen, after all. She'd seen so little of the world, why should it be a surprise if her ideas seemed to come from dime novels? [Editor's note: Like this one?]

Sophie put the girl's words out of her mind, thinking instead of her Indian grandmother. Deer Woman, wife of Joe, who lay ill now in Cheyenne. Deer Woman, remembered looking up with large eyes, her dark hair falling on each side of her face. She'd become Joe's woman when she was young and he was young, a fur trapper in the mountains. And for the rest of her days Deer Woman had cared for Joe, had shared his bed, borne his child, made his home. "She was the best woman a man coulda found anywhere," Joe had said. Sophie remembered precisely the moment he'd said it. He'd been astride a horse, ready to ride back to Fort Martin from Cheyenne, where he'd come to see Sophie as she was traveling through. "They used to call me 'squaw man,' behind my back," Joe said, "but I never paid no heed. She was the best woman a man coulda found anywhere."

The memory troubled slightly. Surely he hadn't thought he needed to defend her grandmother to her. No, surely not. He hadn't meant that. She dismissed the idea and focused on Deer Woman again. If she were alive now, she'd be nursing Joe, offering one of her healing plants or a magic potion. And if it were the season, she'd sit by his bed in the evening and tell him stories. Sophie remembered the stories, how compelling they had been when she was small, and then how frustrating when she had grown older. They didn't abide by the logic she had learned from her schoolbooks. "But, Grandma, why did Wolf do that?" she would demand. "And what was Coyote doing there?"

Suddenly she recalled the dream, and she saw the beast frozen in the moment she had discovered him. Carcajou, yes, she remembered now. Carcajou, who'd ravaged Joe's traplines. Deer Woman called him Bear-Devil, and whenever he appeared in her stories, it wasn't very long before he had blood dripping from his claws.

And then the frozen picture from the nightmare widened. She saw the body, Helen's body. And then the picture came to life, the beast began to move, and the dream came back, all of it, flooding over her in a fresh rush of memory. Once again she heard the guttural sounds and saw the watering fangs. The beast's growl shot up to a scream—and an involuntary shudder ran through her.

- Chapter 2 -

The Cheyenne depot was a jumble of cartons and barrels and people milling about. As the train pulled in, Sophie's eye was caught by a group of boys climbing on a tall stack of boxes near the platform's edge. Scrambling upward, fighting for the top position until the boxes threatened to topple, the boys ignored a young woman who was holding a baby and scolding them. A uniformed official joined the young woman, shook his finger at the boys--and then the scene was lost to Sophie as two workmen, pushing and sweating, blocked off her view with a layered cart heavy with flour sacks. People moved around the cart, scanning the faces in the train windows, some seeming to look for relatives or friends, others just curious to see who might be arriving in Cheyenne. A bleary-eyed old woman carrying a wide wicker basket heaped with fruit cut through the crowd, sending up cries of "Apples! Apples!"

As the center of the crowd shifted to where most passengers would disembark, Sophie saw James Stevenson come out of the Pacific Hotel. Dressed in dark suit and derby, he had above average height, lean, yet powerfully broad-shouldered. His high forehead and thick brown hair were hidden by his hat, but she could see the finely drawn features, saved from too much regularity by a nose bent and flattened at the bridge as though it had once been broken.

Walking across the platform toward her car, he started to go around a small group standing with traps and carryalls, but at his approach, they moved aside. A bonneted housewife nudged her neighbor and whispered behind her hand as she watched James pass. What was she saying? Sophie wondered. Perhaps just his name. Most people in the territory would have heard of him. Or was she whispering that he was Scottish and grandson to a baronet? James didn't talk about his background, which no doubt meant someone was always just discovering it.

As Sophie watched him approach, she was suddenly struck that he carried himself differently than she remembered. Before, he had carried himself with a kind of... careless ease. But now there was an inwardness about him; what was once nonchalance had edged over into brooding disregard. And as he neared her car, she noticed dark circles under his eyes.

Well, it was hardly fair to judge him from a train window, hardly fair of her to judge anyone, considering the demons she had been letting romp through her mind. She let herself out onto the private car's rear platform, waited while a conductor laid a bridge to the station platform, then reached for James' hand and let him help her across.

"How was your journey?" he asked. There was the merest trace of a burr in his words.

"It was long. How is Joe?"

"Your grandfather is failing, Sophie. Every day, he's a little worse. It's good you could come."

His responses were meticulously polite. He leaned forward at just the right angle to hear her--and to let her hear him above the hiss and clank of the train and the depot confusion. But when he looked at her, he focused slowly, as if reluctant to pull away from whatever scene was playing out in his mind.

"The children are well?" she asked.

As he nodded in answer, it struck her that his melancholy distraction scarcely lessened his attractiveness. He had a quality she had sensed in other rich and powerful men, an attitude hinting at latent energy and vitality. She wasn't certain if it caused success or came from it, but Philip Dymond had also had it, this aura, this almost perceptible glow, and neither weariness nor distraction could very much diminish it.

"Mrs. Dymond! Mrs. Dymond!"

She turned, her thoughts interrupted, and saw a young man hurrying through the crowd, waving at her with a notebook in her hand.

"Mrs. Dymond, I'm from the Clarion. I'd like to talk to you."

"She doesn't have time now," James said, motioning him away. "No reason you should talk to him," he added when he caught Sophie's questioning glance.

"But I don't mind." She put a mollifying hand on James's arm. "Why don't you come by tomorrow morning," she said to the reporter. "Come at ten a.m. and we can talk about an interview."

"Not until tomorrow! Wouldn't you have time this evening?"

Now she saw the arrogance in the young man's bearing. He had a loose-jointed way of holding himself and letting his head rock back so that he looked at her from beneath half-lowered lids. There was an insinuating tone in his voice, and it occurred to Sophie she should have listened to James. "No," she said, "particularly not for a paper I've never heard of." She wanted to put him in his place, but after the words were out, she thought they were a little brutal. "Do you have a copy I could look at before tomorrow?" she asked, trying to be kind.

He handed her a folded newspaper. "You know, I interviewed Lillie Langtry when she was here."

This information was clearly meant to bowl her over, and she realized she should have known better than to be merciful. "The question isn't whom you have interviewed, but whether or not you will be interviewing me." Before he had time to reply, she closed off the conversation. "I'll expect you at the Bellavance house on Ferguson Street at ten a.m. tomorrow. We'll discuss it then."

"You'll be staying at our house, Sophie," James interjected.

"At the Stevenson house on Ferguson Street, then. Ten o'clock." She hid her surprise. Her grandfather Joe was at Paul Bellavance's, and she had assumed she would be staying there with him.

James explained as soon as the reporter left. "There's a guest suite for you at our house, Sophie, and there'll be room for your maid. The Bellavance house would be very crowded. Paul has the larger of the guest rooms fitted out for Joe, and the nurses are in the smaller room."

She spent a few minutes making sure Connie would see to all the details of the baggage; then she took Tom from her, tucked him under her arm, and walked with James to his carriage, a drop-front phaeton, deep green with a thin yellow stripe. He helped her up, and as she was waiting for him to walk around and get in himself, she happened to glance back at the depot. Through the crowd she could see the Clarion reporter peering into the window of her railway car, taking notes. She pointed him out to James.

"I don't know why you bother to talk to him," James said, flicking the buggy whip so the matched bays headed briskly up Hill Street.

"I suppose I feel an obligation. My publications have interviews in every issue. The reporters who work for me are constantly asking people to talk to them. It seems only fair that I at least consider it when someone asks me for an interview." After a moment she added, "Besides, it's usually the papers that don't talk to me that write the most unpleasant stories."

He gave a small, sardonic smile. "Yes, I've had that problem."

"Really? How?"

"Not personally, but you've read what the Eastern press has to say about the big cattle operations out here. 'Cattle barons,' they call us. Or sometimes 'monopolists.' And they never pass up a chance to call us thieves. Just let President Cleveland take some action against us, and the cheers are deafening. But do you think they ever point out what we've accomplished? Look up ahead. That's an opera house, Sophie, an opera house that seats a thousand people. That's what Cheyenne is like now. That's what we've done. Made a civilization out here on this land no one wanted, that no one thought was worth anything."

As she looked to where he pointed, she fit his words to what she remembered: hundreds, thousands of emigrants passing through Wyoming on their way to California and Oregon. Always they were headed someplace more fertile, someplace where the brooks ran and the trees blossomed. This elegant opera house of brick and stone represented a new day, the recent awareness of wealth to be gained on high prairies. There were few trees, but there was acre after acre of needle grass and bluestem, of buffalo grass and gramma--and it was free. Cattle turned loose on the prairies would feed on the grasses, fatten, and calve, returning huge profits to their owners. And so the opera house was possible, and all the other signs of prosperity.

While Cheyenne was not yet the "Athens of the West," as an overenthusiastic writer for Dymond's Illustrated News had recently described it, it was rich now, and a certain sophistication balanced its brawling exuberance. A showy example was pulled up alongside the opera house, a shiny black landau, its soft leather calash tops let down for the pleasant weather. As Sophie watched, two young women paused to admire the fashionable carriage. Dressed in pastels, they inclined their heads together, then linked arms and moved on. Ostensibly ignoring a bearded expressman, who was boldly watching them from his trim vehicle, they stopped a little farther down the street to look in a shop window. Then, with just the slightest glance behind, they disappeared into a milliner's.

James slowed the phaeton. There was confusion in the street ahead, where a long train of freight wagons had got into difficulty turning a corner. Onlookers had collected on the wooden sidewalks and spilled over into the street. Children ran underfoot, adding to the dust in the air, and somewhere a dog barked indignantly.

"Hey, Milt, ya can't turn a corner, how ya expect to get to Fort Laramie?" an army officer shouted to the train's skinner.

“Here’s the problem,” someone else yelled. “This un hasn’t stepped the chain!”

“Ah, ‘at’s ‘at god-danged new un,” the skinner yelled back. “Stupidest god-danged mule I ever saw.”

James threaded his way through the confusion, continuing up Hill Street. Preoccupied again, he seemed deaf to the noise, unaware of the dust and steamy animal smells. Sophie tried ignoring the thick, foul air, but finally gave up and put a gloved hand to her face. Tom sneezed, gave his head an ear-flapping shake, and, curiosity undiminished, continued his survey of the passing scene.

As James turned the carriage left onto Eighteenth Street, a cowboy staggered out of a brick building near the corner. He balanced precariously on the wooden curb, then stumbled into the street. Off-balance now, flailing the air to stay upright, he took a few steps and fell—right into the path of the carriage. James reacted quickly, bringing the bays to a halt just short of the man. Then he started around to the left. But the cowboy looked up from where he was sprawled in the street, and with a drunken grin of recognition, scrambled awkwardly up from the dust and moved to block the phaeton’s path.

“Hey! Lookee here!” he shouted. “If it ain’t James Stevenson hisself! Ladeez! Gents!” He recovered his hat from the street and swept it across in front of him, bowing exaggeratedly to the men and women passing by on the sidewalk. “Let me pree-sent Mr. James Stevenson of Edin-bur-row, Scotland, big boss of the Cloud Peak Land and Cattle Company.”

“Out of the way, Wilson,” James said. “Get out of my way!”

“Hey, now, you musta forgot. I don’t work for you no more. Got me my own outfit now, run my own cows. You don’t give me orders no more, Mr. James Stevenson of Edin-bur-row, Scotland.” He bowed again, flourishing his hat and nearly falling over.

“You’re drunk, Wilson, a drunken thief. You know whose cattle those are.” James was sitting forward in the seat. He held the carriage reins in his left hand and with his right gripped the buggy whip. There was a rapid throbbing at his temple.

“Ah, but the jury said they was mine, Stevenson.” The cowboy took a few weaving steps closer to the carriage and began to eye Sophie. “Well, well, what you got here? You courtin’ again? Not too bad, this one, but I liked that last woman of yours. That’n had a real feelin’ for us homesteaders.”

At first Sophie didn’t understand what had happened. She was looking at the cowboy when there was a whistling sound of air being cut, and suddenly a red line appeared on his face. It ran from his left eyebrow down to his chin and was thin at first and then wider, and then there was blood. Wilson roared in pain, clutching his face as though the buggy whip with which James had struck him had cut it in two and he were frantically trying to hold the halves together. As Sophie watched, blood began to drip from beneath his hands onto his shirtfront.

Before she could react, the carriage was moving past the white, staring faces on the sidewalk, past the church at the corner, and then wheeling right and heading up Ferguson Street. She grabbed onto Tom, thinking he might try to leap from the carriage. Yipping and quivering, he strained against his hands until finally the carriage stopped.

She turned to James for an explanation, and as his eyes met hers, all the questions she’d always had about him came rushing to mind. Why had he come to Wyoming in the first place? It hadn’t been money. He had possessed wealth before anyone understood the riches that lay in the grasslands. And it hadn’t been simply a search for adventure. He had stayed too long for that. He had committed himself to wife and family and home here.

And that led to the question which had troubled her most since first she’d seen him. She remembered the day clearly: clouds high and fluffy in the blue arc of sky, a cool breeze blowing in off the prairie—and Helen standing with a tall, broad-shouldered stranger. Amid all the flurry of greeting, Helen, cool and precise, explaining at each introduction that this was James, her fiancé.

It hadn’t seemed possible then, and now, twelve years later, Sophie still didn’t understand: why had James Stevenson married her sister, Helen?

- Chapter 3 -

He looked away. "A rude awakening for you, Sophie." When she didn't answer, he went on, "Wilson worked for me once, then decided to go out on his own. He filed on a hundred and sixty acres of creek bottom, got a woman from Ida Hamilton's to file on an adjacent parcel, and the two of them moved out there. They bought a couple head of cattle, three, maybe four years ago, and now they're running close to fifty head. They're stealing animals, a lot of them from Cloud Peak herds."

"You should take them to court."

"I have, and the jury found in favor of the poor beleaguered homesteader and against the rich and powerful 'cattle king.'" He shook his head in disgust.

"What will a jury do to you for what happened just now?"

"It won't come to that. Juries may play into the rustlers' hands, but the sheriff knows better. Wilson won't even get him to call on me."

She was quiet a moment, thinking, "If he hadn't mentioned Helen, you wouldn't have... struck him."

He didn't answer immediately, and in the silence between them, there was an odd discomfort. "That may well be," he said finally.

"But what was he talking about?" She spoke quickly, letting her words override the awkwardness.

"She had changed, Sophie," he said, looking down at the reins as he spoke. "The last few years, Helen had become totally caught up, almost obsessed by... by two projects, two endeavors, I suppose you could call them. One was trying to find your mother. You know about that." He glanced up, and she nodded, noting the constraint in his voice. He didn't like explaining. She supposed it was something a man like him was not very often obliged to do.

"And the other," he continued, "was—ah, how shall I describe it—it was all to do with women. Temperance was part of it. She joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and she was determined to clean the whiskey out of Cheyenne." He shook his head. "And it went beyond that to trying to reform prostitutes and trying to help some of the women living out in those miserable shacks on the prairie. The woman living with Wilson was a big case for her, because she'd been a prostitute, still is, some say, and she's out there in a hovel with two small children. I understood why Helen pitied those people, Sophie, and I told her that. But it became useless for me to talk to her finally. She wouldn't understand. She just wouldn't see how those people were using her, how they're threatening everything we've accomplished in this country."

"Using her? I..." But before she could finish, someone beside the carriage spoke.

"What's your dog's name?"

The question was so loud, Sophie was surprised to look down and see a girl of no more than seven or eight. She had a round, open face, a generous sprinkling of freckles, and her hair, which had long ago lost its part, was held back on the sides with carelessly inserted hairpins. Sophie glanced back at James, but she could tell he wanted their conversation to be over, so she turned her attention to the girl. "He's named Tom. Are you Sarah?"

"Yup, I'm Sally." The voice was loud as before, improbably loud coming from such a small person.

"I'm your Aunt Sophie."

The child's attention was all on Tom. "I never seen a dog like that before," she boomed.

"He's a Pekingese. Would you like to hold him while I get down?"

The girl took Tom, and Sophie let James help her from the carriage. "So this is your house," she said to Sally, who was studying Tom's face from perilously close range. "This is the first time I've been to it."

"It's not so new. We've lived in it three years." These statements were made in a moderate tone, but then the child resumed speaking at what was apparently her usual volume. "Did somethin' happen to your dog?" she asked loudly.

"Happen to him?"

"His face is all flat and his eyes stick out."

"No, nothing happened. He's supposed to look that way. You know, maybe you shouldn't put your face so close to his."

"Why not?"

"Well, he could bite."

Sally gave her a look of amused disbelief. Surely Sophie couldn't be serious in thinking this odd, furry creature to be a threat.

"He does bite sometimes," Sophie said.

Making it quite clear she did it only to humor Sophie, the girl put Tom up on her shoulder. Then she opened the ornamental iron gate, and they all started up the walk.

Though Sophie was seeing the Stevenson house for the first time, it seemed familiar to her. Helen had written about the brick and red stone from which it was constructed, described the stone arches over doorway and window. There on the north front was the large round tower she had planned, and on the south front, the flying tower she had decided on for balance. She must have supervised the landscaping, too, Sophie thought, so carefully placed were the trees and shrubs. The young elms edging the sweep of lawn stood at measured intervals. A short row of lilacs nearer the house was perfectly offset by a flowering plum. None of the plants was mature enough yet to tie the house into its setting, but eventually they would work that way. Already the house conveyed a sense of permanence simply because of its size.

Sophie followed Sally up the long curved walk and saw the carriage house and stables to the right and rear. As they stepped into the long shadow of the main house, she noticed pieces of thin rope scattered everywhere, and the walk was dusty too, rather in need of sweeping. Such signs of slight neglect about a handsome home might have made her feel warm and welcome, might have said, "Since you're a friend, we'll let you take us as we are." But that wasn't the sensation she experienced as she climbed the stairs to the front porch. Helen would never have permitted these small disorders, she thought with a shiver. Helen had planned this house and lived in it, and now she was dead. And this was the place where she had died.

Sally pushed Tom back into Sophie's arms and ran down to the end of the porch, where a boy about her age was waiting. They had a number of wooden boxes around them, and Sally joined her friend in scooping objects from one box to another, counting them on the way.

"Pa, you seen how many we got?" Sally shouted excitedly at James.

"What do you have?" Sophie asked, walking toward the children. The objects were everywhere, piled in soft brown heaps, overflowing the boxes.

"It's gophers," Sally trumpeted. "We got better'n a hundred of 'em! That's more'n five dollars!"

"Five whole dollars we can spend at the circus!" her friend joined in.

And then Sophie realized the brown objects were animals, brown, furry animals. But they were all so still. And the heads--there was something not quite right about the way the heads lay. And then she knew why they were dead, all of them dead.

"Sally," James said, "You know you only need the scalps for the bounty. Why the hell do you have the carcasses?"

"I dunno, Pa."

"Dammit, I want them out of here. They're going to stink! Hell, I can smell them already. Get rid of them."

"Ah, Pa. Couldn't we put them out back?"

"Get rid of them!"

"Ah, Pa, do we have to?"

"Sally..." The rapid pulse was beating in James's temple again, and his fists were clenched. The children, seeing they had pushed the matter far enough, scurried to pack their grisly booty. As they started down the stairs with a box full of carcasses, the front door opened and a round gray-haired woman in a neat gray dress stepped onto the porch. James turned as if to berate her, but instead he took a deep breath, and when he spoke, it was with exaggerated care. "Make sure the children take care of this, Mrs. Syms." Then his glance fell on Sophie. "But first see to Mrs. Dymond. Show her into the drawing room." He made a slight bow to Sophie. "Mrs. Syms will make certain you're comfortable until your things are unpacked. Please excuse me. I have... matters I must attend to."

Surprised by his abrupt leave-taking, Sophie watched in silence as he went down the steps and strode up the sidewalk. Then she followed the housekeeper inside, into a cool, high-ceilinged hallway and through a wide doorway opening off to the left.

"That Sally!" Mrs. Syms was saying, her hands spread in a show of exasperation, her eyeglasses glinting indignantly. "That child! How could I know she'd do this!"

"Children are difficult to predict," Sophie said distractedly.

“As soon as she heard about the nickel bounty on prairie gophers, she got her friends and they started chasin’ the critters and catchin’ ‘em with these little nooses they set around the holes. But who’d think they’d keep the carcasses? Who’d think they’d store ‘em on the porch? I’m sure I don’t know what that child’ll do next!”

Sophie nodded sympathetically, but her thoughts were on James. He’d been angry with Sally too; no, more than that, he’d been furious with her. Perhaps that’s why he’d left so suddenly, to avoid another display of temper. Or did his quick departure have more to do with Wilson? Perhaps he’d been embarrassed by that incident and wanted to get away. But no, she didn’t think so. For another person that might be the motive, but not for James. He was not the kind of man for whom discomfiture was a familiar emotion.

Mrs. Syms arranged a drape here, fluffed a pillow there, adjusted her silver spectacles, and said she would have tea brought.

“No, not now,” Sophie said. “Nothing now.”

The housekeeper left, and as Sophie put Tom down to let him explore, it occurred to her that she herself could be the reason for James’s hasty departure. Had he wanted to avoid her questions? To ensure that there would be no more conversations about Helen?

A wall sconce caught her eye. Electric, she noted, and she had read Cheyenne had telephones now too. She looked up to see if the overhead fixture was also electric, and she saw the ceiling had been frescoed in maroon and gold. It was skillfully done, really quite lovely. As she was near the fireplace, she began idly to examine the objects massed on the mantelpiece: a porcelain vase with ormolu handles, a Madeleine clock with bronze columns, an ornate silver candlestick, and many, many pictures.

She picked up a photograph of Helen, fairly recent, she judged, taken within the last three or four years. It showed a pretty but very serious woman, her hair parted in the middle and drawn back behind perfectly sculptured ears. The neck was thin and graceful, and so were her lips, but their set was uncompromising. And her eyes were compelling. They had been blue, and while you couldn’t tell that from the photo, they’d had an odd, imperative shine about them which came through in the photograph. It was as though the dark Indian strain in Helen had fought against the light color, draining it and adding an opalescent gleam.

She put the picture back on the mantel and stood for a moment looking at it. When finally she averted her gaze, her eyes fell on the newspaper the reporter had given her at the depot. She had put it on a table, and it lay there in the elegant room incongruously screaming out headlines of violence and death: Belfast rioters were being buried, murderers arrested. Lovers were killing themselves in suicide pacts, workers jumping to their deaths from burning factories.

“Awful, isn’t it?”

Startled, Sophie looked up to see a girl of about eleven standing in the doorway. She knew it was Esther. The girl was tall and very thin, and she had Helen’s eyes. “Yes, it is, rather,” Sophie answered after a moment. “Your newspaper does love a violent story.”

“Last year around Christmas they had one about a mother who’d killed her children.” The girl came on into the room walking quietly, tensely, as though there was someone she was afraid she would waken. “The mother buried them, but not deep enough, and so their bodies were eaten by hogs.”

Sophie was stunned into silence.

“Dymond’s doesn’t go in for that sort of thing so much,” said the girl.

“Not so much, no.”

They were both quiet, and then the girl tilted her head. “Have you seen our house? Would you like me to show you around?”

“Of course. Yes. That would be very nice.”

“This is the drawing room,” the girl said in her oddly tense and formal way. “The fresco is my favorite thing in here. Judge Carey brought an Italian artist out here to do his ceilings, and then everyone on Ferguson Street hired him.”

Sophie followed her through each of the first-floor rooms then up the back stairway to the third floor, where the children slept. Esther’s room was extremely neat, a complete contrast to Sally’s next door, where three disheveled and startled-looking dolls were jammed in the bed, the covers bunched up around them. A cube game lay scattered on the floor along with two tops and a sizable collection of alphabet blocks. In the corner, a yellow kite was hanging from ladderlike stairs going up to a trapdoor in the ceiling.

Esther saw Sophie looking at the steps and explained they led to the tank room.

“Tank room?”

“A big tank is up there. It holds water for the house. You want to see it?”

“I don’t think...”

“And there are big windows, too. You can see everything from them.” Esther had already untangled the kite and started up the rungs, so Sophie followed. The girl pushed open the door at the top, scrambled on up, then turned to help Sophie. The area they entered was really a large attic, the size of an entire floor below, and while a huge copper water tank dominated, there was an assortment of other things: trunks, boxes, old furniture against the walls. Esther was struggling to open the windows, and finally, with much clanking of the counterweights, she got them up.

Almost all of Cheyenne was visible. Sophie could see all the way to the depot, even make out red stone piled near it, material for a new depot, Esther said. Leaning out one of the windows, Sophie looked down at the fine homes which lined Ferguson Street. Some were brick and stone; others solid brick; others large, square, and wooden. How different Cheyenne was now from nine years ago when she and Philip had stopped here on their way to San Francisco.

So engrossed was she in her thoughts, she failed to notice when Esther left her side. When she did look around, Sophie saw the girl had not been content merely to learn from the other window, but had climbed over the low sill and was sitting on a narrow ledge outside. Just seeing her out there, three floors above the ground, was a shock, and then Sophie realized the girl was playing a game of some kind, a dangerous game. Grasping the edge of the ledge, she would rock forward until she was just at the point of equilibrium. She would hang there a long moment, then rock back, then forward. My Lord, thought Sophie. She could kill herself! If she should lean just an inch farther forward, her grasp on the ledge wouldn’t keep her from plummeting to the ground.

“Esther?” She spoke softly, not wanting to startle her, but at the sound of her name, Esther turned abruptly, and Sophie gasped with fear she would fall.

She teetered slightly, but kept her balance, and she looked at Sophie with a dispassion which rejected any possibility that she might have done otherwise. “Are you ready to go back downstairs, then?” Her voice was matter-of-fact, but as she climbed over the sill, she moved stiffly, tensely.

Sophie followed her down the ladder and down the stairway to the second floor, her heart pounding from the start the girl had given her. She felt she should speak to her, warn her how dangerous it was to rock on the ledge, but something in Esther’s ramrod-straight back warned her off. Now was the time for Sophie to keep to her own affairs, the girl’s bearing seemed to say.

They entered a large roomlike hall area on the second floor, and Esther pointed out the guest suite. Across the hall was another set of rooms she identified as her father’s. In between, Sophie glimpsed a room which seemed in stark contrast to the rest of the house. She saw it only fleetingly, but she had an impression of bare floors and white everywhere. “And whose is that, Esther?”

Instead of answering, the girl stared at her. Then she turned sharply and started down the wide main staircase, the sound of her high laced shoes accompanying her descent. There was no carpeting on these stairs. They were polished oak and gleamed in the light coming through the tall windows overlooking the stairwell.

After a moment, Sophie followed, and watching the girl move, she knew that the tense spring inside the child had just become more tightly coiled. But why? Had she, Sophie, transgressed somehow in asking about the bedroom? Surely she had displayed only polite curiosity.

Esther was waiting in the large landing area, standing by a chair which had a buffalo robe folded over the back of it. Sophie knew the robe. It had been Deer Woman’s, and Sophie remembered how her grandmother had treasured it. She walked over and touched the soft leather, ran her fingers over the familiar quillwork. It was a striped pattern, the reds, blues, and yellows soft and shiny with age.

“Mother planned this area for herself,” Esther said. “She liked it here because of the light. She motioned toward a mahogany secretary with its writing surface down. “She wrote the letters here looking for her mother.” She tilted her head and looked at Sophie as if to ask if she knew about Helen’s letters, but before Sophie could respond, Esther whirled around and pointed to a miniature building against one wall. “See this dollhouse?” she demanded, speaking rapidly now. “Paul Bellavance had it built for me. I used to play with it here while mother worked at her desk. And see this fan?” She pointed to a glass-enclosed object on the wall, her words coming faster and faster. “This fan is from Japan. And see this handkerchief in a frame? That’s Napoleon worked in lace in the corner.”

Sophie watched her, alarmed at her behavior. She was overexcited, almost manic. She needed calming; Sophie knew that. But how to do it? And meanwhile, the words tumbled on and on.

“And see this carving? It’s ivory.”

Should she put her arms around her? Try to calm her by touching her?

“And see this music box? It plays ‘The Last Rose of the Summer.’”

Sophie reached out, but the girl jerked backward. She stared at Sophie, silent for a moment, and then the words started again. Only now they were slow and deliberate.

“And... see ... those ... stairs?” With a long, thin finger, she pointed down.

Sophie nodded, sure of what was coming.

“Those are the stairs my mother fell down. The ones she fell down and broke her neck.” With the words came a rush of tears. They flooded the girl’s face, which at first remained curiously impassive, then crumpled as though someone had punctured a balloon inside her. She began to moan, and the sound went on and on until Sophie had to do something, anything. She reached out once more, and at her touch, Esther gave a great heaving gasp. The girl looked around wild-eyed as though she had forgot where she was; then her gaze came to rest on Sophie.

There was a moment of hesitation when she seemed about to speak. But instead she twisted away from Sophie’s hand and ran down the stairs, her shoes clattering on the hard, polished oak.

- Chapter 4 -

By the time Sophie thought about running after her, Esther was out of sight, and Sophie had no idea where she had gone. Shaken, she walked back up the stairs to the guest suite. Connie was there, taking dresses from a domed trunk and hanging them in her wardrobe. Wanting to be alone, Sophie sent her to find Tom.

When Connie had gone, Sophie shut the door and leaned against it, her thoughts full of the girl on the stairway. A picture of her, her finger pointing down the steps, was etched on Sophie's mind. What was wrong with the child? Surely this couldn't be a normal form of grief? If Helen had died recently... But it had been almost a year.

By the time Connie came back upstairs with Tom, Sophie was thinking more objectively, but she still had trouble paying attention to what the maid was saying.

"It's for dinner, ma'am. After you visit your grandfather. Mrs. Bellavance telephoned and wants you to stay for dinner. She said to tell you Mr. Stevenson would be there too."

"Yes, yes, that would be fine."

"Do you want me to call and accept for you?"

At Sophie's nod, the girl was off. When she came back in a few moments, she opened the wardrobe. "How'd this one be, ma'am?" She pulled out a cream-and-lavender dress. "It's sooo lovely."

"Fine, Connie. It will be fine." With Connie's help, she changed, but she was scarcely aware of it. Her thoughts were still on Esther.

"Ma'am?"

Connie was telling her she could look in the mirror. Sophie glanced at her reflection, only half-seeing it. "It looks nice, Connie."

"Shall I tell the housekeeper you'd like a carriage?"

Sophie put on a glove, forcing the material between the fingers down with a chopping motion of her other hand. "I think I'll walk."

"Walk? But, ma'am, your shoes. And by yourself?"

In the front hallway, Mrs. Syms was also taken aback. "Mrs. Dymond, I can have a carriage for you in a minute or two."

"I prefer to walk. It's only a few blocks." When Mrs. Syms continued to bustle and protest, Sophie repeated herself firmly. "Really, Mrs. Syms, walking is what I prefer."

As she crossed the porch, she saw that the prairie gophers were all packed up and moved away. A line from Plutarch ran through her mind: "Boys throw stones at frogs in sport, but the frogs die in earnest." Perhaps children could kill so lightheartedly because they had no idea they would ever die themselves. Perhaps it was unnatural for them to feel their mortality, and if something happened to force it on them... well, then they became morbid, like Esther. She thought of the girl rocking back and forth on the ledge. Had she been trying to imagine what death was like in order to rid it of its fearsome mystery? and on the stairway landing when she had described Helen's dying, had she been speaking the name of death in order to exorcise its terror? But instead of driving them out, she seemed to have renewed their hold upon her.

"Aunt Sophie?"

So intently was she thinking of the girl, she at first thought she'd imagined her voice, but when she turned, she saw it really was Esther. She was coming through the dust pumping furiously on a bicycle. Because of the bar running from beneath the seat to the handlebar post, she had her skirts tucked up, but her hair streamed out behind. Running madly after her was Sally, her loud voice echoing in the evening air, "C'mon Esther! Wait up! Lemme have a chance, Esther!"

They passed Sophie, and at the end of the block Esther braked sharply and jumped off the bicycle. She waited for Sally, then helped the younger girl get on. She was gentle with her, steadying the bicycle to keep her from falling over, but there was an awkward quality to her movements, as though each was planned, each the result of a very conscious decision.

"Is your bicycle new?" Sophie asked as she drew near. She thought it must be, because it was the very latest kind, with the wheels the same size.

"Brand new. We had an ordinary before, but with the big front wheel, it was impossible in skirts, and Sally couldn't even begin to get on it."

Sophie was astounded at how normal the girl's response seemed. If it hadn't been for their earlier encounter, would she have remarked Esther's self-conscious stiffness at all? "Who rode it then?" she asked.

"Nobody. But that wasn't my father's fault."

Sophie hadn't been thinking of James, so the girl's answer surprised her.

"What happened was, he was at the Cheyenne Club one night, and he and some other men decided to send for ordinaries. For a bicycle club. They were going to start a bicycle club, except then my father never had the time. So Sally and I tried to out, and when he saw it wouldn't work for us, he sent for this one." She looked at Sophie, a defensive pride shining in her eyes. "He got us the first one in town, and there's not another like it yet!" With that, she reclaimed the bicycle from Sally and got on it, rolling and tucking her skirt. "He's still trying to get us a lady's model, one without this stupid bar." Then she was hurtling up the street, Sally pounding furiously along in her dusty wake: "Ah, c'mon, Esther, just one more turn. Just gimme one more chance."

Ignoring her sister, Esther made a sharp turn near the end of the block, reversing her direction. As she passed Sophie, she spoke, "Your dress is very pretty."

Her words were quick and shy, and so it took Sophie a minute to comprehend what she had said. "So is yours," she called out. "At least the part that shows!"

The girl looked back, smiling, and Sophie waved, glad Esther seemed happy for a moment, but still unsettled by her.

Sophie was almost to the edge of town now—the Bellavance house was the last one on Ferguson Street. And as she looked over the expanse of prairie, the setting sun fell to just such a place in the sky that its rays suffused the landscape with color: orange and gold and rose all at once, until the sagebrush seemed to catch fire and the prairie to burn. The sky was yellow and gold and pink and lavender, and set against it were the clouds, dark purple now, edged with crimson red. Yes, Sophie thought, yes. This is what I've needed. This immense space. This glorious sky. She put everything else from her mind and watched until the colors faded. Then she walked on, aware of an ease beginning within her.

The mood was broken abruptly as she approached the gate to the Bellavance home and suddenly had the eerie sensation of being observed. She looked back down the street, and though she could see no one in the fast-gathering darkness, the feeling persisted. In her shoulders, at the base of her neck, was a tense uneasiness she couldn't ignore. It was as though her senses were telling her of someone hidden who was waiting for her to turn away so he could strike from behind. But hidden where? She turned and looked up at the Bellavance house, a round-shingled, two-story cottage set on a high foundation. The first floor was all alight, and since the house was smaller than most on Ferguson Street, she could have seen anyone watching her from inside. And there was no one. She looked up at the second floor, and her eyes fixed on a darkened window. Had there been a movement? She couldn't be sure. The white curtains were still now, absolutely still.

Determined to shrug off her uneasiness, she walked to the door and rang the bell. Paul Bellavance opened it himself, smothering her in an embrace as soon as he saw her. "Sophie, Sophie. It's been too long. I'm so glad you came." He kissed her soundly, then held her at arm's length. "Ah, Sophie, we're so proud of you. Here, let me have a look at you."

As he was surveying her, she considered him, his shrewd and kindly brown eyes, his weathered face, deeply furrowed and creased. He was a big man, an imposing figure, especially now that his hair had whitened. His clothes were not new, but they were well-cut, giving him an air of relaxed prosperity. Paul had done well in Cheyenne, Sophie knew. His mercantile company had grown with the town until it provided him a comfortable income. But she doubted he had pushed matters beyond that. He wouldn't have speculated in land or cattle, not because he disapproved of it, but the rewards it might bring simply wouldn't, in his eyes, justify the effort. "There's nothing I want I can't buy now," she'd heard him say when such a venture was proposed. More than most men Sophie knew, Paul seemed guided by a concept of sufficiency. The mercantile company was success enough for him; the due paid him for being one of the territory's longest-term residents was recognition enough. His easy, relaxed way had always made him good company, and she realized she had missed him. "It has been too long, Paul," she said. "Almost nine years. You could come see me in New York, you know."

"Too many people, Sophie. I'm too much a part of this land now, and I can't stand being away. But come on, you don't want to talk to me, you want to see Joe. Come on, I'll take you upstairs." He led her through an entrance hall paneled in dark wood and up a carved walnut stairway.

"It's good of you to make a place in your home for Joe," she said.

"James was going to have him over there, but the children like to run and make noise..."

"Sally especially."

He smiled. "Besides, Joe's like my family. I'm real honored to have him here."

They had reached a dark upstairs hallway, and Paul put his hand on her arm, guiding her into a low-ceilinged bedroom dimly lit by a wall sconce. A nurse was sitting by the bed knitting black wool. When Paul spoke to her, she gathered her things and left the room.

"He's so pale," Sophie said. "And he looks so small." Joe's eyes were closed and he lay very still. She sat down in the nurse's chair beside the bed. "It seems so odd to see him lying here. He could do anything, that's how I always think of him. Anything he ever tried."

"And according to some of his stories, there's not a lot that he and my dad didn't try. There were some wild times when the two of them were trapping in the mountains."

"I got the tamer stories, or at least tamer versions. I remember he liked to talk about you and your dad building Fort Martin."

"That was one of his favorites," Paul said with affection in his voice. "And he liked to leave the idea the fort they built is the one that's there now. Which is... well, shading the truth, let's say. After the Army bought 'em out, a lot was added. I remember Joe and Dad even talked the Army into adding a couple of rooms to the post trader's store for them."

She looked up at him. "Your father died not long after the solders came."

"Not long after. A drunk Indian stole a cow, and a greenhorn soldier decided to make an example of him. Ten men ended up dead, including my dad." He was silent a moment, then continued, "The day we buried my father, Joe came and said he wanted me to take his place. I was hardly more'n a boy, and he took me right on, made me his partner just like my dad'd been." Paul was quiet again; then he walked to the door. "I'll leave now. If he wakes up... well, you know he can't talk. Some sounds now and then, but nothing you can understand."

As Paul left, she looked at Joe again. It was so hard to reconcile the way he was now with the way he'd been. So small, he seemed so small, this man who'd loomed so large when she was a child. Her mind went back to when she was nine or ten, and she saw Joe standing over her as she tore open a parcel he'd brought her from St. Louis. It had been wrapped in tissue and bright ribbon, and inside was a pale-green frock with a checkerwork trim of black velvet. She had gasped with delight at the sight of it. It was prettier than anything she'd ever owned, lovelier than anything she'd ever seen, and the next morning she put it on to wear to school.

"I'm gonna save mine," Helen announced. For Joe had brought her a package too. "I'm gonna put it away for something special."

But Sophie had worn hers, running and playing in it on the way to school, loving the way the delicate fabric swirled and billowed. She had been looking behind her as she ran, watching the dress float behind her, when she tripped and fell. The delicate material tore with a long and sickening sound.

She started to cry and wouldn't get up, didn't want to see what she had done.

"Sophie, come on. We'll be late. Sophie, you gotta get up."

But she wouldn't move. She lay in the dust crying, the tears less mourning for the dress than anger at herself. How could she have let such a thing happen? How could she have been so careless?

Helen fetched Miss Travers, and the schoolteacher lifted Sophie to her feet. "So that's the fuss. It's ruined, isn't it."

It's not the dress, Sophie wanted to protest. Not the dress at all. It's what I did to it, don't you see? But she couldn't get the feelings into words; tears were all she could manage.

"You stop that crying right now, Sophie Talbot!" Miss Travers brushed angrily at the torn skirt. "It's a sin, you caring so much for material things."

But Miss Travers' orders had little effect, and Sophie was still crying that night when Joe came home. He saw the tears, heard about the dress, and understood immediately. "Mad at yourself, are ya?" he said, picking her up as though she weighed nothing at all. "You're not the first person ever do somethin' like this, ya know. Why, I remember a time at Rendezvous I lost nearly half my pelts, ten packs of 'em." He went on to tell her how he'd been duped by an Arapaho; and there'd been something about a wolf the Indian claimed was tame. Sophie couldn't remember all the details, but she recalled the story had ended with a midnight chase with Joe after the Indian, and the wolf—

A noise behind her broke into her thoughts. Startled, she twisted around and saw that the door to the bedroom had opened a crack. It was only the latch, she thought. The latch must not have caught when Paul went out.

She turned back to the bed and picked up Joe's hand. Scarred and gnarled as it was, she could see in it the square and capable hands she remembered. He could do anything: build a fort, fix a broken prairie schooner—he'd even taught himself to read during one winter camp. In all his long life, had there been anything he wanted to do he couldn't, any challenge he had failed? She could think of none... except perhaps one. Herself, or at least the girl she had been so long ago. It was about her thirteenth year it had started, her refusal to recognize Joe's or anyone else's authority. She had begun for the first time to understand the power that lay in a pleasing face, a pleasing shape, and she had been fascinated with its effects on the soldiers at Fort Martin, intoxicated with the adventures it opened up.

One evening she had been flirting with two young soldiers. Helen had been with her, but had run home when Sophie agreed to go with the soldiers to their quarters. It was a game to Sophie, with her controlling the players, maneuvering them until they responded in ways she had planned. She had known they would ask her to their quarters, and she thought she could determine what would happen when they got there. And if she couldn't?—she shrugged off the risk, ignoring everything but the excitement of it. She had gone with the young men, there had been much laughter, a few playful kisses—and then one of them backed her into a corner. He kissed her roughly and pressed against her, hard and insistent. She pushed him away, frightened now, feeling helpless, out of control. He started back toward her, but at that moment Joe appeared in the doorway. Helen must have told him where she was, and he had come to get her.

"Get away. Get away from her." Joe didn't shout, but his voice throbbed with rage. The soldier backed away to stand by his friend, and both of them watched Joe warily. They had the advantage of youth, but Joe's years in the mountains had hardened him, toughened him, and they wouldn't choose to fight.

Sophie moved toward Joe, and she could feel his anger threatening to explode. But when she reached him, touched him, he looked at her, and she saw an awareness come into his eyes, almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. His shoulders fell forward; the anger seemed to drain out of him. "Let's go, Sophie," he said, and turning his back on the men in the room, he took her away.

As they walked across the parade grounds, his expression was troubled. "Fort Martin ain't a good place for you now," he said finally. "I ain't here much, and you don't pay your grandma no heed. It'd be better if you went away for a spell." He told her he'd heard of a school from another sutler. "He sends his girl there and it sounds real fine, right near San Francisco and run by the nuns. If we can't find some family goin' that way, I'll take you there myself."

Disbelieving, she had stared at him, and what she saw shocked her and at the same time told her he was serious. There were tears in his eyes, something she had never seen before and had never expected to see. She looked at him now, small and helpless on the bed, and she felt her own tears rising.

Forcing herself to sit upright, she glanced around the room. It was cozy and comfortable, done in warm colors, a pleasing room except for one mawkish steel engraving. From the wall opposite the bed, a Landseer stag stared down with eyes which would have better suited a saint. Noble, gentle, forgiving, they were not an animal's eyes at all.

Suddenly she felt the prickling across the back of her shoulders again, knew with inner certainty that someone was watching her. She tried to talk herself out of it, telling herself it was nonsense; the only thing watching her was that avuncular Landseer stag. But however much she protested, she still knew someone was looking at her. They were outside the door, watching her through the crack.

Gently she laid down Joe's hand. Then she got up quickly and rushed to the door, pulling it open in a single motion. An old woman was standing there, dressed all in black, her eyes glaring and malevolent. Sophie felt confused, disoriented, as though time and space were shifting and changing, leaving her unmoored in a buzzing, rushing darkness. Her throat felt constricted, but she must have cried out because there was the sound of people running. The old woman rolled her eyes toward the noise and disappeared into the hallway's darkness.

- Chapter 5 -

"Sophie? Sophie? What happened, Sophie?" James was the first at her side.

"Somebody outside the door. I was startled. Foolish of me."

"Outside the door? Who was it?" Paul demanded.

"A woman, an old woman. I know her, but I can't think..."

"Anna May, please go see that Mother is in her room." It was Paul who spoke, looking over his shoulder. then he turned back to Sophie. "It was my mother. I'm sure it was. She's been living with us these past few years, and she's old and sneaks up on people sometimes. Here, sit down." He indicated a love seat in the hallway and turned on a light. "You should sit down. You're pale."

But Joe had awakened, and Sophie wanted to see him. He was making a questioning noise, and there was fright and confusion in his voice. She tried soothing him, holding his hand, stroking his forehead, but her presence didn't seem to give him comfort. Quite the contrary, his eyes would fix on her and fill with dread, as though she were a specter come to haunt him. After several minutes, Sophie realized it would be better if she left him with the nurse.

She shut the door to Joe's room behind her. "He doesn't know me," she said, sitting next to Paul, who had waited for her in the hallway. "Or maybe the noise and running confused him. How stupid of me to cause all this excitement." She felt an utter fool, angry with herself for upsetting Joe, Paul's mother. Of course that's who the old woman was. "The Widow Bellavance"—that's how Sophie had known her at Fort Martin. She couldn't really remember Paul's father. She had been only three or four when he had been killed in the Denson massacre. But she recalled his mother now, remembered a grim-visaged woman who seemed to hate the entire world. Sophie had felt her malevolent gaze before.

"You didn't know my mother was living with us," Paul said. "We should have warned you."

"The truth is, I didn't even know she was in Cheyenne. Why didn't I see her either time I was here before?"

"She was over on House Street then, in a little place I bought her over there. She's never been much for company or visiting. Liked to be by herself and was fine until a couple of years ago. Then she started wandering, looking in the neighbors' windows, so we brought her to live with us."

A small woman with brightly hennaed hair came hurrying up the hall, smiling with astonished cheerfulness. "Your mother's just fine, Paul. A little overexcited, perhaps, and I think it would help if you'd go in and see her. Besides, I'll take care of Sophie. We girls understand these things better than you men do. Isn't that right, Sophie?"

As Paul stood, Sophie forced herself to nod an answer, even though she knew that to Anna May a response mattered little. She didn't pay heed to most of what was said to her, and she seldom let what she did hear affect the course of her chatter. It always amazed Sophie that Paul had chosen Anna May for his wife. There was nothing evil about the woman, but she was such a strain on the nerves. Was Paul's equanimity so great that he was unaffected?

"You're just too thin, that's what it is," Anna May was saying. "Just look at you. I could put my hands around your waist, I'm sure. Have you been dieting, Sophie? Your nerves will give out, don't you know, if you don't take care of yourself properly. And you're laced too tight, I imagine. That's not good for you either." The astonishing smile flashed again. It reminded Sophie of an electric light, the way they seem to glaringly overbright at first. "Why don't you let me undo your laces a bit?" Anna May suggested.

"I'm really quite all right, Anna May. And my laces are just fine, really."

Anna May drew nearer, and in case she meant to have at the laces in spite of Sophie's protests, Sophie got up quickly and went to freshen up.

Downstairs, when Sophie entered the front parlor, she saw James sitting at the piano, desultorily picking out a tune with his right hand, a glass of pale amber liquid in his left. She started toward him, but Paul interrupted her. "Is there anything I can get you?" he asked anxiously.

She considered. "Not just now, thank you."

Anna May came to where they were standing and whispered to Paul. He listened, then looked at Sophie. "You don't mind if mother has dinner with us, do you? She's used to eating with us and she gets real confused if ever we break her routine."

"Of course, I don't mind. This is her home. Of course she should eat with us."

"She really doesn't know what's going on around her most of the time," Anna May said, as though Sophie needed further reassurances. "She won't say a word."

"Anna May, please bring her down. I feel quite embarrassed that you'd hesitate to do so because of me."

It was Paul who went to fetch his mother, and he escorted her into the small dining room. The old woman kept her eyes down, apparently lost in an inner world of her own. The only thing which seemed to catch her attention was the food, and as soon as a plate of fresh oysters was set in front of her, she began to gulp them ravenously.

"Isn't it lovely having oysters?" Anna May gushed. "There's almost nothing we can't get in Cheyenne now."

Sophie looked to where Anna May was seated, thinking that she'd seen other cases of relentless cheer, but surely this was one of the worst. Anna May returned her gaze with another bright smile.

Sophie turned to James, who was seated next to her. He had hardly spoken all evening. "Esther gave me a tour of your home today," she said.

He had been moodily staring into his wineglass and looked up abruptly. "Esther? How'd she seem to you?"

"At times she was fine, but at other times she was... quite troubled." She wanted to give him some idea of what had happened, but this wasn't the moment for details.

Anna May broke in, her expression fiercely sympathetic now. "Why has she taken Helen's death so much harder than Sally has, d'you suppose?"

James clenched his jaws so that Sophie could see a pale ridge of muscle underneath his sunburned skin. "Perhaps her age," he said curtly.

"Because she understands what happened more than Sally does?" Sophie spoke hurriedly, trying to forestall Anna May.

"Not more, necessarily, but different, that's sure." He took a sip of wine. "For one thing, she remembers Helen's intensity about her own mother. Or about her own mother's absence, I suppose I should say."

"Julia, d'you mean?" asked Anna May. "And how Helen wanted to find her?"

James nodded in a very controlled way. "Helen's absolute commitment to finding Julia said to Esther every day, day in and day out, that not having a mother was a terrible thing. The most terrible thing. And then Helen died." He finished off his wine, then refilled the glass.

"Why did Julia run off?" Anna May asked, looking at Sophie now. "I never have understood."

"Our father was killed. Not long after the Army came to Fort Martin, there was an explosion in the magazine, and he was killed. Helen and I were so young, I think the burdens were just too great for Julia, and so she ran away." Even as she spoke, Sophie thought how calm, how objective her words sounded.

"Well," said Anna May indignantly. "It seems unnatural to me, a mother leaving her--"

"Anna May! Please have Maria take away these oyster plates!" Paul interrupted in a harsh voice, and Sophie looked at him in surprise. She had never heard him snap at Anna May before. Her forced enthusiasms never seemed to trouble him. But now Sophie saw his lips were set in a hard, grim line, and an old memory tugged at her, something about Paul... and her mother. That was it. She remembered bits of unguarded conversation when she was growing up, hints that Paul had been in love with her mother. It was easy to imagine how a romance might have begun during the long winter months at the fort. But then what had happened? If they'd been in love, why hadn't they stayed together? Why had Julia married young Lieutenant Talbot?

Sophie happened to glance at the Widow Bellavance, who was sitting across the table. The old woman was staring at her again, exactly as she had in the doorway of Joe's room. Her eyes were bright with... what was it? Hatred? Resentment? And then suddenly, unexpectedly, the old woman spoke.

"Why have you come here?" Her voice was cracked with age.

"She's visiting, Mother," Paul said loudly.

"Why you come here?" the old woman repeated querulously, still looking at Sophie. Then the serving maid placed the entree in front of her, and the widow dropped her eyes to her plate. She began to pull strings of crisp roasted skin from the breast of the capon.

Disconcerted, Sophie turned to James again. "How close do you think Helen came to finding Julia?"

"It's difficult to say. From time to time, she'd think she had found her, but it always turned out to be nothing. I told her the detectives she hired might be deliberately misleading her, giving her false information, building her hopes so she'd keep looking."

"She used Pinkerton's, didn't she? Is it proper to doubt a firm founded by a Scotsman?"

He looked at her sharply, then smiled a tic of a smile when he saw she's been attempting a joke. "Pinkerton's was fine. Expensive, but fine. She didn't always use them, though. She'd use anyone who promised her to find Julia."

Sophie's attention was caught by a snuffling sound from across the table, where Anna May was looking down at her plate, her lower lip trembling. Sophie felt sorry for her, and at the same time exasperated. How could she be so insensitive? First she had tactlessly provoked Paul's anger, and now she would embarrass them all with her self-pitying response to it. Sophie hoped she could distract her. "Anna May, James tells me Helen was involved in temperance work. Have you been too?"

"Yes, I have," she answered, with a catch in her voice. She kept her eyes down.

Sophie gave a mental shrug at the failed gambit; then another ploy occurred to her. "Have you had a chance to meet Frances Willard?"

That was enough. "Oh yes, I have," said Anna May. "She's the most wonderful person. She came here to help us get our WCTU chapter organized. 'Womanliness first,' she told us. 'Whatever else may follow afterward.'"

Although she was aching to do it, Sophie restrained herself from commenting on the fact that Miss Willard was being quoted at a table where wine was being served. Instead she nodded and made a murmur or two, just enough to encourage Anna May.

"She doesn't want women to be like men, that's what's different, d'you see," Anna May was going on. "She thinks we ladies have a special contribution to make."

"Special? How's that?"

"A spiritual contribution, a moral one. F'r instance, I remember what the polling used to be like in Wyoming before women had the vote. Drunkards everywhere, and fistfights and knife fights. But that's all changed since we got the franchise."

"Anna May, that's not because women are voting," James said. "The territory's becoming more civilized. That's what accounts for most of the change."

"I'm not good at arguing these things. But I know if it was left to men, we'd never get rid of these saloons or those... houses!"

"What houses do you mean, Anna May?" James asked innocently. He had eaten very little of his dinner. The plate in front of him was almost untouched.

"Like Ida Hilton's... Oh, you know what houses I mean, James Stevenson. Anna May turned to Sophie. "You really ought to speak to Miss Travers. She can explain these things so beautifully."

"Miss Travers?"

"You know Miss Travers, Sophie," Paul said. "Your old teacher from Fort Martin."

"Amy Travers? She's here?"

He nodded. "She's one of our high-school teachers now."

"Oh, yes, she and Helen were the most intimate friends," Anna May said. Her words made Sophie remember how attached Helen had been to Miss Travers even at Fort Martin. She had followed the young schoolteacher everywhere, spent every moment she could with her, composed long notes to her. "The two of them were so beautiful together, so pure, so loving," Anna May was going on.

Abruptly James stood, threw his napkin on the table, and announced he was going outside for a moment. The others sat in silence while he left; then Paul spoke.

"Anna May, it only makes the situation worse to talk about Amy Travers in front of him."

"He's just so wrong not to welcome her help."

"They're his children. We have no business interfering."

"Paul, what are you talking about?" Sophie asked.

"Miss Travers has been stopping at the Stevenson house in the late afternoons, early evenings, since Helen died, and visiting with the children. She thinks they need more of a woman's influence than they're getting. James doesn't like her, though, doesn't like her stopping by. He makes sure he's out of the house when she comes."

Sophie wondered if this could be why James had so abruptly turned her over to Mrs. Syms when she arrived. Had it been the time of day when Amy Travers usually visited? But Sophie hadn't seen her, and why would the woman continue to come if she wasn't wanted? And if Miss Travers didn't realize how James felt, why didn't he make sure she understood?

Suddenly Sophie felt very tired. "Mrs. Bellavance, Anna May, Paul," she said, excusing herself. "It's been a very long day for me, and I'd like to be getting back to the Stevensons'. I'll go up and say good night to Joe, and perhaps by then James will have returned.

Joe was sleeping, so she came back downstairs quickly. James was waiting in the entrance hall. They made their farewells and got into the carriage he had brought. As they drove the short way home, there were many things Sophie wanted to say to him, but she wasn't sure how to begin. He seemed oblivious to her presence, caught up in an inward maze of contemplation.

But apparently he was aware of her, for as they drew up in front of the house, he broke the silence. "I've been most ungracious to you, Sophie," he said, "leaving you at the dinner table, abandoning you as soon as you arrived."

"It's true we haven't had much opportunity to visit." As soon as the words were out, she hated the way they sounded. So prim, straight-backed, and polite.

"I didn't intend to be rude. It's..."

"It's Amy Travers, isn't it?" Now she was being unnaturally direct, she thought with chagrin.

But James didn't seem to notice. "I try not to be in the house when she's there."

"I didn't see her this afternoon."

"Perhaps she didn't come. Occasionally she doesn't."

"You should tell her to stop coming," Sophie said, unable to comprehend why he hadn't confronted Miss Travers.

"Later, perhaps. For now, I'll avoid the aggravation. Or at least try to. Whenever I see Anna May, she insists on telling me what a pure, unselfish soul Amy Travers is, and that's damnably annoying. But then, Anna May can be annoying when she discusses the weather."

"Animated Anna May, d'you mean?" Sophie gave a bright, exaggerated smile.

He laughed at her imitation, assuaging the slight guilt she felt for having fallen into it. "Ah, Sophie, you're a good tonic for me," he said. "I must sound like the complete misogynist to you, though, what with my complaints about Amy Travers and Anna May."

"I think I understand." Their eyes met and she felt a powerful attraction to him, a surge of feeling which surprised her. She hastened to lighten the mood. "You should say one or two kind things about women soon, however. Otherwise, given as I am to frights and starts, you might set me to shrieking."

"You are all right now." His statement was really a question.

"Of course. I'm fine. Anna May's convinced it has to do with not eating, and much as I hate to admit it, she's probably right. The train journey was so long that by today I didn't feel like breakfast or lunch, and then seeing Joe and encountering the Widow Bellavance like that..." she broke off, not liking the line she was taking. She sounded fussy, overconcerned with herself. "One of my competitors described me once as 'a very strong lady,'" she told him as they walked toward the house. "Stronger than befits a lady, I think he meant to imply."

At that moment, James stumbled, tripping over a large metal object on the sidewalk. "What the devil!" It was the bicycle that Esther had been riding, but something had happened to it. The front fender was bent, the front wheel utterly misshapen.

"It looks like it's been rammed against something."

"Repeatedly, I'd say. And deliberately." He lifted the bicycle from the path and threw it several feet into the darkness.

"Did Esther do it?"

"I can't imagine who else."

"But she was so proud of the bicycle, so proud you'd given it to her."

"That doesn't mean a thing. One minute she'll be clinging around my neck, soft and loving, and then she'll be holding too tight, as if she'd like to strangle me."

"But why..."

"I have no idea."

"She loves you. That was quite clear when I talked to her."

"She ahtes me, too." His voice was coldly factual, and he nodded as he spoke, as if to confirm the statement to himself.

"Has she always been this way?"

"Toward me? No, just since Helen's death. She's always been difficult, though. Tense and complicated. So much like Helen, the two of them were always at one another."

They walked on into the hallway, and when they got inside, she reached up and touched his shoulder. She meant to say something sympathetic. But before she had a chance, he bent down and kissed her cheek. "I'm glad you're here, Sophie."

As he went outside to see to the horses and carriage, she could feel herself not quite lean in the direction he had gone, but incline that way, and she was troubled by how she felt. She couldn't let this happen. No, of course not. And she wouldn't. The time was past when she had let her impulses rule her life.

She stood in the hallway, knowing that as tired as she was, she would not fall asleep easily. And the last thing she wanted was to lie in bed tossing and turning. There had been quite enough of that on the train. She considered a moment, and then, instead of going directly into her room, went down the hallway and slid open the heavy oak door to the library. She turned on the lights and scanned the titles behind the leaded-glass doors. She opened a case, selected a book, put it back, and leafed through another. Finally she settled on a Shakespeare play, "A Midsummer Night's Dream." She could lose herself in its festive comedy, she thought, carrying the slim volume upstairs with her.

When she was ready for bed, she arranged the pillows, made herself comfortable, and picked up the book from the bedside table. It fell open somewhere near the middle. She would have ignored it, would have turned to the front page and begun reading the play, but her eye was caught by a line drawn in the margin. It set off Helen's words to Hermia:

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods.

Have with our needles created both one flower,

Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,

Both warbling of one song, both in one key--

As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds

Had been incorporated, as we grew together

Like a double cherry, seeming parted

But yet a union in partition--

Two lovely berries molded on one stem.

So, with two seeming bodies, but one heart,

Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,

Due but to one, and crowned with one crest.

And will you rent our ancient love asunder,

To join with men in scorning your poor friend?

The same pen which had marked the margin had underlined the last two lines.

She looked inside the book's front cover and found an inscription in the same ink: "To my Helena, my dearest lover. You are the joy of my life. If ever you fail me through my fault or your own, I will forswear thenceforth all human friendship. Thine always, A.T."

Helen and... Amy Travers? No, it couldn't be, simply couldn't. But "...my dearest lover"?

No, it didn't bear thinking about. She was making much more of the inscription than it deserved, and perhaps it was little wonder after what she'd been witness to today: James and the drunken cowboy, Esther on the window ledge and stair landing, the Widow Bellavance in the doorway. She'd been trained by the good citizens of Cheyenne to expect bizarre behavior until now she was finding it even when it wasn't there.

Still, as she read through the inscription once more, she experienced an unfamiliar sensation. For just a moment she felt furtive, embarrassed almost, as though she'd opened someone else's correspondence or read someone else's intimate diary.

- Chapter 6 -

She let the book fall into her lap, and by the time she thought of lifting it up again, she noticed something wrong with the electric light in the room. It was pale, had a weak, sickly quality—and then she realized that daylight was coming through the window, dissipating the effect of the lamp. And somewhere a meadowlark sang. It was morning, and she had slept the night through, slept deeply, totally, beyond the reach of either dreams or nightmares.

The window was open a little way, a gentle breeze blew in, and she lay still, savoring the feel of its June coolness on her arms and face. She heard the meadowlark again and thought how lovely his song was—and how lonely, too. It took on overtones of solitude and isolation from the vast prairie quiet until he sounded as though he were the only bird in the world.

Gradually the human noises began. Somewhere in the house someone turned off a tap. A screen door slammed, and a child's voice floated up from outside. A dog barked—wasn't that Tom? Sally must have him outside, playing with him.

There were footsteps on the stairway, low voices in the hall, and Sophie decided to get up. When she had dressed, she entered the hallway to find Esther waiting for her. She was sure that's what the girl was doing, though Esther was taking pains to make the encounter seem a coincidence.

"Aunt Sophie. Good morning. Are you on your way down to breakfast too?"

As they started toward the stairway together, Sophie thought of mentioning the bicycle, but rejected the idea. It was James' place, not hers, to bring it up. They passed the bedroom Sophie thought had been Helen's, the one she had asked Esther about yesterday. "That was my mother's room," Esther said, tilting her head and looking up.

Sophie merely nodded. She had the impression that the girl was testing her somehow by offering the information so casually, and she didn't want to show her surprise. Nor did she want to risk triggering another hysterical outburst like yesterday's.

They walked on down to the dining room, where an enormous breakfast was waiting in covered dishes on the sideboard. There was crisp-fried pork, fat buckwheat cakes, and sliced peaches glistening in their heavy juice. Sophie had little appetite, but Esther kept pressing food upon her, food and conversation.

"You don't have any children, do you, Aunt Sophie?"

"No, that's right."

"I think I shan't either."

"Oh, why is that?"

She shrugged. "It hurts too much. I wasn't very old when Sally was born, but I remember my mother screamed and screamed." She finished the last of her buckwheat cakes. "Mmmmmm, these are good. You really ought to have some."

Sophie glanced at her. Was she trying to shock? Is that what she'd been doing yesterday when she walked into the drawing room and in the most matter-of-fact voice imaginable described horror stories in the newspapers? But she had been tense then, keyed up. Now she seemed cool and unruffled as she took three more buckwheat cakes and chatted on.

"But the baby that really hurt was the one after Sally."

"The one that was born dead."

"Mmmm-huh. Mother screamed for a whole day and a whole night that time." She was pouring thick maple syrup on to the buckwheat cakes, and she paused for a moment to watch the bright golden eye of the butter melt into the darker gold liquid. "I heard Miss Travers and Mother talking about it. They said the doctor killed the baby. It was a boy."

"Killed him?"

"Mmmmm-huh, that's what they said. Everybody knew there was terrible trouble because Mother screamed for so long, but the doctor didn't know what to do. He had all these sheets draped over her, but he didn't know what to do. And so when the baby came out backward, the cord strangled him. I thought Mother would never stop crying. For months and months she cried. She cried after the miscarriages, too."

"I don't know about those."

"Practically every year she didn't have a baby, she had a miscarriage, almost regular as everything. Until a couple years ago anyway." Seemingly undisturbed by the information she had imparted, Esther ran her spoon around her plate, licked maple syrup from it, and spoke again. "Over on Van Lennen Street, there's a lady whose baby died when it was just a few weeks old. She was so upset, she had the photographer come and take pictures of it. But of course its eyes were closed, so she painted them in. I've seen the picture. It's very strange."

"Oh, and another thing that happened--this wasn't very long ago--was, they found a baby in a privy vault downtown. Dead, of course. They still don't know who threw it in there, but somebody who didn't want it, that's for sure."

"Esther, there are some very nice, very wonderful things about having children, too."

"Oh, I know, I know. I didn't mean to be unpleasant. I just thought you'd be interested. No, I know there are nice things. Miss Travers tells me that too." She looked at Sophie out of the corner of her eye, a fey smile on her lips. "Of course, she's never had any children either." Before Sophie could protest, "Esther went on, "No, I know the nice things. Really I do." She was not smiling now. "I remember a story my mother told me. She said when I was born there were a few seconds when she first saw me that she didn't know who I was, whether I was here, or she was me. It was like we were both each other." She looked directly at Sophie, her eyes suspiciously bright. "When I told Miss Travers that story, Sally laughed, and so Miss Travers sent her from the room."

Sophie had trouble thinking what to say. "Maybe Sally was jealous because it was your story," she tried finally. But that was inadequate, ignoring the most important part of Esther's confidence. "It's very precious to you, isn't it, the memory of what your mother said."

Esther nodded, and one of the tears which had been gathering along her lower lids slipped down her face.

They had both finished, so they got up and walked into the drawing room, Sophie with her arm around Esther, her hand resting on the girl's shoulder. "I like the way you've done your hair," she said. It was pulled back on the sides and hung in loose curls down the back.

"Oh, do you really? I saw it in 'Godey's'..." She stopped in mid-sentence and looked up guiltily.

"I don't care if you read 'Godey's,' Esther." When the girl still seemed unsure, Sophie assumed an air of mock severity. "As long as you're reading 'Dymond's Ladies' Magazine' too, of course." She ran her hand down a curl and let it twine around her finger. Then she patted Esther on the shoulder. "A reporter from the 'Clarion' will be here soon, a young man I promised to see."

Esther gave a quick nod, and while Sophie sat down, the girl went to the mantelpiece and began rearranging things on it. Soon she moved to the floor, where she began making a pattern with objects from the mantelpiece. She was sitting with her legs bent in inverted V's, and when she leaned back on her arms to consider her arrangement, Sophie saw that the front of her dress strained slightly. Her breasts were growing, and Sophie wondered if she had begun to menstruate yet. And if she had, would she tell her about it? Would her odd matter-of-factness carry over to her own coming of age?

Sophie remembered when her own flow had begun. She felt obliged to tell her grandmother, had gone looking for her, not because she wanted to tell her, but because she thought she should. Deer Woman had been sewing a pair of moccasins when Sophie found her. "The bleeding--it's begun for me," she blurted out.

Deer Woman put her work down. "My little Sophie--not so little now." She smiled a melancholy smile. "With my tribe you would go to the 'hunagen' now."

Sophie felt herself tighten inside. Her grandmother meant well, but she was always talking about things that had nothing to do with Sophie's life. And she had talked about them fondly, when to Sophie they sounded queer and awful. "I wouldn't go," she said.

"To the menstrual lodge? But why?"

"They couldn't make me go. Why should I be sent away like that?"

For a moment her grandmother didn't say anything. Then, gently: "It isn't punishment. It never was for me. It was something to look forward to. Often there were babies there, and always friends and talk and laughter..." Her voice trailed off as if she realized her words were useless. After a moment she lifted her arms, wagging her fingers, and Sophie walked over and let herself be drawn into her grandmother's embrace. But inside she held herself rigid and aloof. The world Deer Woman spoke of seemed alien and unattractive, and she wanted no part of it.

"There!" Esther announced. "I've got everyone I need in this one. Come see, Aunt Sophie."

Sophie knelt on the floor beside her and saw that Esther had arranged the pictures from the mantelpiece into a family tree. At the top was a photograph of Joe and Deer Woman in middle age, both of them looking uncomfortable in the clothes they were wearing. Joe had on a dark jacket and dark pants, a suit Sophie had never seen him in, though this old picture had made it familiar to her. Deer woman was wearing a dress with tiny buttons and lace ruching, holding herself awkwardly within its stiff folds. She'd worn white women's clothing so rarely, she never had learned to seem at ease in them.

Below the picture of Joe and Deer Woman, Esther had placed a drawing of Sophie's mother and father. Joe had told Sophie once that this drawing was a good likeness. But Julia looked startled, Sophie thought, and the young lieutenant's face seemed blurred. She picked it up to examine it and realized that although it portrayed a younger generation, it was older than the photograph of Joe and Deer Woman, perhaps as much as a decade older. By the time the picture of Joe and Deer Woman had been made, this blurry figure was in his grave and the surprised young woman had run away.

"I do wish I had a picture of Paul's father," Esther said. She was gesturing toward a group of pictures, and Sophie saw that she had tried to set up a family tree for the Bellavances too, but she had only two pictures to work from, one of the Widow Bellavance, the other of Paul, Anna May, and their five children, all grown and gone now.

"You do need Emile Bellavance, don't you?" Sophie said. "I'll ask Paul if he doesn't have a picture of his father. Perhaps..." Sophie broke off as she set the picture of her parents down and looked at the photographs arranged below it. The picture of Helen—it had been defaced! She picked it up and saw that someone had gone over all the lines in it with ink, gone around the eyes, the irises, and even the pupils, blacked in the lashes and brows; outlined the lips until the face looked like a harlot's, or like a corpse on whom the undertaker has too lavishly applied his art. "Esther, what's happened to this picture?"

The girl looked up, seeming unconcerned. "Oh, Sally did that. Every so long ago."

"No, just yesterday I looked at it, and it was fine."

"You must have looked at another picture. There's more than one of Mother on the mantelshelf."

Sophie was sure this was the picture she'd been looking at, but before she had time to resolve the matter, Mrs. Syms appeared in the doorway to announce that the reporter from the 'Clarion' had arrived. By the time the housekeeper showed him in, Esther had put all the pictures back on the mantelpiece and slipped through the door into the dining room.

The reporter seemed very different from yesterday, Sophie thought. Could it just be that he had taken off his hat? Although he was in his twenties, he was balding, and having to reveal this fact made for the breach she detected in his self-assurance? Or had he perhaps spoken with someone about her? In any event, his annoying arrogance had tempered, and she saw no harm in granting him an interview. "There were some questions you wished to ask?" she said as soon as they were seated.

Plainly he had not thought the interview would happen so easily. He hurried to get a stubby pencil out, not very successfully hiding his surprise. He riffled the pages of his lined tablet, looking for a sheet to write on, and tried to cover his unpreparedness with conversation. "Will you be in Cheyenne long?"

"A few weeks, perhaps a little more. I wanted to see my grandfather, who is ill, and I may write one or two articles while I'm here. Perhaps one comparing Cheyenne now to the way it was when I was here nine years ago."

He felt obliged to record what she had said, and there was a silence while he wrote. "You grew up in Wyoming?" he said finally.

"Yes, at Fort Martin."

"Which is named for your grandfather."

"He founded it. He and Emile Bellavance."

"And my editor says you're the head of Dymond Publications now?" There was a trace of awe in his voice, and Sophie took a certain satisfaction from it, particularly when she recalled his attitude at the depot.

"That's correct."

"Well, how...I mean, it is a long way from Fort Martin to New York City and Dymond Publications. I'm not sure I understand how it happened. My editor said something about Adah Menken?" His expression was bewildered, and Sophie wondered what he had thought at the depot. That she was the fashionable widow of a prominent man who dabbled in her dead husband's business? A well-dressed dilettante from Publisher's Row? And now that he knew that she was Dymond Publications, it was more than he could take in to learn she had also spent time with Adah. Indeed, it had been more than many people could accept when the story had first come out. Her enemies had been gleeful, of course, at the reports in the gossip rags; but her friends had refused to believe it. She had handled both groups with a cool statement of the facts, which she repeated now. "Yes, I was with Adah Menken's troupe for a short time. I joined them in San Francisco, where I had been in school, then traveled back East with them."

"Were you an actress?"

"I had some small parts."

"In 'Mazeppa' by any chance?"

"Yes."

"So you saw her ride that horse. I mean, not 'ride' exactly..."

"She was tied on its back in a supine position." Whenever Adah's name came up, it was followed by questions about the spectacular finale to 'Mazeppa': a huge stallion galloping on a specially built ramp, a maiden tied to its back, looking very frightened—and quite bare. "Actually, it was a very brave thing, letting herself be tied to a horse that way. And I never saw an audience—not a single one—that failed to give her a standing ovation."

The reporter was leaning forward, hoping she would say more. Sophie knew exactly what he wanted her talk about. It was what everybody wanted to know. "I'd like to add," she said, "that even though the character she played was bound naked to a stallion as punishment, Mrs.

Menken was dressed in flesh-colored tights and tunic for all her performances."

He was hanging onto her words, a perfect example of that metaphor, but he managed to recover himself sufficiently to write in his notebook. It took a very long time to get it all down, and as he wrote, Sophie remembered how she had come to know Adah. Sophie had been fifteen, a student at the convent school, and the thought of running away had been in her mind for months. One day as she walked along with a group of girls, she was thinking how much she hated the school and its rules. They all held hands, as the nuns required, so that they formed a chain with a sister at the front end and another at the back. It was a humiliating way to walk down a street, Sophie was thinking, when there, on the windowless side of a wooden building, she saw a picture of a woman on a horse. She stared at the 'Mazeppa' poster, thought of how well she herself knew how to ride, and made one of those great leaps of logic at which the young are adept: the 'Mazeppa' troupe would be her way out of the convent school! She'd go to the woman on the poster, tell her of her own skill with horses, and she'd be invited to join the troupe! As the chain of girls pulled her along, Sophie was already planning on how to get away from the convent so she could go to the theater.

That very night she lay in her narrow cubicle, pretending to be asleep. The cubicles were partitioned off with muslin and lit from the inside so that the sister at the end of the hall could see the girls without being seen herself—if she were awake. That was the picky point. Sophie had heard the sister slept, but did she really? Finally she stole [sic] herself to take the risk, slipped out of bed, and dressed. No one objected. She parted the muslin curtain and crept out into the darkness, past the sleeping nun. The window was open—the sisters' zeal of fresh air approached their enthusiasm for the blessed saints—and in a moment Sophie was over the sill and on her way to the theater.

Once she got there, she had no trouble finding Adah. She simply followed the noise to the crowded dressing room and made her way to the center, where the tall, dark actress stood. Adah shushed the men around her and listened to Sophie's story. Then without pressing for details of Sophie's background, or questioning whether she had the equestrian skill she claimed, Adah turned to a short, bearded man near her and commanded him to find Sophie a part in the play. Soon Sophie found herself dressed as a page. It was she who brought Beauty Belle, the horse Adah used in San Francisco, onstage.

Sophie wasn't aware then how much Adah's mood depended on the situation at the moment. She would not always be so outgoing and generous, but this happened at a time of triumph for her. The entire troupe of 'Mazeppa' departed San Francisco in glory, all of them in stagecoaches heading for St. Louis. Their stop in Virginia City was another coup for Adah, with the miners begging her for a single performance of 'Mazeppa' and showering a fortune in silver on her.

In Virginia City, Adah called Sophie into her room. "Sophie?" That was the way she talked, with tiny question marks scattered through her husky speech. "Sophie? You're beautiful, do you know that? Of course you do."

By now Sophie had heard of the monumental rages of jealousy Adah was capable of, so she was wary of the actress's words as well as flattered by them. But there was no sign of anger as Adah continued, "There will be men in your life, Sophie, many of them, probably. Enjoy them, Sophie, but don't let yourself be trapped." She looked at the young girl meaningfully. "Sophie? do you know what I'm saying?"

"I... I'm not sure."

Adah picked up the lacquered box from the sofa table. Sophie thought it probably contained cigarettes and Adah meant to have one. She was fond of smoking. But she handed the box to Sophie. "This is for you."

Sophie opened it, thinking she should thank Adah, but when she saw what was inside, she was speechless. There were several small sponges, each in a silken net with a string attached. There were packets marked "Preventive Powders," and lined up in neat rows were several dozen condoms.

"There are all these things, you know," Adah was saying. "But the sheaths are really the best. Sometimes men don't like them." She stared into space for a moment, seeming to remember something; then she gave a small shrug. "But since it is they who get us with child, don't you think they should cooperate?"

The young reporter's voice jerked Sophie back to the present. "And then after you left Adah Menken's troupe, you were married?"

"Yes, to Albert Burroughs. He was an anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution." She watched carefully and saw that as he was supposed to, the young man assumed from her words that Albert was dead. Well, that was one secret she had managed to keep. She had learned long ago that speaking of Albert in the past tense conveyed the idea that he was no longer alive, and for years she had avoided further questions about him. But she could not avoid thinking of him, of the kind, quiet man who had given her so much: music, languages, a whole world of philosophy and poetry she'd never even guessed at. He had taught her to write, to dress, to set a table, to design a room. and how had she repaid him? That was the question she always came up against. Could she have done otherwise? Could she have been kinder?

"Then when was it you married Philip Dymond?"

"In 1872," she answered, and the interview went on routinely. She told how she had worked with Philip, becoming editor first of "Dymond's Ladies' Magazine," and then later of "Dymond's Illustrated News," how she had assumed control of all of the Dymond enterprises upon Philip's death. Yes, she was very impressed with Cheyenne's growth, and no, she didn't have tickets to the opera house yet, but she certainly hoped to go. It took very little effort to respond to these queries, and Sophie found her thoughts drifting away from the interview, away from the present and back to the past. Albert was there, a pale and quiet ghost, and Philip was there, vital, handsome, his dark eyes alight.

Finally the young man had asked his last question, and as Mrs. Syms showed him out, Sophie went upstairs. She paused on the landing, running her hand over the soft leather of Deer Woman's buffalo robe, surveying the place which had been so important to her sister. How many letters had Helen written at this desk? Sophie wondered. How many hours had she spent trying to find Julia? And then Sophie looked back down the stairs, thinking how unexpectedly, how suddenly it had all ended for Helen.

On the second floor, Sophie walked to the door of Helen's room and stepped inside. A narrow bed with a painted iron bedstead stood in one corner. Its quilt had been blue and white, she saw, but it had faded through many washings until it was almost entirely white. Only one object hung on the white, unfinished walls, a beribboned cross above the bed, and on the oak bedside table was a Bible. Except for an oak dresser covered with a lace dresser scarf, there was no other furniture in the room.

Sophie walked slowly across the hall to the guest suite. Once inside, she picked up "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and took it to the window seat in the round tower part of the room. She pulled the curtain, closing herself in, then reread the passage Amy Travers had marked off. She sensed there was a pattern here, and she tried to empty her mind of all its preconceptions so that she could see it. Who had been important to Helen, after all? Their grandmother, whose robe she had kept near her; their mother, for whom she had spent years searching, her friend Amy Travers, who loved her. And her daughters, too. Sophie thought of Helen lying in childbed, looking at the female child just come from her body and feeling that they two of them were still, somehow, one. Where James fit in, Sophie didn't understand, but not in that bare, unfinished room, not in that narrow bed. And when Helen had shut him out, who was left? Only women.

As she looked again at the passage Amy Travers had marked off, Sophie realized Helen hadn't even told her Miss Travers was in Cheyenne. Probably she had thought that Sophie wouldn't care, wouldn't understand the importance. And how could I? Sophie asked herself, thinking how different a life she had had. Her world had been a world of men. There had been those few months with Adah, but outside that, it was not women who befriended her, not women who loved her. Men were the ones with whom she had formed the bonds of affection and intimacy. They had been her friends, her mentors, her lovers.

She and Helen had dwelt so far apart in many ways, Sophie wondered if the distance could ever be crossed. Still, she wanted to try.

(But why now? a tiny voice interrupted. Why was it so important now? Was the guilt she felt suddenly more piquant after last night in the hall with James?)

She tried to shrug off her doubts. Whatever the reason, she wanted to know about Helen's life--and to understand her death.

(Again the still small voice broke in: How could it have happened? Cautious, precise Helen, who had never been careless, how could she have had an accident? How was it possible she had taken the fatal misstep which had sent her plunging down the stairs?)

- Chapter 7 -

Any Travers called at the Stevenson house before noon. When Sophie saw her sitting in the drawing room, she thought how much at odds her Christian name was with her physical appearance. "Amy" suggested someone diminutive, but Miss Travers was a tall woman, changed little in the many years since Sophie had last seen her. She had the kind of face which ages well, the skin drawn tightly over prominent bones, the eyes deeply set. She wore her hair in the same way Sophie remembered, pulled back severely, plaited in a tight coil.

Miss Travers put her hand out, and when Sophie took it, she was surprised at its heavy softness. It was like something alive but sleeping, Sophie thought, like a warm, boneless animal. When the schoolteacher spoke, Sophie was surprised again. She had forgotten how high and emphatic her voice was. "I'm pleased to see you, Sophie."

"And I you, Miss Travers." Sophie saw the schoolteacher looking at her waved hair, her light blue gown, and she realized Miss Travers was seeking evidence of frivolity. When she had been Sophie's teacher at Fort Martin, she had considered her a frivolous child, and Sophie could tell she meant to cling tightly to that old opinion. She had no intention of being impressed by Sophie's achievements.

Mrs. Syms brought tea; Sophie poured from a richly colored majolica service and made polite conversation. But all the while, her thoughts were on Helen and how close Miss Travers and Helen had been. Surely if there were anyone who could answer Sophie's questions, it would be this woman. Bringing them up might seem rude, but nothing would be accomplished if Sophie's only concern were to seem mannerly. Besides, by sitting here asking innocuous questions and responding with meaningless phrases, wasn't she simply acting out Miss Travers' idea of her?

"Esther and I were talking," Sophie began, "and she told me something quite surprising. About Helen. About the baby boy who was born dead."

"Yes?"

"She said that you and Helen blamed the doctor. That you said the doctor killed the baby."

"I had no idea Esther was aware... Well, she must have overheard. We talked about it often in the months after, had to talk about it, really. Losing the baby was so hard on Helen. And she couldn't forget the pain. The memory wouldn't go away..."

"How was the doctor to blame?"

"He seemed at a complete loss what to do. He was new in town, and he seemed... embarrassed every time he came into the bedroom with her. And he insisted on draping her with all these sheets, as though he didn't want to see her."

"Perhaps he hadn't any training."

"No, it wasn't that. It was the kind of training. I finally asked him if he'd ever seen a baby born before. Of course not, he said. He'd just graduated from a 'very fine' medical school, and of course they'd never permitted their students to witness an actual birth. What sort of indecency would that be?" Well, it wasn't an easy birth. The baby came feet first, and the cord got wrapped around the neck. If only the doctor had some experience... of if Helen had only called a midwife. She swore that she would after that, but it was too late."

"How do you mean, too late?"

"The long labor weakened something inside her. After that, she couldn't carry a baby more than four or five months."

"But she conceived them anyway."

Miss Travers looked at her coldly. "She became pregnant, yes." The implication of her words was unclear, but she spoke them with a finality which indicated the subject was closed.

"Tell me how Helen died," Sophie said after a moment.

"I'm not certain I understand. Surely..."

"I know she fell down the stairs, but I know nothing else, and I can't ask here, not the family. Was it morning? Night? What had she been doing? Who found her?"

"It was in the late afternoon. It appeared she'd been going over the correspondence she had with the detectives about your mother. She did that fairly often. The letters were out on her desk."

"And who found her?"

"Esther. When she came home from school."

"Oh, no."

"Sally was with her, but Esther kept her away from the body and sent her to find Mrs. Syms. She was downstairs with the servants, had been for a half-hour or so. It apparently happened in that time."

"Where was James?"

Miss Travers sat down her cup, averting her eyes. "He was out. It was several hours after she was found before he came back home."

"Where was he?"

"I don't recall. Perhaps no one ever asked him. Why should they?"

Was there irony in her words? Sophie couldn't be sure. It was difficult to identify emotion in that high, flat voice. Sophie spoke again. "My sister's death has troubled me greatly, the way she died, I mean. It was so unlike Helen to have an accident. She was careful, meticulously so. It seems impossible to me when I think about it." Miss Travers said nothing, but her eyes were locked on Sophie. "Is it possible Helen was distracted or worried about something?" Sophie asked. Miss Travers' eyes, examining her, probing, made her feel uneasy. "I have to confess I know very little about my sister's concerns. We corresponded, but..." Sophie shrugged, breaking off. "Since you were very good friends with Helen, I thought you might..."

"I loved your sister," Miss Travers said.

"And did she share her deepest cares with you?" Sophie's intonation was wrong, and she saw Miss Travers tense. Without meaning to, Sophie had sounded sarcastic, and she rushed to cover it up. "I'm told Helen was very involved in temperance work, trying to close down saloons, houses of prostitution too, didn't I understand? Could she have been concerned about those things? Distracted by some difficulty she had encountered?"

"It was entirely the other way. Helen found great comfort in the help she gave to others." For a moment Miss Travers had seemed close to telling Sophie something, but now she was slipping neatly out of her questions. Why had Helen needed comfort? Because of all the miscarriages? Is that what had troubled her? "I'm not sure you truly comprehend what Helen was doing," Miss Travers continued. "It wasn't a nay-saying thing, closing down this, getting rid of that. What she was doing was helping others, the women especially. The ones who are married to drunkards, the ones who sell their bodies to them." Now Sophie was certain she detected emotion in Miss Travers' voice. It gave her words a bitter, curling edge.

"There's a woman who lives with a man named Wilson. I understand Helen was helping her."

Miss Travers lifted her eyebrows, as though surprised by Sophie's knowledge.

"I had an encounter with Mr. Wilson."

"Yes, we'd both been trying to help Baby Wilson. That's what she's been calling herself, though she and Zack aren't married. In fact, I'm still trying with Baby. I'm leaving from here to go out there."

"What do you do out there? How do you help her?"

"By talking to her, letting her know there's someone who believes in her better side." Miss Travers' words were curiously without conviction, Sophie thought, almost as though she were repeating a lesson by rote. "She's isolated out there on the prairie," the schoolteacher continued. "Zack's hardly ever around, and so it's just she and the two children--and the occasional cowboy who drops by to see her." Miss Travers caught Sophie's questioning glance. "Oh, yes, Baby's still a prostitute, though perhaps not so blatantly--or busily--as she was when she was at Ida Hamilton's."

"James said Zack Wilson's a cattle thief."

"James thinks any homesteader's a rustler. I suspect Baby's bought more cattle with her favors than Zack's ever thought of stealing." She had a locket watch pinned to her dress, and she opened it and turned her head to see the time. "I really must go. I want to get back here and visit with Esther and Sally this afternoon."

"Might I come with you?" There were so many more questions to ask. And she wanted to meet Baby Wilson, the woman Helen had tried to help.

Miss Travers looked at her doubtfully. "Surely not in those clothes."

"I'll change right away."

* * *

The double-seated buckboard waiting in front had large yellow wooden walls. As Sophie climbed in, she noticed a shotgun had been mounted on the back on the front seat. The weapon looked well cared-for, though it was far from new. It appeared to be about the same vintage as the patient old roan standing in the hitch.

Miss Travers drove out of Cheyenne, and as the town grew small in the distance, Sophie realized this was the first time in many years she had been out on the prairie in anything but a train. This was completely different from crossing the land in a great puffing machine, an experience suffused with nostalgia for her. She remembered childhood days running and riding across the prairie, long afternoons lying on her back in the prairie grass, watching the wind mold cloud shapes. The silent stretch of land on all sides recalled for her the way life had been, and at the same time, made her feel unexpectedly serene, at peace with herself about the present. Cares and questions dropped away, and she felt a gentle happiness as she looked at the far horizons and listened to the quiet. Miss Travers seemed to recognize her mind and talked little.

After nearly two hours, Miss Travers pointed out a shape on the horizon. As they drove closer, the shape gradually separated, resolving itself into a line of cottonwood trees along a creek, and on the far side, several hundred yards up a gentle slope, three rectangular buildings. A few brown-and-white cattle were lying in the shade of the cottonwoods, Sophie noticed—and then she thought she heard something. She sat forward on the seat, listening. What was it? Not the wind, though the wind was blowing. The sound was more a wailing noise, but intermittent, choppy.

"Probably one of the children crying," Miss Travers said.

But as they drew nearer, they could make out words in the sound: "Help me! Oh, somebody, help me!"

"That's Baby!" said Miss Travers. "You'd better hang on." She urged the old roan to a gallop and the buckboard began to rattle and sway. They pounded over the prairie, Sophie clinging to the iron armrest, wondering if they would arrive before the buckboard disintegrated and the horse collapsed. Miss Travers slowed to cross the small creek, then urged the old roan on for the last two or three hundred yards, stopping abruptly when she came to the first of the rectangular buildings, a wooden shack with the windows broken out. She jumped down from the buckboard and ran into the shack, moving with surprising agility for a woman so tall.

Sophie followed behind, stopping before she went in when she saw a small figure sitting near the corner of the shack. It was a child of about two. He looked up at her suspiciously from beneath a tangle of black curls, then resumed his play, as oblivious of the screams from inside as were the chickens scratching in the dirt near him.

Sophie rushed on into the shack and found Miss Travers kneeling beside a prostrate figure, a woman incongruously dressed in red, who was sprawled near a hole in the middle of the shack floor. "She's down there," the woman was shrieking and sobbing, "and there are two rattlers, two goddamned snakes and my Jenny!"

"Shh. Shh. You'll only frighten Jenny more."

The hole in the floor was the entrance to a crude, shallow cellar, Sophie realized, when she saw the wooden cover laid to one side. She peered cautiously into the cellar, and she could see a girl of about four frozen against the dirt wall at the far end, her face a rigid circle of white. Almost directly beneath Sophie was one of the menacing shapes, a large rattler coiled up. Like its fellow several feet closer to the child, the snake's head was weaving back and forth, its unblinking eyes probing the dim light for any sign of motion. Its rattle quivered, making a dry, deadly sound. "Keep still, little Jenny, keep still," Sophie found herself whispering.

The woman started to scream louder. "Jenny! Jenny!" And she started to pound on the floor of the shack as she called out to the child.

"Baby, stop it! You must stop that!" When the woman continued her mad pounding, Miss Travers raised her arm and brought it down swiftly, delivering a blow which twisted Baby's head around violently. Baby stopped her pounding, covering her face with her hands and beginning to moan.

"She's not going to be of any use," Miss Travers said. "Sophie, get me the shotgun. Out in the buckboard. Get it."

When Sophie rushed back in, Miss Travers was holding a hoe with a long wooden handle. "I can't get into the cellar because of where the snakes are," she said. "And I can't shoot down into it because I might hit Jenny. What I'm going to do is to reach down with the hoe and pull the rattlers out. You're going to shoot them."

When Sophie started to protest, Miss Travers silenced her with a look. "There is no choice," she said, emphasizing each word. "We have to do this." Sophie nodded, and Miss Travers continued, "I'll show you how to shoot the gun, and at close range, you won't miss. The thing you must absolutely remember is not to shoot until I've got both snakes out of the cellar. They can't hear, but movement, vibration, will set them off, and the shotgun blast will surely startle the child. She'll jerk, and if there's a snake down there when she does, he'll be into her."

The assurance with which Miss Travers moved Baby behind a bed in the corner and then showed Sophie how to work the shotgun helped keep Sophie outwardly calm. But inwardly she felt a panic rising. She had killed snakes as a girl, but remembering it was like watching a young stranger do it. They were too long ago, those days when she could kill a rattler with a well-thrown rock. The memories were of no help to her now.

In the corner, Baby stopped moaning, and the shack was quiet for the first time since Sophie and Miss Travers had arrived. Then Sophie heard it, soft, like pebbles sliding down a slope, but infinitely threatening too, like an assassin's whisper. All the games she and Helen had played with snake rattles when they were children did nothing to blunt the terror which shot through Sophie when she heard that whirring sound.

"Jenny, I'm going to get the snakes out now. No matter what happens, you mustn't move." After Miss Travers had spoken to the child, she turned to Sophie. "Remember, you can't shoot until they're both out." Then she lay down on the floor and reached into the cellar with the hoe.

"There," she said, "there, I've got him. No, no, he's off. No, there, I've got him. He's coming, coming out." She rose to her knees, pulling the hoe slowly out of the cellar; then she began to stand, but something happened, the snake began to slip off the end of the hoe, perhaps, for suddenly Miss Travers jerked the hoe upward and the rattler flew out of the cellar and straight at Sophie. It hit her on the shoulder and side of the face, a cool rope of muscle, and she screamed as it fell writhing to the floor. She scuttled backward and in an instant the snake had coiled into a shape like a figure eight. Sophie took aim with the shotgun. The lidless yellow eyes began anew their scan for motion, the head going back and forth faster now.

"Sophie, no, don't shoot! He won't strike unless you move. I must get the other out before you shoot."

Sophie didn't answer. She was afraid to move her lips, afraid even to blink. Not only would the motion alert the rattler, it would break her concentration, and it took the total effort of her mind and will to keep from pulling the trigger and shooting the snake. His head was going back and forth, searching the air for her, the susurrus of his rattle telling of muscles tensed, waiting for release.

Out of the corner of her eye Sophie could see Miss Travers reaching into the cellar with the hoe again. This time she brought it up slowly, smoothly, flipping the snake on the end of it to near the door. "All right, Sophie," she said, starting to duck down into the cellar.

But at that moment, Sophie saw the black-haired child from outside in the doorway. The boy had one hand on the doorframe and was about to step into the shack, right into the rattler's striking range. "Miss Travers! The doorway!" Sophie grasped and pointed, letting the shotgun fall.

Two things happened at once. Miss Travers leaped forward with the hoe and chopped at the snake near the door.

And the snake close to Sophie struck. He hit her skirts and stuck there, his fangs caught in the material. She kept trying to move away from him, backing up, but they were joined together, trapped together. Sophie tried to take aim with the shotgun, but the snake was too close. "Miss Travers! Miss Travers!" Sophie screamed again and again, overcome with horror at the writhing creature caught in her skirts. "Miss Travers!"

The schoolteacher ran across the room with her hoe, and with a single blow severed the snake's body. Both halves continued to writhe, blood leaking out as he twisted. Miss Travers struck at the head again and again, until finally the creature lay dead. He fell away from Sophie, their loathsome joining ended.

She fell into Miss Travers' arms. "Shhh, shhh, now, you're fine," the older woman said, patting her on the back. "Come, now, we must see to the children."

Sophie calmed herself and picked up the black-haired boy, who seemed sullenly unmindful of the danger he'd been in. While Miss Travers got his crying sister from the cellar, Baby reappeared from the corner beside the bed. She reached for neither of her children, choosing instead to make some repairs to her hairdo in front of the dusty mirror hanging from one of the shack's bare studs. Now that Sophie had a moment to study her, she saw that Baby's upturned nose and rosy lips were set on a softly rounded prominence of bone. The result was a vaguely simian look that was somehow appealingly sensuous. Not like anyone would mistake Baby for a lady, particularly not in her red dress with its extreme décolletage.

"Boy, did you save our skins," Baby said, pushing a hairpin into her long brown hair. "I thought Jenny was a goner for sure."

"What's a goner, Mommy?" the girl asked from Miss Travers' lap. She was hiccupping a little, but had stopped her sobbing.

"It's what Miss Travers and her friend here kept you from bein', sweetie." Baby tilted her head to examine the bruise beginning to form on her jawline.

"This is Sophie Dymond, Baby," Miss Travers said. "She's Helen's sister."

"Helen's sister! You don't look anything like Helen!"

"Your two children are quite different too," Sophie said. She made the observation simply for the sake of conversation, but the result was far from casual. Baby blushed furiously and turned back to the mirror. It occurred to Sophie there might be some question about the children's paternity, and she thought it best to change the subject. "Miss Travers tells me Helen used to visit you."

"Yeah, she used to come out here. It was good when she did." Baby spoke slowly, as if remembering. "I get so lonesome to talk to another woman--"

"What happened to your windows, Baby?" Miss Travers interrupted. The blond child on her lap was waving flies away.

"They was shot out."

"Shot out? Who did it?" Sophie asked.

"I didn't see exactly. It happened at night. But I know who it was."

"Who?" Sophie asked.

Baby looked at Miss Travers. "It was the cattlemen," she said. "The big cattlemen over in Cheyenne. They want us outta here."

"So they shot out your windows?"

"It's not the first time they done somethin' like that." Baby had finished with her hair and came to sit on the edge of the bed beside Sophie. She spoke to the child on Sophie's lap, "How ya doin', sweetheart?" The child stretched out his arms and Baby took him, but at the same time she was examining Sophie closely. "You married?" she asked, her eyes shining like a small and curious animal.

"I have been. I'm a widow now."

"Zack said he'd marry me. Soon as we prove up on the homesteads, he said we'd get married." She rocked gently back and forth with the little boy. "Maybe you'll come visit me again?" she asked wistfully. "It gets real lonesome out here. Zack hardly ever home, and I don't see nobody 'cept sometimes some of his friends." She ducked her head and pushed a curl around the boy's ear, then turned to Sophie again, her face earnest. "There's some things, you know, you can only talk about with a married woman." She was speaking in a low voice so that Miss Travers, who was cleaning the other child's face, wouldn't hear. "Your sister, I could tell her things and she could tell me things about men, you know. Things some people"--she looked meaningfully at Miss Travers' direction--wouldn't understand."

"Helen told you things?" It seemed impossible to Sophie that her sister would have confided in this woman, but Baby nodded, holding her fingers to her lips at the same time.

"But what? What kinds of things did Helen tell you?"

"About that husband of hers--what's his name?--and what he done to her." Because she was whispering, Sophie hardly caught her words, and she had no chance to ask her to repeat them, because Amy Travers had finished with the older child. She sent her outside and turned to Baby.

"I want to know what Jenny was doing in the cellar, Baby," Miss Travers said.

"Gettin' me some potatoes. I never thought about snakes down down. Guess they was tryin' to get cool. We had all that rain, and now it's so hot and dry." She paused for a moment, then realized the intent of Miss Travers' question. "Why?" she asked suspiciously. "What d'ya think?"

Miss Travers answered by taking in Baby's red dress.

"You think I'd put her in the cellar while I...?" Baby hugged the boy child to her. "I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't."

Miss Travers said nothing, but continued to look meaningfully at the red dress. Baby looked down at it too. "All right! I was hopin' for some company. But later. How could you thinnk I'd put them down in the cellar? I just sent her down for some potatoes..." Her voice trailed off, and she brushed at the little boy's hair. Then suddenly she was shouting, "I get so damned lonesome out here, what d'ya expect of me? Look at this place." She swept one hand around at the shack's single room. There were two beds, both with straw mattresses, a table, some chairs, an iron stove for heating and cooking. There were no cupboards, but shelves had been attached to the shack's bare studs, and on them a few dishes were neatly stacked. Pans bright with scouring hung from hooks underneath, and there were other signs someone had tried to make the best of the shack: at the windows were curtains hand-sewn from flour sacks; on the wall near the table, two brightly colored chromos had been hung. But like everything else, they were coated with a thin layer of dust. One could actually see the dust trailing into the cabin over the bare windowsills. "No goddamned windows!" Baby was shouting, on her feet now, pacing back and forth, one arm holding the child on her hip. "No goddamned windows and no goddamned people!"

Tears were running down her cheeks, and she wiped at them angrily, leaving dirty smears in which more tears left pale tracks. "And you think I'm no goddamned good!" she shouted at Amy Travers. "You come out here and talk to me about bein' proud and bein' pure, and you actin' like you care, but you don't mean none of it, do you?" As she turned her face away from Miss Travers, her eyes caught Sophie's, and suddenly Baby seemed embarrassed by her outburst. "Now you won't come back and see me, will you?" she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand again.

Sophie did not know how to answer, but she was saved from having to when Baby seemed to remember something. A craftiness came into her eyes, and she looked more than ever like a clever monkey, able to plot and devise, but unable to simulate guilelessness. "You come back and we'll talk about Helen," she said loudly to Sophie. She flashed a quick look at Amy Travers, then turned back to Sophie. "You come back, and we'll talk about my friend Helen."

- Chapter 8 -

As they drove away, Sophie surveyed the Wilson homestead: two shacks and a sod hut, a grouping made only a little less desolate by the nearby creek with cottonwoods growing along it.

"What're the other two buildings?" Sophie asked. "Not homes, surely. They're too small."

"One's the soddie they built when they first came out here. Then they put up the shack they live in now right on the edge of their other parcel so they'd have dwellings on both homesteads."

"That's the law?"

The schoolteacher nodded. "They built the smaller shack just this spring for Baby to keep a few chickens in. She kept them in the soddie for a while, but she was always afraid somebody'd claim the soddie wasn't a dwelling if they saw chickens scratching in it, so she hounded Zack until he built the little shack."

They crossed the creek in silence, and Sophie found herself studying Amy Travers' hands. They were amazing really, especially considering that Miss Travers had spent most of her life in this country. They didn't look like the hands of a woman who could drive a buckboard, shoot a gun, kill a rattler. Except for their size, they looked almost like a child's hands, the nails neatly trimmed ovals, pink and pliable-looking, the knuckles not protruding, but instead making a slight dimpling in the soft flesh. The skin had a marblelike smoothness, but one knew the slightest touch would make an indentation in the pillowy softness. Sophie was reminded of a statue, The Rape of the Sabines, she thought it was called. The ravisher is lifting his victim to carry her off, and his fingers sink into the yielding flesh of her thigh.

The comparison increased an uneasiness Sophie already felt, and for much of the ride back she was silent, examining her feelings. But Baby's words nagged at the back of her mind, so as the buckboard reached the outskirts of Cheyenne, she spoke, "Was Helen a friend of Baby's?"

"No. She was only trying to help her."

"But Baby implied they were confidantes."

"They weren't."

"She said she knew about something James had done to Helen."

Miss Travers looked at her sharply. "That's impossible. She's lying. Just like she was about Jenny in the cellar. I'm certain she makes her go down there when she wants to entertain her men friends."

Sophie had trouble believing that of Baby, but she didn't want to get distracted in defense of her now. "Why would she make up something like that? I'm sure that's what she said. That Helen told her about something James had done to her."

"She's lying," Miss Travers nodded her head jerkily. "Yes, she's lying. You don't know Baby well enough to judge what she's saying. And you don't understand what's happening here. You've been gone too long."

There was no mistaking the reproof in Miss Travers' words, but Sophie restrained herself from an impatient response. "I'd like to understand," she said.

"Baby hates James. Because he's one of the big cattlemen, don't you see?" The register of Miss Travers' voice shot even further upward, and Sophie wondered at her sudden emotion. It was such a change from the way she usually spoke, and seemed artificial somehow, as though she were trying to convince herself as well as Sophie. "With all the ranches James has bought up," Miss Travers went on, "the Cloud Peak Company's the biggest owner in the state. Baby's implying she knows ill of them because he's one of them, the biggest one, and they make her life miserable. She hates them all."

"Why do they harass her? I don't see what difference Baby and Zack can make, a couple of homestead claims on all this land." Even as she spoke, Sophie realized her question was off-target. It followed the logic of the conversation, but missed the feeling she had heard in Amy Travers' voice. But what was the locus of that emotion? Sophie couldn't pinpoint it.

"There are more and more homesteaders every day," Miss Travers was saying, her voice dropping. "And each of them cuts into the open range the big owners need for their cattle. And Baby and Zack are fairly close to Cheyenne too, close to where the big owners headquarter. That makes them more of an irritant than if they'd homesteaded somewhere else. It also makes them easy targets. A man can ride out there after supper, shoot out a few windows, and be back in time to drink with his friends."

"You don't think Zack Wilson's a cattle thief?"

Miss Travers shrugged. "No more, I'd say, than the big cattlemen, though they figure out ways to make their thievery legal. They get together at the Cheyenne Club and devise their schemes, and the next thing you know, there's a law on the books that lets them steal unmarked cattle from the homesteaders."

They were back at the Stevenson house, and as Miss Travers brought the buckboard to a halt, Sophie tried to bring the conversation back to what Baby had said. "It just didn't strike me that hatred for James was the main force behind Baby's words," she said. "She seemed to want me to know that Helen was her friend." She saw Miss Travers stiffen with annoyance. "Miss Travers, I'm simply trying to know my sister."

"I wouldn't spend time worrying about Baby, then. You should come to a temperance meeting--there's one tomorrow afternoon. Why don't you come? It's at three o'clock in the Presbyterian Church. Come, and you can see the women who were really Helen's friends." She was thoughtful a moment. "Or have you considered looking for your mother? Maybe you should take up a task which was important to Helen. That might help you to know her. I've even thought I might try to find Julia myself, for Helen, you know."

"Leave it alone, Miss Travers."

The schoolteacher's eyes widened in surprise, and Sophie felt uncertain how to go on. She wasn't prepared to discuss her innermost thoughts with Amy Travers, but having taken things this far with her unthinking response, she felt she had to continue. "It's always seemed to me that my mother must not want to be found. She made a choice to leave us, to be apart from us, and she's kept to that choice all these years, never relenting once. If I were to find her, I'd be in the position of a petitioner, begging her to do something she obviously doesn't want to do. It's not a role I'd feel comfortable in."

Miss Travers didn't answer, and while Sophie could not be certain of the feeling in the schoolteacher's deep-set eyes, she thought she saw a gleam of understanding. Sophie looked down at Amy Travers' hands, those soft hands which had written the loving inscription to her sister, and she remembered how Miss Travers had killed the snake and comforted her with those hands. She was suddenly aware that Amy Travers might reach out to her again, and she didn't want that. Quickly she got down from the buckboard.

"Wait, I'm coming in too," Miss Travers said. Sophie waited, and side by side they walked toward the house.

As they drew near the porch, Sophie noticed a small cloth bundle lying at the foot of the steps. Before she had time to give it more than a passing glance, Miss Travers scooped it up and put it under her arm. Just then the front door opened and both women looked up.

"Oh, you're here, James," Miss Travers said. "How does that happen? Am I early?"

"I was concerned about Mrs. Dymond. She didn't tell anyone where she was going with you."

"And you thought I might let harm come to her? You know me better than that, James." The disdain in her voice was unmistakable, and the muscles of James' cheek and neck strained with suppressed anger.

As they all moved into the drawing room, Sophie saw Miss Travers shift the cloth bundle just enough so James could see it.

"Where...?" he started to ask.

"At the bottom of the porch stairs," Miss Travers answered. She shifted the bundle again, and something bright blue fell to the floor. Sophie bent to pick it up, and only in the last second before she handed it to Miss Travers did she realize what it was: a tiny glass eye. As the schoolteacher took it from her, Sophie saw that the bundle under Miss Travers' arm was a doll. Its head was cracked open.

"It was Esther's, wasn't it?" said Sophie. "She threw it from the attic window."

"Either that, or down the steps," Miss Travers said, exchanging a glance with James, which Sophie couldn't interpret. "I'll go up and talk to her. To both of them."

As she left the room and started up the hall stairway, James turned to Sophie. "Where did you go with her!" he demanded.

"To the Wilson homestead," she answered in a tone no less indignant than his. "What right had he to demand an accounting of her?"

"Ah, I might have guessed." He jammed his hands in his pockets, and his dark-ringed eyes flashed with anger. "And I suppose she told you all about how we're a bother to those poor folks out there."

"The subject came up. Somebody shot out all the Wilsons' windows."

James raised his eyebrows, seemed doubtful for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, that kind of thing is going to happen. Look, I don't know what she told you, but the Wilsons shouldn't be out there."

"Why not? The law says they're entitled to their homesteads."

"You can't run cattle on a homestead. It takes thousands of acres in this country."

"But there's all the land that doesn't belong to anyone. Can't Wilson's cattle graze there just as yours do?"

"It's not that simple. There are too damned many cattle on the range now." He began to pace back and forth. "But, hell, that's not the real reason for getting Wilson out of there. The plain fact is, he's a thief."

"Miss Travers said the big owners got a law passed which lets them steal unmarked cattle from the homesteaders."

"She's talking about the maverick law," he said with some impatience. "It just gives the Stock Growers' Association—the big owners, if you will—control of roundups and lets them sell the unmarked cattle that're brought in."

"But couldn't the unmarked cattle belong to Wilson, for instance?"

"Not likely. Since the stock growers own most of the cattle in the territory, odds are the mavericks come from their animals."

"But there's a chance they could be Wilson's."

"A chance, yes." He was growing angry at her insistent questions. "But there's a much better chance that the animals in Wilson's herd belong to other people. He's put his brand on every unmarked cow he can find, and he's changed more than a few brands, too. He's a thief, plain and simple, but the juries won't find against him, so people are going to take the matter up themselves. Wilson's lucky if it doesn't come to anything worse than a few windows shot out."

She took a moment to think about what he'd said. "Let me see if I understand you. It's all right for the stock growers to round up Wilson's unmarked cattle, but not for him to take yours. And it's all right for Cloud Peak animals to graze on the open range, but not Wilson's cattle. You seem to think you have more right to the law than he does."

"In a way, I suppose I do. Who will do more with it? Who will contribute more?" His voice was rising. "Wilson's a drunken thief. His wife—no, not his wife, the woman he lives with—is a whore! The future shouldn't lie with them."

He walked over to the window and looked out. "I love this land," he said. "My grandfather would come here and hunt and then come home and tell us about it. I loved this land before I ever saw it, and damned if I'll see it ruined!" He turned and started to pace again. "The people who are coming here now, do you want them putting up their shacks every hundred-and-sixty-acre parcel? And shacks are all they'll ever have, because a hundred and sixty acres isn't enough to get a man beyond a bare subsistence. Or do we want the big ranches and the wealth they can bring, the plenty which makes a city like Cheyenne possible?" He stopped and looked at her directly. "We have to keep it like it is, don't you see? If the Wilsons of the world triumph, it'll be ruined forever. The land cut up into small parcels, the town presided over by small minds—"

"James, really--"

"No, I'm right. They'll turn the opera house into small shops, an apothecary here, a tobacconist there."

"How did Helen feel about what you're saying?"

"These last years, she seemed to regard whatever I thought as wrong, every idea of mine in error. And Miss Travers encouraged her. I can easily imagine what those visits to the Wilsons were like. 'Look, Helen, look at these poor people who have hardly anything. And James, who has so much, is persecuting them.'"

"Did you forbid her to go out there?" Baby's words were in her mind. Was it something like this Helen had confided in Baby? If, of course, she'd actually confided anything.

"No. I doubt she'd have listened. Maybe a few years earlier... but by the time she started her visits to the Wilsons, well, it was no use. By then..." He stopped speaking, and though his eyes were still on Sophie, he didn't seem to see her. He seemed to be looking at something which had leaped out at him from the past.

"James?"

He blinked as if to clear his visions. "Ah, Sophie. Forgive me." He turned and walked to the fireplace. He put a hand on the mantel, leaned against it, and looked down. There was a long silence., and then suddenly he raised his fist and brought it down hard on the mantelpiece. Several pictures fell over; the silver candlestick crashed to the floor. "Dammit, Sophie! It's important that you understand what I'm about!" He turned to her. "You spent the day with Miss Travers, why not the evening with me? There's a dinner at the Cheyenne Club to welcome the governor back from the East. I hadn't intended to go, but I'd like to if you'd come with me."

"I'd be pleased to, James."

"He had his hands clasped behind his back; his expression was difficult to read. "About nine, then. I'll wait for you down here." He nodded and left the room.

Hardly had he gone when Mrs. Syms came bustling in. Either she'd heard James' outburst or she was used to his wreaking havoc on her mantelpiece, because she headed straight for it and began restoring things to order. While she straightened the pictures, she told Sophie that Anna May Bellavance had telephoned. Mrs. Bellavance wanted to ask when Mrs. Dymond would be coming to visit her grandfather. The question was innocuous, yet it bothered Sophie. Joe. She hadn't been to see him today, hadn't even planned a visit, and he was why she'd come to Cheyenne. She asked Mrs. Syms to call the Bellavance home and say she would be over directly.

"Yes, yes, I'll do it right away," Mrs. Syms said. But as she straightened one last picture, she stopped short. "My goodness, what's happened to the missus!" She was holding the photograph of Helen.

"Esther said Sally did it. That she did it quite a long time ago."

Mrs. Syms shook her head. "Wasn't this way when I dusted yesterday."

Before Sophie could respond, she noticed a darkening in the room. The sun had dropped behind a cloud, she thought at first, but then out of the corner of her eye she detected movement. She turned and saw someone staring through the window. The Widow Bellavance was standing on the porch, her face close to the screen, her long talon-like fingers curled against it.

Still holding the picture of Helen, Mrs. Syms rushed across the room to pull the draperies. Sophie turned away, appalled by the hatred she saw in the old woman's eyes.

- Chapter 9 -

The Cheyenne Club was new since Sophie's last trip West, and while she'd never seen it, she'd certainly heard about it. Visitors to Cheyenne were fond of describing its tennis courts and fine furnishings, its skilled chef and well-stocked wine cellar.

Tonight the club was ablaze with lights. "They must have had brought in extra batteries," James observed as they drove up.

His statement conjured up pictures of guns and war in Sophie's mind. "Batteries? How do you mean?" What could guns and war have to do with this festive scene? Lamps had been strung from the roof of the portico encircling the club, and large flags mounted at each of the supporting pillars. A crowd had already gathered, the men in dark suits, the women bright as summer flowers in their silk dresses.

"Well, there you've caught me out," James laughed. "Now I have to confess I know hardly anything about electricity except that when this much is being used, extra power has to be brought in. The light company has some big contraptions called batteries which apparently serve to store power. For occasions like this, they bring them in on big wagons."

He gave his phaeton over to a boy at one of the hitching posts, and as he and Sophie mounted the stairs to the portico, greetings were called out.

"Hello there, James!"

"Good to see you, James."

"James, so glad you came. How are you?"

He introduced Sophie to several of the men who had greeted him, and they looked at her with polite admiration as they bowed over her hand. Her ivory gown had been a good choice, she thought, looking down at its narrow skirt. And she knew that the lilies of the valley tucked in her chignon complimented her dark hair.

The last man James introduced her to, George Huber, made her uncomfortable, and she tried to analyze why. It was his eyes, she concluded finally. They were too black and shiny, and they flicked away too quickly when she returned his gaze. James had turned to speak to someone else, then paused to talk to a young blond woman dressed in deep pink. Sophie hoped he would come back quickly. She didn't want to spend any more time than she had with Huber, a tall man, immaculately dressed and manicured. He had startlingly black hair and skin shiny like his eyes, so shiny she found herself wondering if it, like his nails, might have been polished. He had been quick to tell her of the thousands of head of cattle he owned, but she found it hard to imagine him on a roundup. Not that he seemed a type averse to physical exertion, but she couldn't imagine he'd want to perspire and get dusty unless his bathtub was nearby.

"Dymond's is a terribly good publication," he was saying, leaning quite close to her. "I even think we get it here at the club. I'll wager that if you look at the library, you'll find several copies on the table."

"I'm glad to hear we're read here in Cheyenne."

"And you've written about Cheyenne too, if I'm not mistaken. Two or three months ago, I believe it was. Didn't you call us the Athens of the West?"

"One of my writers did."

"Ah, now, do I detect a note of disbelief? Have you been to the opera house? Have you looked around the club? I think your writer was precisely on track."

Huber's responses were so slippery smooth, Sophie decided that talking to him was like talking to soap. She succumbed to the urge to strew a little grit across the path of the conversation. "But wouldn't you concede there's a shadowy corner or two where the light of civilization hasn't reached? I spoke with someone today. Baby Wilson. Do you know her? When she thinks of Cheyenne, it's not as a cultural wellspring exactly."

His eyes narrowed. "Mrs. Dymond, now why would you be talking to a woman like that?"

"My sister knew her."

"Yes, well, but that was one of those ladies' charity things."

"Mrs. Wilson had some very interesting things to say about how the big cattle owners in Cheyenne are trying to drive her and her husband off their homestead."

He hesitated a moment, and she could see him deciding on a strategy. He opted for geniality and tried to make the calculation in his eyes seem like the glint of goodwill. "Now, Mrs. Dymond, you know I own a few cattle, and I can tell you that you mustn't pay any attention to people like the Wilsons. If you were really acquainted with Mrs. Wilson's... uh ... activities, you'd know to take what she says with a grain of salt."

"From what I've heard of the activities of some of the big ranchmen, I wonder if I shouldn't suspect them of seasoning the truth?" She hadn't meant to be hostile, but his condescension had spurred her on. She tried to sound a conciliatory note. "When there's a conflict, I seldom find anyone on either side who's terribly objective. I suppose that's one of the functions of the press, to provide a disinterested viewpoint."

"You intend to write about this?"

"Why not? I find it intriguing." This wasn't the article she'd had in mind, but she wouldn't tell Huber that, wouldn't let him think his hostile reaction could make her back off.

"I suspect you find it intriguing because you don't really understand, Mrs. Dymond."

"I understand what I saw perfectly well. A family living in a shack on the prairie, living on land the law entitles them to, and there's an attempt to drive them off."

"A family!" he exploded, scarlet mottles of anger appearing on his cheek and neck. "You don't really think they're married, do you? And she's a prostitute! She used to be at the House of Mirrors, Ida Hamilton's whorehouse. Were you aware of that? And him, he's not living out there, he's thieving out there!"

At that moment James appeared. While his presence put an end to the angry words, a tension remained, revealing itself in the cool leave Sophie and Huber took of one another.

"What happened between the two of you?" James asked Sophie.

"Well, he made it quite clear he doesn't want me to write about the conflict between the big ranchers and the homesteaders."

"I didn't know you intended to."

"Frankly I didn't until my exchange with Mr. Huber. Do you object?"

He was silent a moment. "If you do this, Sophie, you must try not to become so caught up in the circumstances of individuals that you forget the larger questions. I saw that happen with Helen. She would get so involved with the hardship of a single person, she would condemn a whole system, a whole way of life, without paying due to its positive achievement."

"You aren't answering me, James. Do you care?"

Again he hesitated. "Yes, I care, Sophie. More than is prudent, I find myself caring about what you do."

His unexpected words had a strange effect upon her. It was as though they tore through a wrapping which had been dulling and protecting her senses, and she found herself acutely aware of the voices rising and falling around her, of the glare of lights and the darkness beyond. She thought carefully before she spoke. She didn't want to make more of his words than he had meant, but even less did she want to diminish them. "Your caring is terribly important to me," she said finally. They looked at each other, and then he gave her his arm, a commonplace gesture, but as they moved inside, she knew something of importance had happened.

The first room they entered was crowded, so they walked on to the dining room, where only a few people were standing about. It was not as bright as it had been on the portico. The electricity had not been turned on, and the large, pleasantly proportioned room was lit by thick wax candles which cast a rich gleam on the dark wood paneling and the massive brass ceiling fixtures. Tables had been set for dinner, the covers a pale yellow satin overlaid with lace strips. On each table was a large bowl of red and yellow roses.

Her hand still on James' arm, Sophie bent to smell the flowers in one of the bowls, and as she did so, it came to her in a rush that she wasn't the first to enter this room with James, nor the first to ride in the carriage with him from the stone house on Ferguson Street. Helen had been before her, had climbed the stairs to the gaily lit portico and greeted his friends. Perhaps she had even quarreled with them.

The thought was troubling. As she straightened, she saw Paul Bellavance standing alone by the fireplace, smiling at her and James. She wondered if on another evening he had stood there smiling at James and Helen, but affection for Paul subdued the idea, and as she and James moved toward him, Sophie thought how much she liked Paul. His smile wasn't just the polite gesture most are; she found it truly warming. Something about the furrows and creases it added to his face made it seem a gentle affirmation that life was pleasure as well as pain, and that she was part of the pleasure.

"Quite a difference from Fort Martin," Paul said as they neared.

"Like another world," Sophie responded.

"More the world you're used to now, I expect. But I still remember when you and Helen would come into the post trader's store and get candy from me."

"You were even easier to big it from than Joe. You never said no. Not once I can remember. Besides, you were always there. Joe'd often be away hunting and trapping."

"I suppose it was hard for him to stay in one place," James said. "After roaming in the mountains for fifteen years, he must have found the fort confining."

"But you didn't mind," Sophie said to Paul. "Staying at the fort, I mean."

"No, you've got to remember I came there from St. Louis. I was almost fifteen when my father sent for me and my mother and brother. After growing up in the city, I hardly found the fort confining." He paused a moment. "Besides, I had my father's example, and he was different from Joe. I think he found it a relief to stay in one place after his years as a voyageur."

"Paul, have you a picture of your father?" Sophie asked.

It was as thought she had broken his train of thought with her question, because he didn't answer at once, and when he did, his response was abrupt. "No," he said.

"Esther wanted one. She's building family trees out of photographs and drawings, and I told her I'd ask you. I thought perhaps the same person who sketched my mother and father might have drawn your father."

Paul didn't answer, but Sophie paid little heed, because as she was speaking, she had seen George Huber enter the room. He looked her way, then crossed to the corner, where he spoke to a small man in dark clothes who was sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall. After listening to Huber, the man slowly turned his head and looked at Sophie. Huber said a few more words to him, then left the room. The small man rocked his chair forward from the wall, catching the leg of it with his foot and moving it so that he directly faced Sophie. Throughout the entire maneuver, he never once unfolded the arms crossed over his chest, nor did he take his eyes off Sophie. He put a booted foot over his knee, settled back, and smiled at her, a look of amused contempt in his eyes.

"James, who is that man?"

When he turned to look, the man nodded at James. "It's Jake Rodman."

"But who is he?"

"A detective. The Stock Growers' Association hired him to investigate cattle rustling."

"Why is he staring at me like that?"

"He's a bit rough," Paul said. "Probably doesn't know better than to stare at a lovely lady."

"I'll speak to him," James said, starting to move away.

"No, no," Sophie said. "Let's just go into another room." To her surprise, James stopped. She'd been prepared to follow after him and argue.

"You two go ahead," said Paul, settling the matter. "I have to wait for Anna May. I'll see you at dinner."

When they entered the library, Sophie noticed several men sitting in armchairs reading. "Do you think they know there's a party?" Sophie asked.

"I think they're trying their best not to notice."

"Let me guess. They don't like it when you open the club up to women."

"How did you know?"

"Some things never change. Whether it's New York or Wyoming. What I've never understood is what they want to do that they can't do when women are around. Spit on the floor? Read the newspapers naked?"

James laughed. "I think they just feel more relaxed without women around, freer to speak their minds or not talk at all, if that's what they want. Women get together in the same way. They wouldn't want a man to invade the sewing circle, would they?"

"James, I have never in my life been in a sewing circle, I wouldn't have the vaguest idea."

"A reading group, then?"

She shook her head.

"A charity group? A church group?"

"Nothing like that. And it's as well for me, I suppose. I've never learned to feel quite comfortable when there are only women around."

"If you know that, you must have tried it."

"Only after dinner now and then when the men retire for cigars and brandy. When it does happen, I feel extremely awkward and out-of-place. It's as though I don't know the language. One of the women will say, 'It was a lovely day last Wednesday,' and someone else will say, 'Wednesday,' in a knowing way, and there'll be general laughter. I'll think there's been a double entendre I've missed somehow, but there never is. The laughter, the little noises ladies make of happiness and sympathy when they're together, don't seem to me to be a part of rational discourse."

"It sounds to me as if you don't like women."

She immediately objected, but even as she did so, she wondered about the accuracy of his observations. It was true that, given her preference, she would always choose the company of men.

Seeming to sense he had made her uncomfortable, James changed the subject by walking over to where an engraving was hanging. It showed towering mountains above a lush valley. "The Big Horns," he said. "If Bierstadt had just set his easel up a few miles north, you could see the XVH."

"Your home ranch." As he nodded, she asked, "What do the initials stand for?"

"XV is for fifteen; H is for Hussars. My father was in the Fifteenth Hussars."

"That's the second time today you've mentioned your family, and I don't think I've ever heard you speak of them before."

"Everyone else does." He smiled. "I hardly need to."

"Americans are impressed by titles."

"In about the same way they're impressed with mermaids and Hindus."

"How do you mean?"

"All things they don't understand. I'll wager I've had to explain a hundred times why it is I won't ever be a baronet even though my grandfather was. Americans have a devilish time with primogeniture, so I'm always explaining that my father was a second son, and so he got no title, no land, and damn little money when my grandfather died. Nothing personal, just the way the system works. My uncle's the baronet now, as his eldest son will be after him."

"What did your father do with his life? Besides the Hussars?"

"He took the shocking step of making quite a lot of money. He did it in railways. And then he further shocked the world by having his fortune divided equally among my brother, my sister, and me upon his death."

"And they're still in Scotland."

He nodded.

"But you came here. Why?"

"The tales I heard from my grandfather. I had to see it."

"But you stayed."

He smiled. "I suppose the truth of it is, I like a country where no one understands a titled aristocracy, a place 's new and open and offers each man a chance to make what he can of it. It doesn't matter what his birth order was."

"This afternoon you were saying something quite different. You talked about having the 'right people' in control of the West, a small select group. That sounds very much like an aristocracy to me."

He raised his eyebrows, surprised at her objection. "But not an aristocracy according to one's birth. A man should rise and fall according to his talent, his ability, his willingness for hard work."

"And that includes the Wilsons."

"Of course. And in a fair fight, the people I'm talking about will triumph over the Wilsons every time. What I object to is having the rules of the struggle altered in Wilson's favor. That's what happens when Eastern newspapers trumpet to the world how villainous the big cattle owners are and then Eastern politicians follow mindlessly along, passing laws and issuing decrees harmful to big ranchers. Or, right here in the territory, take the juries. They render verdicts on the basis of how much or how little a man owns rather than on the basis of justice." He paused a moment. "At the very least, no one should be too indignant if we alter our strategy to meet the new rules."

Over his shoulder, Sophie could see the doorway from the dining room, and as James was speaking, Jake Rodman came through it. As soon as Rodman saw Sophie, he leaned against the wall and fixed his eyes on her. "And is he part of your new strategy?" Sophie asked James.

James turned and looked. "Jake Rodman? No. Well, he's been working for the Stock Growers' Association about a year now. But we've been hiring detectives for a long time."

"The man looks like a hired thug."

"Sophie, is he bothering you? I will speak to him."

"No, no, there's nothing to warrant that." It had, after all, been barely twenty-four hours since James had seen her overreact to the Widow Bellavance, and she feared that having him confront Rodman for her would fix in his mind forever an image of her as an easily flustered female.

But she did want some relief from Rodman's staring eyes. "James, could you excuse me for a few minutes?" She left the reading room by the hallway door and began to look for the ladies' dressing room. The first woman she asked told her there was none. Since women were admitted to the Cheyenne Club only on occasions like this, why would they have such a thing? Sophie finally discovered, however, that a "Ladies" sign had been hung on the door of the downstairs dressing room for the evening. As she entered, she was glad to have a sanctuary where Jake Rodman couldn't follow. But she also wished she had not let him unnerve her. He was trying to bother her, she was sure of it. And she had let him succeed.

Anna May Bellavance and two other women were in the dressing room. They were standing close together near one of the marble sinks, and except for Anna May's somewhat distracted greeting, there was a heavy silence in the air when Sophie entered. It was obvious she had interrupted a conversation the women felt uneasy about resuming in her presence. She went to the other end of the room, sat down at a table in front of a mirror, and busied herself with a search through her evening bag. She wanted to think, and she hoped the women would ignore her, forget about her. Sophie found she couldn't ignore them; she was unable to help overhearing their conversation. One of the women, a small birdlike creature, was speaking very excitedly. "We should leave!" she was saying. "At the very least we should do that. If they're going to drink, we should walk out!"

"We wore our ribbons," Anna May said sunnily. "That lets them know how we feel." Sophie glanced in the mirror and saw that each of the women had the white Women's Christian Temperance Union ribbon pinned to her left breast.

"Ribbons, do you think ribbons do any good?" The small woman laughed. It was an unpleasant sound, forced and too high-pitched. "We should go out and smash the bottles, every one of them. I'd like to break them, smash them, let that poison run into the gutter. That's where it belongs. Then we'd do some good."

"Cleantha, you're upset. You don't really want that. You're just upset." It was Anna May speaking, not smiling now.

In the mirror, Sophie could see the small woman called Cleantha hesitate. She put a hand over her eyes and shook her head. "Maybe I was getting carried away. You're probably right. It's just that I know what tonight will be like. I know what he'll be like."

"It's always the same after they drink," the third woman said in a low, intense voice.

Cleantha nodded. "Always the same."

In the mirror, Anna May reached out and put a hand on Cleantha's shoulder. Sophie looked away, feeling uneasy. Quickly stuffing her things into her bag, she put her head down and rushed out past the women. Revealed intimacies always made her uncomfortable, and she wanted to get away. And she had no really good reason to stay, she told herself. Was Jake Rodman bothering her? Then she should simply tell him to stop.

As soon as she stepped into the hallway, she saw him. He was leaning against the staircase balustrade, and suddenly she was angry, partly for following her, but also with herself for letting him get on her nerves. She walked up to him, keeping her eyes fixed on his face. He had heavy lidded eyes, a hawk nose, a jaw blue with beard. He showed no surprise at her approach, but she doubted he ever revealed much emotion.

"Mr. Rodman, I intend to go back into the reading room, and I don't want you to follow me."

"You think I'd do that?" He talked slowly, barely moving his lips. He smiled a slow, mocking half-smile.

"You have been following me. I assume your purpose--and no doubt Mr. Huber's as well--is to make me uneasy."

"Edgy, are you? Well, now, I wouldn't say that's from me followin' you. I'd say you just been worryin' too much about things that don't concern you none."

Sophie suddenly realized why his studied economy of movement made her so uncomfortable. It was as though he were saving himself for a quick, savage outburst in which he would level everything near him. "I'd like you to give Mr. Huber a message from me," she said, forcing herself to keep a steady, firm voice. "You tell him that when this evening began, I wasn't sure what I'd write about Wyoming, but now I've decided. I want to thank him for that, and you too, Mr. Rodman, because the two of you have pointed the way. When people discourage me from looking somewhere, that's the place I inevitably find the best story."

"Seems to me you're getting mighty exercised, Mrs. Dymond, when you ought be thinkin' about takin' things slow and easy. Otherwise... well, you know what they say about this country. It can be hard on a woman, mighty hard. 'Hell on horses and women'--that's the way they say it."

She could hardly miss the threat in his words, but she kept herself from showing any reaction to it. "Just give my message to Mr. Huber," she said. And she left him leaning against the balustrade.

* * *

When Sophie came back into the library, she saw a small crowd had gathered. She approached the edge of it, and someone stood aside to make room for her. James was at the center, she saw, James and the blond she had seen him talking to earlier. The young woman was heavily powdered, but quite attractive, a curvaceous creature, rounded at bosom and cheek. When she smiled, even her teeth seemed puffed and rounded, like tiny ivory pillows. When she spoke, the thick honey-colored hair gathered at the back of her neck stirred on her shoulders.

James was seated with the young woman behind him. She had her hands on his head and was moving them, shifting them this way and that as if she were measuring. "I don't have my tape," she was saying, "but it's obvious we have a large-sized brain here, and that means great mentality." She ran her fingers along one side of his head, pressing his skull gently. "An abnormal spirit of daring, I would say. Great courage and fearlessness." The young woman was skilled at using pauses to make her words seem well-considered, and she had a flair for the dramatic, too--which was really more important, since hardly anyone took phrenology very seriously anymore. But Sophie did not like her and did not like her touching James. She managed an expression of mild amusement, however, well aware that one or two of the ladies in the crowd were glancing at her covertly to see her reaction.

"Caution is not so well-developed," the young woman was saying, "particularly when compared with the organ of combativeness--or the organ of self-esteem."

James laughed, as did several in the crowd. "Tell us about amativeness, Madeleine," a male voice called out.

"...a man of taste and considerable imagination," the young woman was saying, her fingers moving on.

"Amativeness, Madeleine, amativeness." The young woman looked up and gave a tiny shrug and smile. She put one hand on James' forehead and with the other began a gentle probing at the base of the skull. She closed her eyes, as if to block out all sensations except those coming through her fingers. "Mmmmmmm," she said, "love and regard for women are quite strong." She opened her eyes and leaned around to look at James. Her smile was not merely admiring, it clearly communicated an awareness of her own attractions. "Quite strong, I would say."

There was a cheerful whistle from someone in the crowd. "Hear, hear," a voice called out. Then dinner was announced, people began to move off, and Sophie approached James and the young woman, determined to be pleasant and gracious. But the young woman gave her a glance so archly self-satisfied, so smug, that Sophie could not resist a word with her. She learned close and whispered, "Your hairdo is quite lovely, my dear, but a little dangerous, don't you think?" The young woman gave her a puzzled look. "The weight, you know, right there on the neck. Several doctors have found women with that style to have grossly enlarged organs of amativeness." She smiled politely and put her arm through James'. As she let him take her in to dinner, she regretted that she'd let the young woman provoke her, and she also felt somewhat perturbed with James. Before she could ward it off, the thought came: if it had been another evening and he were with Helen, would he have let the blond woman be so familiar?

* * *

Sophie was seated next to the governor. He wore a mustache, parted his hair just slightly off-center, and spoke with great energy. Francis Warren was not a well-schooled man, Sophie knew, but he had a cleverness and perseverance which had enabled him to attain eminence in Wyoming. And a fortune, too. He had vast holdings in land, sheep, and cattle.

He fixed his clear eyes on her. "I Understand you mean to write about Wyoming, Mrs. Dymond."

How fast news travels, Sophie thought, murmuring an affirmative.

"I suppose you'll want to write about our women," Warren said. He ignored her look of surprise. "I don't recall that Dymond's has ever said much about Wyoming's being the first place in the world to give women the vote, though that phenomenon has attracted interest from everywhere. I get letters daily asking me to report on our experience with female suffrage. Just today I had one from Germany."

Sophie was intrigued by Warren's strategy, or what she suspected to be his strategy. No ham-handed threats to keep her from writing about the cattle industry. No, he was trying to distract her with another story, one he thought would interest her more. "Actually, Governor," she said, "that's not what I intended at all. While I certainly agree that women should be able to vote, I've never found my readers much interested in the suffrage movement. And personally speaking, well, I suppose I'm glad someone is doing it, but I'm not sure this marching in the streets and sloganeering on street corners is effective. It seems to generate as much opposition as support."

"But that's exactly the point, Mrs. Dymond. That could be the point of your story. Wyoming's women got the vote without ever organizing a movement. In fact, I suspect that if they had made speeches and marched, it would have backfired. We don't like that kind of thing out here. I'd say your inclinations reflect how much you are a daughter of the West." He smiled a thoroughly charming smile, and Sophie found herself amazed by his cleverness, particularly when the thought occurred to her that the evening might have been orchestrated. Were they trying a two-pronged attack, with Rodman bullying her and the governor charming her?

"You do have the Women's Christian Temperance Union," Sophie said. "They often work with suffragists."

Warren rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Yes, we do that the WCTU, but it a fairly new thing, and lucky for the women it is. If the WCTU had been active when the legislature was considering the vote for women, we might still not have it here in Wyoming."

The governor's wife, a full-bosomed woman with sympathetic eyes, was sitting on the other side of him. Sophie saw her tug at his sleeve, and she knew why Mrs. Warren was trying to interrupt: she remembered about Helen and the WCTU. But Warren ignored his wife. "The thing is so... so outlandish! The idea of the West being dry!" She swung his arm around in a gesture meant to be exclamatory, but it took in the wine and champagne glasses at each place, the black-suited waiters still busy serving drinks. "Why would they even try for such a thing?" Warren asked, consternation in his voice.

Sophie was glad that the governor expected only a response and not an answer, because she didn't know the answer yet. And even if she did understand it all, would she be able to explain it to the impatient, clear-eyed man? "It is a puzzle, isn't it?" she said.

* * *

Sophie and James left before the dancing. She stood in the portico while he went to have the carriage brought around, and as she was waiting, George Huber approached.

"Mrs. Dymond, I wonder if we haven't misunderstood one another," he said.

"I think I understand you and Mr. Rodman quite well."

"You mustn't mind Rodman. He has his strengths, but tact isn't one. We simply ask to be treated fairly, that's all."

"I never for a moment considered doing otherwise."

"I was naturally concerned when you mentioned Mrs. Wilson. She does have quite an unsavory reputation. Talking to people like that--"

"I'll talk to anyone, Mr. Huber, whether he or she has a name to protect or not." He had been leaning close to her, but he drew back as she continued, "When I say I'll be objective, Mr. Huber, I mean exactly that. I'll give the big cattle owners exactly the consideration they deserve. No less than that. And no more."

She saw James and turned around, but not before she noticed angry scarlet spots blossoming on Huber's neck and cheek.

- Chapter 10 -

James stopped the carriage in front of the Stevenson house. "Please go on around to the carriage house," Sophie said. "I'll walk in with you from there. You needn't take me up the front walk."

When he had pulled into the carriage house, they both remained unmoving for a moment. In the darkness she became acutely aware of his nearness, and even before she looked at him, she knew he was watching her. She glanced up, their eyes met, and he gave a short exhalation, more than a sigh, for she could hear his voice in it. "Sophie," he said hoarsely, "Sophie..." He reached for her and she moved toward him, unthinking for the minute, knowing only that she wanted to be in his arms. As he kissed her, she was aware of his hands, his arms, the strength of his embrace, but at the same time her mind began to dart wildly, skewing from one image to another. She saw Wilson lying in the dusty street, Esther rocking on the ledge, Baby whispering conspiratorily. She saw herself leaning over the red and yellow roses at the Cheyenne Club, apprehending the ghost of Helen in their heavy fragrance.

She broke away. "No, James, no." She tried to explain. "Helen is so much in my mind."

"She's dead, Sophie."

"It's a kind of guilt, I suppose, a feeling I'm trying to supplant her, trying to replace my own sister."

"I don't think of you as Helen's sister."

"But I do, you see, and that's the difficulty. I shouldn't mind following someone else in your life, but Helen..." She searched his face for understanding, but he responded with only a curt nod. She knew she'd said enough, too much perhaps. Words wouldn't make up for pulling away from his embrace; all words did was form loose feelings into hard certainties. It had been an image of Helen that intervened, but was guilt the feeling that thought of her sister inspired? As James escorted her into the house and bid her a cool good night, she was unsure if that was the right name for the vague anxiety she felt.

* * *

When she got to her room, her thoughts were still on James, so it was several minutes before she missed Tom. Usually he was asleep on her pillow when she returned, but tonight he was nowhere to be seen, and she became concerned. What if he had wandered away, lost himself out on the prairie? He was a spirited animal who would growl aggressively at much larger dogs, but he was completely unsuitable for the wild, a creature whose breeding committed him totally to civilization. He wouldn't last a night on the prairie.

She put on her robe, decided to look for him first in the house. She hurried up the dark back stairway to the third floor. Sally liked to play with Tom, and perhaps she had taken the dog. Standing in the doorway of Sally's room, she could see the child asleep on her back, her arms flung out to the sides, the covers thrown off. But Sophie did not see Tom anywhere. Then she noticed a bundle of blankets at the foot of the stairs going to the tank room. Two eyes, pale blue, luminescent in the half-light, stared at her from the bundle. "Esther?" And then two more eyes peered out. They were Tom's.

Sophie tiptoed across the room, stepping over toys.

"She won't waken," Esther said, nodding in Sally's direction. "Almost nothing will waken her. That's why I come in here. When I can't sleep, if I come in here and watch her, it makes me feel restful."

Sophie followed Esther's eyes to the bed, where Sally lay in an abandon of sleep, her breathing quiet and deep. Even the pulse at the side of her neck fluttered slowly. "Do you often have trouble sleeping?" Sophie asked Esther.

"Sometimes I have nightmares. You don't mind that I brought Tom up here, do you?"

"No, of course I don't." Sophie moved the curled-up dog slightly so she could sit down next to Esther. "I have nightmares sometimes too," she said to the girl. "Different ones, but usually I'll be frantically searching for something, running and looking, and then I'll find it, but it turns all wrong and awful. A few days ago I dreamed I found a place I was looking for, but there was an animal in it, a horrible animal Joe and Deer Woman used to tell me about. It was so frightening, it woke me up."

"I dream about my mother," Esther said.

The simple statement jarred Sophie, since Helen had been in her dream too. Could Esther have known that? Sensed it somehow? No, of course not, Sophie thought, looking down at the girl huddled with Tom in the blankets. This was no sibyl, only a child, a tired, forlorn child.

"I think I dream about my mother because I want to change the way things were with us," Esther said. "Like when she would be right and I would know it, but I still didn't do what she said. Or when I'd be so angry with her and she'd put her arms around me and I wouldn't hug her back. Or when I would say things, hateful things." She paused a moment, then looked up at Sophie. "Do you know what I mean?"

Sophie nodded. She knew it would be useless to argue, to tell the girl she shouldn't feel as she did.

"But when a person's dead," the girl went on, "you can't change things. It's over, ended. Even if it's wrong."

"Esther, everyone's done things to cause feelings like that. It's not just you."

"Have you ever felt this way? Like you want to change things, but you can't? It's like a story that's all written, all finished, and you can't change the way it ends."

The girl's blue eyes were intense in their entreaty, and Sophie wanted to reassure her. "Yes, I have. The first time I was married--"

"The first time?"

Sophie nodded. "Before I was married to Philip Dymond, I was married to a man named Albert Burroughs."

"I didn't know you were married before. Is it a secret?"

"Not really. I don't talk about it much, though."

"Don't you like to remember it? Wasn't he nice to you?"

"He was a very nice man, a good, kind person, and he came into my life when I very much needed a friend." She leaned her head back against the wall. "I'd been an actress, working for a woman named Adah, and she was a very temperamental sort. Well, one day we were playing in Baltimore--do you know where that is? Well, one day when we were playing there, Adah got angry with me, jealous I think, because a man she liked thought I was pretty. And so she wouldn't let me be an actress any more. She had me running errands for her, cleaning up after her, things like that, and I wasn't happy."

"That's when I met Albert. He came backstage. He said he'd been coming to play every day especially to see me, and when I wasn't in the play any more, he worried about me. That's the sort of person he was, kind and concerned."

"And he was intelligent, an anthropologist--you know what that is?--but he knew about everything. Not just about anthropology, but about poetry and music and languages, and how to write stories. All the years we were married, he was giving me things, too, trying to please me. He was my teacher and my friend. My very good friend."

"And then one day he began to get sick, not in his body, but in his mind somewhere. He stopped talking to people, and then he stopped listening to them. He wouldn't even notice them or pay attention to himself, to things like eating and keeping clean. It was as though he decided not to live in this world any more, but just to be in a tiny spot inside himself somewhere."

"What happened to him? What did you do?"

"When I couldn't take care of him any more, I had to take him to a place where they could. It was very hard to do. The doctors told me he wouldn't get any better, not ever. I knew he'd be there the rest of his life, and it was the way you described it; I wanted so much to be kind and loving to him, to make up for everything I hadn't done before, to thank him for everything he had done for me."

"You wanted to change it all."

All? Sophie thought. All? Yes, she'd wanted Albert sane and whole again. Of course she had. But all? If she could have turned back the clock, would she have changed her life to protect him? Sacrifice her happiness for his? However much she might wish it otherwise, she knew the answer was no, and she felt tired and disgusted with herself. This wasn't what she should have told Esther.

"You can't change what's already happened, can you?" the girl said.

"No."

"Oh, but I do want to. I want to so much." She put her head down on Sophie's knee and began to cry quietly. "One time I told her I wished she'd put Great-Grandma's things away where people would never see them. At school they were teasing me, and I was ashamed to be part Indian and I wanted mother to hide that buffalo robe so nobody would ever see it. I know I hurt her. I could see it in her eyes." The girl was quiet as Sophie brushed a damp curl off her face; then she spoke again. "If I could just change the day she died. If I could just come straight in the house instead of playing on the porch, then I could keep her from dying. And I could kiss her now and tell her I love her." She took a deep, sharp breath. "Sometimes I can't even think what she looked like. You know the picture on the mantelshelf? I thought it'd help me remember if I drew over all the lines."

"And the doll? Why did you break the doll?"

The girl shook her head hard at the question, as if she didn't want to hear it. "I don't know. I don't know."

Sophie rubbed her back and rubbed and rubbed until the tears stopped the girl's eyelids began to droop. "Come on, sweetheart, let's get to bed." She helped her up and with an arm around her walked her to her room. As Sophie pulled the covers up around the girl, she experienced an unfamiliar pang. It took her a moment to identify it as regret for her own childlessness. How fine a thing it would be to help another human being, a bud of herself, unfold and grow.

"Aunt Sophie?"

"Yes, Esther?"

"Will you go to the circus with me? I'm not too old for the circus, am I?"

"No, and I'm not too old, either." The girl smiled sleepily, and Sophie felt a warm affection easing the emptiness which had invaded just the moment before. "I'd like very much to go with you," she told the sleeping child.

- Chapter 10 - (continued)

She carried Tom downstairs to her room, and when she returned from filling his water dish, she saw that he had posted himself on the tower window seat. With his ears perked, he was looking intently down into the yard. Ignoring him, thinking perhaps a cat had wandered by below, she extinguished the light. The dog began to growl.

"Hush, Tom."

The growling continued.

"Tom, hush! That's enough!"

When still he growled, Sophie sat up, meaning to go see what was bothering him. But as she stood, there was a loud sound from near where he was, a damp, slapping sound, as though a heavy wet rag had been thrown against the window. The dog began barking wildly.

"What...?" Sophie started toward the tower, but before she got there, the sound came again, this time more loudly, and at the same instant, the window in the tower burst inward. Something hit the floor with a heavy, sickening thud, and suddenly there was an overwhelming stench in the room. It was the smell of death, of putrefying flesh and bloated body cavity. [Editor's note: Thus far Mrs. Biscuitbarrel has refrained from commenting on the narrative, but those last images certainly don't put her and Mr. B., shall we say, in the mood for love. But let us allow Mrs. Cheney to continue...]

To Sophie is seemed as though all her nightmares had suddenly become real. It was Helen. It had to be. Someone must have thrown Helen's body into the room. Her sister was lying there in the dark, head bent oddly at the broken neck, dead eyes staring unseeingly. Struggling to find the light, Sophie fought down a scream. As she fumbled with the switch, she heard a whimpering noise. At first she thought it was Tom. Then she realized she was making the noise herself.

She flipped the switch, and light flooded the room. She saw Tom sniffing at something on the floor in the tower. She screamed at him, "Get away from there." The dog ignored her, continuing to sniff. "Tom, come here! Get away from there now!" There was a rising note of hysteria in her voice, and still the dog paid no attention. Sophie forced herself to move closer, forced her eyes to the object lying in the tower. She saw shining entrails. but they were so small, and so was the bag from which they had burst—no, the bags. There were several of them, all tied together, small and brown and furry. The prairie gophers. It was the prairie gophers. Someone had tied several of the rotting animals together and thrown them through the window of her room.

She was still trying to absorb [sic] what she saw when there was a loud knocking on her door. "Sophie? Sophie?" It was James' voice.

She opened the door and he came in, followed behind by Connie, her face swollen with sleep.

"I heard a crash. Are you all right?" James asked.

She nodded, pointing at the carcasses in the tower.

"What? Did those kids do this? Where's Sally?"

"James, Sally's asleep. It wasn't her."

"Then who? This is crazy." He moved to the window, put his head out, and looked below. "Looks like another bunch of carcasses near the front walk. Whoever did this must have meant to throw them up here too. Maybe they were scared off."

"No, they threw the other bunch too. They just didn't manage to break the window with them."

He turned and moved to where the carcasses lay, and Sophie, self-conscious now in her thin gown and chilled by the night breeze coming through the broken window, reached for her robe. As she did so, she caught sight of Connie's face. The girl's eyes were swimming, whether from sleepiness or nausea, Sophie wasn't sure.

"What's this?" James had spotted a stained piece of paper tied to the neck of one of the prairie gophers. He bent to pick it up and had to jerk it to tear it away from the string which attached it to the dead animal. As he did so, the entire mass shook, and the ooze of entrails on the bedroom floor widened.

"What is it?" Sophie asked, looking away.

James didn't answer right away. "Let's go downstairs," he said to Sophie finally. And to Connie: "I'll send someone to help you clean this up." The girl nodded as if she were in a daze, and Sophie wondered if she had understood.

Downstairs, the library was chilly, and while Sophie read the note, James started a fire. "Well, what do you think?" he said, turning to her.

She considered the crudely printed words, "MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, SQUAW." The word, "squaw." Why did it make her recoil? There was insult implicit in it, she sensed that, and there also was the strangeness of having it addressed to her. It was so... so unexpectedly odd to be aligned with her grandmother, to be put by a word into a world which had always seemed so foreign to her. "I'm stunned, I suppose," she said to James. "'Squaw'?" No one's ever called me that. Not when I was a child growing up. Joe wouldn't have let them, I suppose. And not since I've been an adult. Oh, there are instances when people make remarks about Indians, but usually if they know I'm part Shoshone, they respond differently, as if there's something rare about it and ... exotic."

"That's in the East, Sophie. It's different out here." He used the bellows on the fire, and it began to flame brightly. "Who'd do this?" he asked, turning back to her. "Who'd want to keep you out of their business?"

She gave a full account of her conversations with Huber and told him about the exchange she'd had with Rodman.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he demanded angrily. "Don't you see? Since I didn't object, they must think I approve their harassing you, especially after the way I put up with Rodman's staring at you. I should have done something about that. And you should have told me about the threats!"

"I wanted to take care of it myself, not come running to you as if I were helpless."

"It's all well and good to be independent when you're playing a game that goes by polite rules, but it looks like you've come across another kind." A log fell in the fireplace, and he took the poker and pushed it back. "Being a woman doesn't always mean you'll be treated in a polite and civilized way," he said to her.

"I never thought that. You make me sound naive."

"I didn't mean to. Not at all. In more instances than not, a woman can count on being accorded respect out here, on being protected by her sex. I've come across women who've taken the most incredible journeys by themselves, shared campfires with cowboys, traveled through outlaw territory completely unmolested. The men out here play some rough games, but sometimes they'll change the rules entirely if women get involved. Remember Anna May talking about elections at dinner last night?"

"Yes, and I remember you arguing with her."

One corner of his mouth went up in a half-smile. "That has no bearing at all on the validity of her observation. Since women've been voting, elections are much soberer, more orderly affairs. That's one of the games the men agreed to play differently when they let in the women--no, not the women, the ladies. And that's the point, you see. There are some categories of female the Western male feels no obligation to pay special regard--"

"The Western male, James. Aren't you one?"

"Let me make my point, Sophie. There are some women who are thought not to merit special regard--"

Again she interrupted. "And Indian women are among them."

"That's right. You're absolutely right. So you see why they called you 'squaw' in that note. It made their job easier. If they could think of you in those terms, it was easier for them to do something like this to you.":

"It makes me indignant to think I need--how did you say it?--'special regard' from a thug like Jake Rodman. It's such an affront. I shouldn't need his 'special regard.' I'm... I'm better than he is! Oh, that's not what I mean."

"Of course it is. And you're right. You're smarter, cleverer, but you're not stronger, Sophie, and you're not as vicious. I don't know if you could ever bring yourself to do some of the things which are second nature to a man like Rodman, and that's to your disadvantage in a confrontation. It seems to me you could use an ally."

He was right. She didn't like to admit it, but he was right. "Are you sure you want to align yourself with me? You can't be certain what I'll say about the stock growers."

He shrugged and smiled. "I guess I'll have to trust to your good judgment. And it won't take much to get Rodman and Huber to back off. I'll just let them know you're off-limits, not to be bothered..." He broke off, frowning.

"What is it?"

"I have to leave first thing tomorrow. Spring roundup's nearly over, and I'm making a circuit of the company's ranches. I've no idea where Rodman is staying, and I heard Huber say he was leaving for his ranch... But it doesn't matter. I'll stop and see Paul before I leave. I'll tell him to deliver the messages. That'll take care of it."

She looked up at him, and though it was late, she thought he looked fresh, alert—energized, that was it. The last hour seemed to have driven the last hint of melancholy from him, and he looked like the man she had met twelve years ago, handsome, a bit imperious, perhaps, but she didn't mind. No, she'd never minded male sureness and strength, though she knew well how much trouble they could be. She'd seen with Philip the energy and effort a man accustomed to dominance requires. A woman must constantly be fighting for her selfhood with such a man, and after Philip's death, she'd resolved she wanted no more such battles. But when she'd considered the matter abstractly, she'd forgotten how strong the attraction could be. What other kind of man was worth loving, after all?

"If you'd like to go back upstairs," James said, "I'm sure your room's been taken care of. If you draw the tower curtains, I'm certain you'll be warm enough."

"Not just yet. I'd like to stay here awhile. Would you stay with me?" She reached up a hand, and he took it in his, looking at her as he did so. She was suddenly aware his eyes were blue. The color was so deep, she'd simply thought of his eyes as dark before, but now she realized they were the color of a night sky, the color of a mountain lake at midnight. They were blue, a blue so deep it seemed to reflect blueness into the whites of his eyes, a blue so compelling she let herself be pulled past all her doubts.

"Sophie?" It was a complex question he was asking, compressed into a single word.

"Yes, James." With the strong affirmation of her tone, she answered him. Then she excused herself, promising to return right away. Upstairs she opened the wardrobe and moved aside tissue-wrapped hats on the shelf until she saw the lacquered box. She wasn't sure if the various maids who had worked for her knew what was in the box, but she suspected they did. And she suspected that after Philip's death, the question of whether to continue packing it with her other things had caused considerable consternation. She had waited to see who would have the courage to bring it up, but no one had, and so she had let the matter slide. And well she had, she thought, lifting the box off the shelf.

A few minutes later when she returned to the library, James was turning down the lights. She sat down near the fire and was surprised when he took a chair some distance away. When he spoke, it was of inconsequential things and she was so puzzled by his behavior that she almost felt like laughing. Had he forgotten their last scene? Had she only imagined it? Then she realized he was giving her a chance to reconsider. It was an awkward gesture, because it was so out of keeping with his nature, but she was touched by it, and when she looked into the shadows where he sat and saw him looking fixedly at her, she was moved in quite another way, struck by how erotic restraint could be.

She got up and went to him, kneeling on the carpet by his chair. They were both still, and she could hear her heart pounding, but at the same time she was seized with a strange sense of unreality. She felt insubstantial as a ghost, as though this were not she kneeling beside this man, wanting him, but someone she was dreaming. He turned to her, leaned down, and put his hand gently on the side of her face. "You are extraordinarily beautiful," he said quietly. They kissed, and then she lay with him in the firelight, unmindful of the past, unmindful of anything except this moment, this man, and herself.

- Chapter 11 -

When she awoke the next morning, it was a slow, gentle emergence from sleep. She was unsure at first of where she was, but she felt no haste to settle the matter. Without turning her head, she could see a doorway, a polished mahogany wardrobe, a nightstand. This was not her New York apartment, not the train. It was the guest suite in the Stevenson house; she was in her bedroom in the Stevenson house.

In the hallway outside her room he had said he would be leaving early. "About five in the morning. It'll be the better part of a week before I'm back."

"You should straighten up your hair before you let anyone see you." She had reached up and mussed it further.

"And you should fasten your robe before you let anyone see you." He reached down as if to tie it shut, but slipped his hand inside instead, inside her unbuttoned nightgown too.

"The better part of a week, you say?" She was smiling, but she found it difficult to speak. Once more she felt all her blood and breath being pulled downward.

"Maybe I could manage it otherwise," he said, pushing her robe back off her shoulder and kissing her neck. "One of the ... ranches is fairly close. I'll go out there... and be back tomorrow night."

"Just to be sure everything's all right here?" They moved into the bedroom.

"Mmmmmmm," he agreed as they fell toward the bed.

* * *

The memory stirred her, and she stretched, an easy reaching at first; then she put her arms high above her head and gave a mighty yawn. As she settled back on her pillow, she became aware of a shadow in the back of her mind. She tried to banish it, but it grew like a thunderhead on the summer horizon, until she could no longer ignore it. James and Helen. What had happened to turn her against him. Sophie could not forget Baby, her bright eyes shining as she had whispered about something James had done to Helen. What had it been? Had it been anything at all?

Finally she had to acknowledge there would be no peace until she knew. She had to know. She got out of bed and dressed quickly in the same dark dress she had worn yesterday with Amy Travers. Then she went to find Mrs. Syme. "I need something I can drive over rough roads," she told the housekeeper. "Is there a buckboard in the carriage house?"

"A Concord Buggy. How would that be? And I know one of the boys would be happy to drive you."

"I'd rather go by myself. Just have the buggy made ready, please."

As she was driving away from the Stevenson home, she regretted not telling Mrs. Syme where she was going. She tended to respond tersely to the housekeeper's officious ways, but in this instance, Sophie wished she had said a little more. It wasn't wise to set off across the prairie without letting someone know. She slowed the buggy, ready to turn around and go back, when she saw a familiar figure riding toward her on horseback. "Paul! Paul!" she called.

"Sophie! Are you all right? James told me about last night. What a thing!"

"I'm fine," she reassured him. "I was just momentarily frightened. The only injury was to the tower window."

"Where are you headed now?"

"To the Wilson homestead. I'll be back this afternoon."

"Are you sure you want to go out there?" There was a look of concern on his kindly face. "Especially after last night."

"The Wilsons didn't have anything to do with last night. At least not directly. I'll be fine, really. It's important to me to go."

"Why, Sophie?"

"It's another place to ask questions, to find out things I have to know."

"About what?"

"About Helen..." She almost mentioned James' name too, but something held her back.

"Sometimes it's best to let the past alone," Paul said.

"I can't, Paul. I can't. Since her death, I've felt... haunted sometimes." The concern on his face deepened, and she realized she had said too much. "Please, Paul, I must go. I'll be back this afternoon." She signaled to the horse and started off.

"Sophie...?"

She kept going, pretending not to hear.

* * *

In the beginning, she held to a brisk pace, intent on reaching the Wilson homestead in good time. But a few miles out, she saw a large herd of antelope and slowed. The graceful creatures let her come so close, she could see they were still shedding their winter coats. She watched them, amazed they were so tame. Perhaps the cloudless weather calmed them, she thought, sweeping her eyes from horizon to horizon. Not a cloud, not a speck in the sky. It was an immensity of unstained radiance.

When at last she saw the Wilson homestead, she knew there was something different about it from yesterday, but it took a moment before she realized what: one of the buildings was gone. As she crossed the creek, she saw that the missing building was the shanty Baby had used for her chickens. And then as she came still closer, she saw that the missing shack was not exactly missing. There was a charred heap where it had stood yesterday.

Baby came running out to meet her, still dressed in red, her little boy on her hip. Before Sophie could speak, Baby motioned her away. "You have to leave," she said frantically. "You have to leave!"

"But I drove all the way out here to see you. You told me to come."

"You don't understand. He's home."

At that moment a figure appeared in the doorway of the wooden shack. It was Zack Wilson, wearing a dirty patch over his left eye. From below the patch, a thick scab ran down to his chin. Beside him was a white male dog, mostly bulldog, Sophie thought, from the animal's undershot jaw and compact muscular build. The most noticeable thing about the creature was the black patch of color over his right eye. He seemed an incongruous mirror image of his master.

"Thought you told me it was one of your temperance ladies," Wilson told Baby.

"Oh, she is," Baby answered quickly, turning toward him as he left the doorway and walked toward the buggy. "She was out here yesterday with Miss Travers."

"Nah, don't lie to me," Wilson said, pushing Baby aside and coming closer to Sophie. "I know this lady. A real fine lady she is. We oughta be right honored she's come to visit us."

He reached up to help Sophie down, but she was unsure whether to get out of the buggy or not. Wilson's courtesy was almost as exaggerated as it had been the day she arrived, when he'd stood in the dusty street mocking James. And behind Wilson, Sophie could see Baby shaking her head, telling her not to get down. All Sophie's instincts told her to stay in the buggy, to take her leave. But she wanted to know about James and Helen. She was obsessed with knowing now, and there was no way she could talk to Baby if she allowed Zack to scare her off. She let Wilson help her down and went into the shack with him and Baby.

The minute she stepped inside, Sophie knew she had made a mistake. The blond child was sitting on one of the beds, and Sophie saw her cower when Wilson entered the room. And there was an open whiskey bottle on the table. Wilson was so much less drunk than the other time Sophie had seen her, she had mistakenly assumed he was sober. But the half-empty bottle caused her to look again. Though he walked steadily enough, his eye was glazed and bloodshot and his movements overdeliberate.

* * *

"Sit down, please, Miss... ah, I guess I don't know your name, do I?" Wilson said.

"Mrs. Dymond," said Sophie. She noticed Baby wouldn't meet her eyes. "No, I don't think I'll sit down, Mr. Wilson. I can't stay."

"Sit down!"

She gave a start at the shouted command, then felt a rush of indignation. "I certainly have no intention--"

"Luper and me don't like it when folks turn down our hospitality, do we, Luper?" He said the dog's name with a peculiar emphasis, and the animal growled at Sophie, its upper lip trembling, threatening a snarl.

She sat in a chair near the table.

Wilson pulled up another chair, scraping it across the wooden floor. The dog sat back on its haunches besides him and began to pant, a long purple tongue lolling down from his mouth. Wilson reached for the whiskey bottle, took a long drink, then fixed his glassy eye on Sophie. "So, Stevenson's sweetheart. Out here on the prairie all by yourself visitin'. You practicin' up to do like that other woman o' his? You gonna be one of them do-gooders?"

Baby spoke for the first time since they had entered the shack. "You got it all wrong, Zack. She ain't his sweetheart. She's the sister of that lady Stevenson was married to."

He took another swig from the whiskey bottle. "Nah, Babe, don't lie to me. She don't look nothin' like that other one." He paused. "I can tell she ain't nothin' like the other. Besides, I seen this one and his lordship together. He don't know you're out here, I bet."

Sophie didn't respond directly. "I really must be leaving," she said.

Wilson got up and came around the table, Luper following at his heels. He put his face close to Sophie's, so close his whiskey breath made her nauseous. His hair grew low on his forehead, and she could see the separate strands of it tangled into a dense mat. "You don't leave unless I tell you," he said. "Ain't that so, Luper?" Again, at the intonation in Wilson's voice, the dog growled. Wilson put out a hand, a stubby, filthy hand, and rubbed his fingers over the side of Sophie's face. "Mmmmm, soft," he said. "Soft and smooth. Ain't like mine, is it? He fingered the suppurating scab on his cheek. "You see what that whip done? You see what your sweetheart done? Suddenly he screamed in her face: "And last night he burned down my goddamned shack!"

"He couldn't have," Sophie gasped. "He couldn't have. I was with him all evening."

Wilson smirked. "All evening, huh?" Then his expression grew menacing. "If it weren't him, his money helped pay to have it done. Those bastards think they're clever, using hired guns for their dirty work." He stroked Sophie's face again. "They burned down what's mine. I reckon that gives me a claim on what's theirs." He let his thick, blunt fingers slide down to her throat, then over the front of her dress, over her breast and down until his hand rested on her thigh. Sophie's mind shot back over the years to the soldier at Fort Martin, and the same terror she had known then leaped through her now. She tried to draw away, but the chair prevented her. She looked around frantically, but Baby, her only possible help, was standing by the table holding the whiskey bottle, paying no attention.

He kissed her, forced her lips open with his mouth. She could taste the whiskey he had been drinking, feel his whiskers and the scab on his face. A wave of revulsion swept over her, and she pushed him away. As he fell back, the white bulldog moved toward her, his growl becoming louder.

"Ah, feisty, ain't she, Luper?" Wilson stroked the dog. "Well, sometimes that's the kind's the most fun." He turned and reached for the whiskey bottle and saw Baby holding it. "gaddammit! Give me that!" He grabbed the bottle, tipped it up, and took a very long drink. "I want you and the kids to get outta here," he said to Baby.

"But, Zack--"

"I said get out! Take 'em over to the soddie. Take 'em someplace. I don't care where."

"Lemme just get a few things together for 'em. It'll take just a minute."

Wilson sat down at the table, emptied the whiskey bottle, and stared at Sophie. She was terrified, felt sick with apprehension. She had no weapons, no hope of help. Paul was the only one who knew where she was, and there was no reason for him to come after her. What could she do? She couldn't give in to Wilson. She couldn't. But if she fought him, what might he do. He was stronger than she--and there was that dog. Every time she moved, the dog growled.

"Goddammit, Baby! What's takin' you so long?" Wilson demanded.

"Just about ready, Zack, just about ready." Baby stood in the doorway with the two children. She would not look at Sophie. "Zack," Baby said, "she's not his sweetheart."

"Get your ass outta here!"

"You can't do this, Zack, you just can't. They'll come after you. You'd know that if you weren't drunk."

He made a threatening move toward her, and she ran, jerking the blond-haired child off her feet.

As Wilson moved toward Sophie, she stood, but the dog growled menacingly, and she dared move no farther. Wilson grabbed her by the shoulders and put his face on her neck. He mumbled words she couldn't understand.

She tried to steel herself, control her revulsion. All her instincts demanded that she fight him, that she kick, bite, anything to push him away, to get his hands off her. But her mind was moving rapidly. What would happen if she did? It wouldn't change the outcome, merely delay it and bring her more pain and injury. She tried drawing within herself to a place he couldn't touch, to a place from which she could watch him and hate him with a pure and unalloyed hatred.

He kissed her then, full on the lips as before, and he began to fumble with the buttons on the front of her dress. His breath, the whiskers scratching her face, his filthy hands on her flesh—suddenly it was too much. No matter the consequences, she could not accept this. "No!" she shouted, breaking away from him and lunging for the door.

Behind her she heard the dog snarl, and she expected at any moment to feel its teeth pierce her flesh. As she threw herself through the doorway, she tripped and fell into the dirt. She lay there, eyes closed, waiting for the dog's fangs, the man's hands.

Instead she heard a loud crash, then a whimpering noise. She opened her eyes and turned to see Wilson sprawled in the doorway of the cabin. He had fallen somehow, crashing down on Luper. The animal was pinned beneath his downed master, whining.

At that moment, Baby appeared. "Get outta here, would ya? Just get outta here."

Sophie turned to her dazedly. "What happened? I don't understand."

"I put laudanum in his whiskey. I didn't think it was ever gonna work." She moved to where Wilson lay and examined his head. "He really cracked himself." She looked at Sophie. "Do you know how I'll pay for this if he finds out what I done? And he'll guess I done somethin'. I'll pay all right, especially if he broke somethin' in that dog. If he has to shoot that dog... I told you to leave. Why didn't you listen to me?"

"I didn't understand."

"Well, you know now, so just get on outta here. Jesus, just go on."

Sophie took a deep breath. "Baby, I came out here because of what you said yesterday. I had to know about what you said."

Baby looked at her, seeming not to understand.

"You said Helen told you about what James had done to her."

Baby threw her head back and laughed. It was a high, discordant sound. "You mean that's what all this happened for? If that don't top all. Jesus, if that don't top everything." She looked at Sophie. "So you wanta know what James done, huh? Mr. Fancy pants James? Well, I'll tell you what it was. What he done is, he raped her." She threw her head back and laughed again, loosing peal after peal of hysterical laughter to ring wildly out across the prairie.

Sophie looked at Baby's round mouth, her rigid body, and she felt a wave of horror pass over her, like wind over wet skin. Suddenly she wanted nothing more than to be away from this place. She ran to the buggy, got in, and turned the horse toward Cheyenne. It wasn't until she had crossed the creek that she looked back. Baby was still standing outside the cabin, a spot of red against the brown earth.

* * *

Sophie scrubbed furiously. She felt dirty from Wilson's touch, unclean, and sitting in the tub at the Stevenson home, she rubbed her face, her neck, her arms with a soap-covered cloth until they began to feel raw. Then she lay back, let the warm water ease her aching muscles, and thought about what Baby had said. It could be true. It didn't even make sense. James and Helen had been married, man and wife—unless of course Baby was talking about something that happened before they were married. But that didn't make sense either. It wasn't the way James was. She thought of the night before, remembered how he had sat apart from her in the library, waiting for her, wanting to be sure. Rape Helen? James? It wasn't possible. Oh, he had a quick temper. She'd seen him take the buggy whip to Wilson. But that was quite a different thing. Yes, different entirely. As she thought of Wilson again, she found herself wishing she had a whip and that awful, dreadful man were in front of her.

As she dried herself, Sophie thought of Amy Travers. Yesterday Miss Travers had said Baby was uninformed about Helen's personal life. She'd said Baby was lying to claim otherwise. Sophie should talk to the schoolteacher, tell her about the rape story. And of course Miss Travers would say it wasn't true. And she would know, if anything like that had happened, Miss Travers would have been the one Helen told.

When she had dressed, she found out from Mrs. Syms where Amy Travers lived and asked the housekeeper to have the phaeton hitched up for her. Then she drove to the address Mrs. Syms had given her. She stood on the porch of the modest white cottage on House Street and knocked, but there was no answer. Nor was there any movement from inside. The house was empty, Sophie decided, but nevertheless she knocked again. Still there was no answer.

She looked at her watch. It was shortly before three. And then she remembered the temperance meeting Miss Travers had invited her to. That's probably where the schoolteacher was.

* * *

Sophie entered the Presbyterian Church on Eighteenth Street and heard the rise and fall of voices. Standing in the vestibule looking into the sanctuary, she saw approximately twenty-five women seated in opera chairs facing the altar. Amy Travers was standing in front, and Sophie realized the meeting was about to begin. She would have to wait to talk to Miss Travers, so she slipped into a chair near the back of the gathering.

As she arranged her skirts, she became aware that the women next to her was looking at her. A neatly dressed, brown-haired woman, she smiled a lovely smile when Sophie glanced over. "Mrs. Dymond, let me introduce myself. I'm Lydia Swerdlow. I'd been hoping for a chance to meet you."

Sophie liked her immediately, partly for her confident handshake and direct gaze, and partly for the way she'd introduced herself. It was so pleasant to meet someone who didn't feel constrained either to pretend she'd never heard of Sophie Dymond or to go on and on about what fine publications the Illustrated News and the Ladies' Magazine were.

"This is Alice Lassawell," Lydia said, indicating a frail-looking woman on her other side. "Allie, this is Sophie Dymond."

Alice Lassawell murmured a greeting, and then: "We loved your sister so much."

"We've been lost without her," Lydia said. "She was such a leader. I've never seen anyone who could inspire such trust and devotion."

"People just opened up to her," Alice added, "perhaps because she was so open and loving with them."

The adjectives puzzled Sophie. They didn't sound at all like the Helen she had known. But before she had time to think about it, the women all stood and began to recite something that sounded like a cross between the Apostles' Creed and a temperance pledge. Sophie stood with them and surveyed the group. Anna May Bellavance was near the front. The tiny woman who had been so upset in the ladies' dressing room at the Cheyenne Club—Cleantha, that was her name—was standing next to Anna May. Then Sophie's glance happened to fall on the women she had just met, and she saw with surprise that Lydia Swerdlow was supporting Alice Lassawell. What was wrong with Alice? She was so pale. Was she about to faint? But the expressions on both Alice's and Lydia's faces indicated nothing unusual was happening.

"We believe that God created both men and women in his own image," the women were reciting, "and therefore, we believe in one standard of purity for both men and women." As Sophie looked around the room, she was surprised at the fierce pride she saw in face after face, and the voices weren't merely mouthing words, they carried special conviction. The pledge the women were reciting was about the equality of male and female, but feeling behind it, Sophie realized, was of female superiority. The women weren't talking about agreeing with men on some common standard of purity; they were talking about lifting the benighted male up until he met the female standard.

The women took their seats, and up front Amy Travers called for order. "Ladies! Ladies! I'd like to begin today by honoring one of our members for her special efforts."

Sophie groaned inwardly as she realized this was one of those meetings meant to entertain and inspire rather than accomplish anything. She'd seen such gatherings go on for hours, and she was starting to think how she could slip away and come back later when she saw that Alice Lassawell was struggling to her feet. She was the one being honored, and Lydia helped her to the aisle. She made her way slowly forward, clutching onto the backs of chairs.

"Is she ill?" Sophie asked.

"She's had ten children," Lydia answered. "Not yet thirty, and ten babies. Her womb has fallen, and what the doctors haven't put her through! Pessaries, injections, manipulations."

Sophie shuddered, hoping Lydia wouldn't go on, but fearing she would. "Female trouble" wasn't one of those subjects women liked to pass over lightly. But Alice's thank-you speech closed off the possibility of further conversation. In a soft voice one had to strain to hear, she talked about "social purity" and encouraged the women gathered to participate in a petition drive of some kind. Then she was making her way slowly, painfully back up the aisle.

As Miss Travers began to introduce another speaker, Sophie decided there was no way she could gracefully leave. But she'd been the victim of circumstances like this before, and she'd learned the trick of looking attentive while her thoughts were elsewhere. She could use this time to plan a strategy for approaching Amy Travers with Baby's accusation. Of course Miss Travers would deny it had happened, but Sophie wanted her to go on and say what was true. Miss Travers knew things she wasn't telling, and Sophie was determined...

"The crimes being committed against women are unspeakable!" The words were loud and fervent. The speaker was Cleantha, the small woman from the Cheyenne Club. "The saloons are turning savages loose upon the women of this land! They lay defiled hands upon us, insult us in the most horrifying manner, breathe their rancid breath out upon us. And what right have they? What right?"

Sophie was startled at the woman's loud passion, startled that this was happening here, in a Presbyterian church, in the midst of all these polite gentlewomen.

"We are as fully human as they," Cleantha continued. "More so, for we have not brutalized our minds with strong drink. We have not brutalized our passions with alcohol. We are persons entitled to dignity and respect, and yet they see us as mere instruments for their satisfaction. And what right have they? What right?"

Sophie began to recognize in the woman's words a familiar emotion. Yes, she thought, yes. That's how I felt when Wilson put his hands on me, breathed on me. It wasn't only fear, it was the affront, the insult I couldn't stand.

"Inflamed by liquor," Cleantha went on, "men turn upon the physically weaker sex, they turn upon innocent women whose only crime is to have attracted their glance—or to be joined to them by the sacred bond of marriage."

Sophie was brought up short. This woman was talking about more than the kind of outrage Wilson had attempted. She was talking about husbands and wives.

"They indulge themselves selfishly, sensually, with no thought of the consequences for us. For their own pleasure, they condemn us to early graves, murdering us as surely as if they had knotted a cord around our necks."

Sophie looked over at Lydia. Her face showed no surprise as she watched and listened. When Cleantha had finished and was taking her seat, Sophie leaned over to Lydia. "Is this... usual?"

"I'd say so, yes."

"I... I thought the WCTU was about temperance."

"It is, but it's all connected. 'Intemperance and impurity are iniquity's Siamese twins.' That's how Miss Willard puts it."

"But impurity—that's outside marriage."

"Conjugal excess is impurity!"

Sophie stared at her blankly, unable to relate her words to the vehemence with which she had spoken. Abstractions, abstractions, some part of Sophie's mind kept repeating. How could words so far removed from reality arouse such feeling?

"Don't you see?" Lydia said. "These women used to think they had no right to refuse their husbands. But they do, that's what Cleantha's saying. Why should men make the decision when it's women who must suffer the consequences? There's no pleasure in it for women. For them it's simply submitting to the ungoverned male one more time, risking the childbed one more time."

Sophie found it hard to believe that the notions of a woman who seemed so bright, so well-balanced, could be so rigidly fixed. She spoke impulsively. "There are ways to prevent conception, of course."

Lydia raised her eyebrows. "For some, perhaps, but not for us."

Sophie caught her meaning immediately, indeed, had expected the words. She had often encountered this idea that no respectable woman would use protective devices. It seemed senseless to her, but it was, she knew, the way most people believed. Sophie wondered: would she herself have felt differently if her life had taken another path?

Lydia was watching her, and Sophie sensed hostility in her gaze now. "We're wives and mothers," Lydia said. "What is against nature has no place in our lives. We would never do anything unnatural."

The words had an ironic ring in Sophie's ear, since to her these women seemed caught in a perversity. In her mind's eye she saw the lacquered box with its sheaths and powders and sponges, devices which greatly eased the female lot. How could these women condemn them?

She stood and bowed her head for the closing prayer, fully aware that Lydia Swerdlow had edged a step or two away from her, as if to avoid the contagion of her ideas. When the prayer had ended, Sophie took a determinedly cordial leave of both the women next to her. Then she went to wait for Miss Travers.

Standing in the vestibule, nodding to the departing ladies, she kept thinking of the conversation she'd just had. These women had loved Helen, adored her, seen her as an inspiration. She had shared their thoughts and beliefs--and did that help explain what had happened between James and Helen? It could be. It could very well be. The births, the miscarriages, one after another--Helen's response had been to move out of her own room, to be apart from James. And probably from time to time he had... sought her out. Ah! She hated thinking about it, but that probably was what had happened. As for Baby and what she'd said--well, she was wrong, probably guessing at things and viewing the relationship between men and women from a perspective so different from Helen's, it was little wonder she had erred.

Still, Sophie wanted to speak to Miss Travers, and she motioned to the schoolteacher when she saw her. "Miss Travers? I need to see you for a moment. Is there someplace where we could talk alone?"

"You came," Miss Travers said. "I saw you sitting in the back, and I thought how happy Helen would have been."

"Could we talk? Somewhere alone?"

"Of course, of course, as soon as everyone leaves." She took Sophie's arm and insisted on introducing her to a few of the departing women. She singled out for special attention a very tall older woman with iron-gray hair. "Sophie, this is Esther Morris. She was one of the first women in the territory to hold public office after we got the franchise. She was justice of the peace up in South Pass City."

Sophie acknowledged the introduction, trying to be polite and pay attention to what Miss Travers was saying, but finding it difficult. Her main concern was to get the schoolteacher aside so she could speak to her.

"Helen's Esther, your niece, is named after Mrs. Morris," Amy Travers was saying.

Sophie murmured a few words and noticed with some surprise that Mrs. Morris seemed shy. How odd that such an imposing figure should be so reticent. But Sophie did not pursue the thought. All her attention was focused on Amy Travers.

Soon the last of the women had departed, and Sophie stood alone in the doorway of the church with Amy Travers. The schoolteacher seemed subdued now. She seemed to realize that something besides her invitation of yesterday accounted for Sophie's presence.

"I wanted to speak to you because I was out at the Wilsons' again this morning," Sophie began.

Miss Travers looked at her keenly.

"I went because I wanted to ask Baby about what she'd said yesterday. About James and Helen."

Miss Travers nodded.

"She told me James had raped Helen."

For a moment there was no expression on Amy Travers' face; then suddenly she turned away. Her arms were crossed, her shoulders hunched; she clutched at her elbows with a tight, nervous intensity. Sophie could not understand why the schoolteacher remained silent. Yesterday she had been so quick to deny that Baby would know about Helen. "Miss Travers?"

No answer.

Sophie moved closer, edging around, and she saw with a shock that Amy Travers was weeping. "Miss Travers? What is it? What's wrong?"

"She did talk to her," the schoolteacher said. "She did--and how could she?"

"What are you talking about? I don't understand."

"It was a fault in Helen. It truly was." Miss Travers turned to face Sophie fully, tears running down her cheeks. "She had--how shall I say it?--a way of giving her confidences too easily." She paused. "But a woman like that. Why would she trust her? Why would she?"

Miss Travers was jealous, Sophie realized with a start. Jealous that Helen had confided in Baby. But that meant... "Then it's true? Are you saying it's true about James?"

Miss Travers nodded distractedly.

"He raped her?"

"Yes, yes," the schoolteacher said. "It was an awful, brutal thing."

"When? When did it happen?"

"A little over two years ago. He forced himself upon her. He was drunk, and he forced her to submit." The flat tone of Miss Travers' voice was a strange contrast to her expression, but when she spoke again, the anguish in her face could be heard in her words. "But why did she tell Baby? Why, why did she have to do that?"

Sophie shut her eyes, and Miss Travers' words faded into the distance, driven back by a tangled, violent image of James and Helen. At the same time, a word began to form in Sophie's thoughts. At the same time, a word began to form in Sophie's thoughts. The letters were a jumble, had been a jumble since first she had learned of Helen's death, but now they were forming themselves, ordering themselves. If James had raped Helen, what else might he have done? It would have been so easy to make her fall down the stairs. Just a tiny push, that's all it would have taken.

With that thought, the last of the letters fell into place and the word rocketed to the front of Sophie's mind. Murder. Murder. Could James have murdered Helen?

- Chapter 12 -

She waited for him in the drawing room. All the servants knew she was there, and as soon as he stepped in the house, he would be alerted and would come to her. Then she would ask him. She was not certain how she would do it, but she knew she would. She had to.

It had grown almost dark when she heard his voice. "Sophie? Sophie?" He came into the room. "Did something happen? Surely not. I spoke to Paul, and I'm certain he relayed the message to Huber and Rodman."

A part of her wanted to respond to the concern in his voice, but she remained silent, immobile.

"I don't have to leave in the morning," he said. "I can postpone it if you need me." He switched on a lamp and moved toward her. She drew back. "Sophie? What is it?"

She didn't know how to begin. "James, you and Helen..."

"Yes?"

"I was told something today about you and Helen."

"Yes, what was it?"

She swallowed hard, looked at him, and said it. "That you had raped her."

"Amy Travers told you that!"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters." His voice was cold as a knife blade. "It's quite obvious you didn't question her story."

His anger caused her a moment of gladness, a lifting of the heavy weight she had been carrying. If he were angry, it must not be true, and she so much wanted it not to be. Then she had a sinking feeling. It was over with him. One question, and she knew from his voice that it was over. And why had she asked the question? Why had she listened to Baby and Miss Travers? But what else could she have done? "James, what do you expect?" she asked, trying to counter his anger. "To be told this had been done, and by someone I've loved—"

"Have loved? Or are you just trying to say we've been lovers. I suppose Amy Travers knows that too."

"Of course not."

"What is that woman trying to do? Why does she want to turn you against me?"

"James..." Should she tell him that Miss Travers had not been the source of the story, that at first she had even denied it?

"She has no right to speak of these things," he said. "Helen... thought that I had raped her."

What was he saying? Sophie couldn't understand. Was he joking? Was this a tasteless joke?

But when he turned back around, there was no humor in his face. "I'm sure that sounds peculiar, but I know no other way to put it." He smiled a mocking, half-smile. "Having never spoken of it before, I'm decidedly unpracticed." Then his expression became serious again. "And I would not speak of it to anyone but you. I want you to understand."

He began walking back and forth across the room, his hands behind his back. "Well, where should I start? With our marriage, I suppose. You should know that it wasn't always bad between us. At least not very bad. In the beginning, Helen seemed to find a certain... contentment in my embrace—ah, how can I say these things?" He broke off and rubbed his temples, still pacing across the room. "She wasn't an ardent woman," he resumed after a moment. "That was apparent on our wedding night. But in the beginning, my embrace was at least not something she hated. I'm not certain when it began to change, but it wasn't very long after we were married, not more than a year or two. And I'm not sure why it was... why she didn't want me to touch her. I came to think it was children, that she didn't want more children, but I don't know. All I know is that she would freeze when I approached her. If I simply put my hand on her shoulder, I could feel her go rigid. I could hold her if I wanted, caress her... but she made it exceedingly clear that she... could barely tolerate me."

"Anyway, that night, the night it happened, perhaps she was more hesitant than usual. I say 'perhaps' because I'm not certain. I didn't sense that her demurrers were any different, but I confess I had been drinking. I'd had quite a bit to drink, and she tried to hold me at arm's length and said what she always said. She'd 'rather not.' Those were her words exactly. 'James, I'd rather not.' To me that was expected, like part of a ritual. It had no meaning for me apart from that."

"But for her, it was obviously otherwise. Afterward, she was hysterical, crying, shouting, saying I had raped her. I was astounded. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. She kept shouting over and over that I had to right to her without her consent. I was no better than an animal—I can still see her clench her teeth and spit that out at me." He shook his head at the memory. "When she had finally worn herself out, she went to Esther's room, and the next day she moved into the middle bedroom. It wasn't even finished yet, but she moved in there, and she never came back to my bed again. We were never together again as man and wife.

"I think of that night often. Particularly since Helen's death, it's been in my mind. I've gone over and over it, and I don't see any way I could have known that night was different. But I should have. How could I not have realized, when her desire to have me stay away from her was so intense?"

For a moment he seemed tired and despondent. Then his jaws clenched and anger glinted in his eyes. "But however grievously I erred, she was wrong to tell that woman. As soon as she did, I knew it. I would come upon the two of them together, and they would look at me as though I were beneath contempt, as though I were an animal, a disgusting animal. It was none of Amy Travers' affair!"

"James, why did you marry Helen? What made you choose her?"

He shook his head. "I was full of dreams about the West, and then I met Helen, and she was born here. That seemed a kind of miracle to me, and I fell in love immediately. In love with an idea, I suppose. It wasn't Helen's fault. It was mine entirely. I saw her as something she wasn't, and when I realized, I tried to adjust my expectations, but I never... ah, well, whatever. It's clear I never did understand."

"In love with an idea? What do you mean? What did you think she'd be like?"

He looked at her directly. "I imagined someone not bound by conventional notions, someone who could see through all the damnable hypocrisy that exists about men and women and human love. He gave a short laugh. "I was young, Sophie, young and foolish."

"Why did you think Helen...?" She stopped in mid-question, because she suddenly thought she understood. "It was the Indian blood, wasn't it? It was Indian women you had an idea of. They'd be passionate, they'd be eager lovers. And there was Helen, well enough dressed and educated to be acceptable to your fine friends, but with the Indian blood too—just a hint of things dark and passionate."

"Shut up, Sophie! You have no idea what you're talking about!"

"And was that it with me, too? Is that why you felt free with me? Do you think of me as a 'squaw' just as Rodman does?"

"Sophie, shut up!"

"Or what, James? Will you strike me? Is that what you'll do? Or push me down the stairs?"

They stood glaring at each other, until finally he spoke. "So that's what you think. I humiliate myself to explain, and you haven't understood a thing. You think I knocked her insensible? Dragged her into a barn like some country boy would? I didn't strike her. There were no bruises on her precious body. All I did was... ignore her refusal, pretend I hadn't heard it, just like I'd been pretending for years." He was so angry he was trembling. "Is that rape, Sophie? Is it?"

"Perhaps..."

"You think so, don't you? And you think a man who would 'rape' his wife might push her down the stairs too?" He took a step backward toward the door. "But there's a problem with your theory, quite a major one, I'm afraid. Amy Travers didn't tell you? She told you so much else, I'm surprised she neglected this. You see, I have an alibi, Sophie. My time is accounted for. I couldn't possibly have pushed Helen down the stairs because I was Ida Hamilton's."

He watched her closely, watched his words sink in. "If you have any doubts about my story, you can check with one of Ida's girls. Gaby's her name. Gabrielle Ross. You can check with her." He whirled on his heel and started for the door.

She was paralyzed by contrary impulses. She started to call him back, but anger and resentment directed her to silenced. He wanted to hurt her by telling her he'd been with a whore. He wanted to insult her. That was as important to him as telling her where he had been.

He paused in the doorway and turned toward her. "Please understand, I wouldn't want to discourage you from pursuing the idea that your sister was murdered. But really, shouldn't you find yourself a new suspect? Have you considered Miss Travers? If you haven't you ought. I can easily imagine Helen and Amy having a lovers' quarrel. Quite a violent one, even."

He was lashing out in every direction now, Sophie thought. Of course he was. It was understandable after the accusation she had leveled at him. "James, wait! Please?"

But even as she spoke, he was gone.

* * *

She dreamed it was the beast in the cave again. His mouth was open, his muzzle twitching with a growl that bared double fangs. But the animal was subtly changed. It was the eyes. They were light blue, a startling, opalescent blue. And the short powerful legs ended not in the splayed claws she expected, but in plump pink fingers, large and yet babylike.

She awoke with a start, feeling feverish and unstrung. And in every part of her was an aching sadness. James. She had lost him.

She turned her pillow and tried to empty her mind, but the effort was futile. Her thoughts kept going back and picking up bits and pieces of the quarrel with James. Helen's Indian blood—how much had that to do with the misconception James'd had of her? Perhaps nothing, perhaps a lot. And there was no way Sophie would ever know. Probably even James didn't know for certain. And what difference did it make anyway? Was an image of an Indian woman as warm and freely loving any more harmful than its opposite, the one most people had of white women—or respectable white women, at any rate?

Hardly had she thought the question, when she remembered Rodman's note: "MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, SQUAW!" and with the memory came an answer. Yes, the image of Indian women was more harmful because in the end it encouraged violence against them, put them in a class with prostitutes, made them part of a class which society felt no great compunction to protect. At least white women gained a measure of safety from the way they were usually thought of.

And then she remembered: it had been James who had pointed this out to her. He understood the images now, whether or not he had in the beginning. But he didn't understand Helen and what had happened between them. Helen, who'd had her own set of images, and then had said no to the preventive devices, and so the babies came and the miscarriages one after another. But still she had a concept of wifely duty—until a voice whispered to her, other women saying it was not her duty. A voice James didn't hear until the night when Helen screamed the words at him.

Had he been at fault? Some, certainly—and he knew it, and it preyed upon him, though he tried very hard not to let it. The very fact that the extent of his wrongdoing was vague probably called up the memories more often than if the case were clear-cut. Yes, she understood that. She knew well the temptation to assess and reassess one's guilt as long as there was the slightest possibility one could slip out of it. And the consequence was inevitably to reaffirm it.

Yes, she knew about that. In the early-morning hours the memories came so easily, and she let them come. Painful they were, but at least they distracted her from the fresher pain of reliving again and again the scene with James.

* * *

She and Albert had gone to a ball. That was the beginning, she remembered. Not just any ball, but an inaugural ball. Over the years, Albert had become one of the top four or five men at the Smithsonian, and because of his position, they received an engraved invitation to the supper dance following Ulysses S. Grant's first inauguration. Sophie had been thrilled at the prospect. In her mind's eye, she could still see the dress she had chosen so carefully. It was white and cherry-red satin, the perfect foil for her complexion, the dressmaker had said.

And she could remember their arrival at the new Treasury Building as if it had happened yesterday. When Albert checked their wraps, he thought he perceived some confusion in the cloakroom. It was a wet night. The edge of her skirt was already damp, and Albert, always a careful man, took the time to see exactly where their wraps were hung. He wouldn't risk their having to go abroad coatless on a rainy night.

Impatient with the delay, she edged into the hall until she was just inside the doorway where she could watch the entering crowd. Rotund politicians went by, looking exactly as though they'd stepped from a Nast cartoon. There were resplendent generals and elegantly dressed women. She counted at least seven Worth gowns—and then she saw Philip for the first time. He entered with a group, and as he talked to his friends, turning to one and then another, smiling, frowning, the air seemed charged around him. Almost visible glints of energy seemed to leap out from him.

He saw her looking at him and stopped in mid-sentence to return her gaze. That should have been the signal for her to look away, but she held his eyes, and as the crowd forced him to move on, he turned his head and kept her in his sight as long as he could. When finally she could no longer see him, she felt a great disappointment. Albert came, and she found some pretext to hurry him to the spot where she'd last seen Philip, but he seemed to have disappeared.

It wasn't until they approached the supper tables nearly an hour later that she saw Philip again. An acquaintance approached with him and introduced him. The hand Sophie put out to him was chill with nervousness, and she was glad to be wearing gloves. He too was gloved, but as he took her hand and bowed over it, she thought she could feel the warmth of his body passing into her own.

He took supper with them, asked polite questions, and told them about himself, describing in detail the illustrated monthly magazine he had just begun publishing. He didn't ask Sophie to dance, which disappointed her, but relieved her too. At least she didn't have to decide what to say, how to act when the two of them were away from Albert.

When the evening was over, she began to worry she might never have to decide, might never see him again. But within a week of the ball, he visited her and Albert in their Capitol Hill home. Scarcely had they greeted him when he made the proposal which had, he said, prompted the visit. Dymond's Monthly, the illustrated magazine he'd told them about? He wanted both Albert and Sophie to write articles for it. Albert could do the customs of primitive peoples, any customs, any people—Dymond's readers loved that kind of thing. And Sophie would do fashion, taking whatever approach she wished. Albert was doubtful at first, but Philip's enthusiasm quickly won him over.

Although Philip's offices were in New York, and Sophie and Albert lived in Washington, D.C., they saw him often, since he was in the Capital frequently and they had their articles to discuss with him. Sometimes Sophie's eyes would meet Philip's while they were talking, and though the conversation continued politely and impersonally, she could see in his gaze a longing which matched her own. Albert didn't seem to notice. He appeared to take great pleasure in Philip's company, and whenever Philip would leave, he always followed him down the porch stairs asking when he would come again.

After Philip had been their guest a few times, Albert left them alone together one evening. And then it happened on one evening and another. and then he began to leave them for even longer periods while he traveled. He always departed like a man secure nothing untoward would happen in his absence. He would put on his topcoat and bid them a warm good-bye, kissing Sophie, putting a hand on Philip's shoulder. If they came outside to see him off, he would inevitably lean from the carriage as it pulled away and shout a suggestion for a restaurant or a play they might enjoy. Did he think his affection for them would guarantee their chastity? Sophie wondered. Like a naked sword between medieval lovers?

It was Albert's benevolence which caused Sophie the only guilt she felt when she and Philip did become lovers. Most of the time when she was with Philip, the very strength of her desire for him seemed a sanction for loving him, an exculpation for unfaithfulness. But sometimes the idea of betraying Albert nagged at him.

"He's been so good to me, Philip, so kind to us both." This was one night when Philip was in Philadelphia.

"Sophie, he knows about us. He's known from the first time he saw us together."

"But if he knew, surely he wouldn't leave us alone together."

"He's an old man, Sophie. He knew he couldn't keep you forever. Someday you'd find yourself someone younger and leave him, so he's found a lover for you and arranged it so that you still share his home."

"No! I don't believe that. He's not the one who found you. I found you."

"But Albert invited me to stay here. Albert arranges for us to be alone."

"How can you say that? He likes you. You're his friend!"

"I suppose that under the circumstances it's better he like me than not."

She was quiet a moment, thinking. "You believe he's deliberately arranged the affair between us."

"I think he saw an affair was likely, and so he arranged it in the way that served him best. The man's no fool, Sophie."

"You can't believe what you're saying. I can't believe it. For one thing, you wouldn't let him do it, manipulate you like a puppet."

"Do I have a choice? Will you leave him, divorce him, and come live with me?"

"How... how could I? He's been so kind. He is so kind to both of us."

"Exactly my point. Dammit, Sophie. I hate the situation we're in, but he's managed it so that it's the only way. And it will be until you can see that he's using kindness to hold you here."

After that, she began to look at Albert more closely. But if he were wearing a mask, she could not see through it. He seemed a genuinely good man, just as he always had, happy to make her happy, happy simply to be with her. He seemed unchanged from their first days together, kindly and beneficent as ever.

Until the morning he wouldn't speak. He arose, dressed, even ate breakfast without uttering a word.

His silence made her uneasy: "Albert? Albert?"

The face he turned toward her was composed in an expression of calm indifference.

"Albert, what's wrong with you, Albert?" As she put her hands on his shoulders, something came into his eyes. He seemed to know for a moment who she was, but the knowledge brought pain. His face twisted, and then with visible effort he rejected whatever was tormenting him, thrust it away--and emptiness returned to his eyes, calm to his face.

Sophie sent for Philip at once, and he brought a doctor with him, the first of many they consulted. At first the medical men advised patience, but Albert did not improve. Each day he withdrew from her into himself, refusing to dress, refusing to eat, finally refusing to move from his bed. He lay there for days, his knees draw up to his head. The doctors became more and more pessimistic, shaking their heads and saying they could not understand what had happened to him. But Sophie knew. He had found out about her and Philip. She was sure of it.

Then the doctors began to say Albert would never improve, and his care began to be more than she could manage. She found a place for him in the Virginia countryside, and for months she visited him every week.

She continued to go there even after she knew there was no point to it. Albert improved enough so that he got up every day and walked with a nurse or sat with the other patients. With help, he would eat, but he wasn't there in the attenuated body sitting motionless in the sunshine. There was no one behind the blank, staring eyes. Finally she missed one week, then another, excusing herself because she had so much to do. The writing which had been a pastime was now a full-time vocation. She needed money, and she wouldn't take any from Philip except in exchange for her writing or for editing he asked her to do. At first there were one or two pieces he requested she go over, and then gradually she became the final editor for every article in his new publication, Dymond's Ladies' Magazine.

When Philip first started trying to convince her to divorce Albert and marry him, she wouldn't listen to him.

"It'll make no difference to him, Sophie. Don't you see that?"

She put her hands over her ears. "No more, Philip. Please, no more."

He was relentless. "He did it to himself, Sophie. He created a situation he thought he could live with, but he couldn't. He was a victim of his own machinations."

"He didn't do it, Philip. We did it to him."

It was almost two years before she agreed to divorce Albert and marry Philip. She let Philip think he had convinced her that he and she were not to blame, but in her heart of hearts, she still blamed herself for what had happened to Albert. Just herself, not Philip, because he so thoroughly believed in what he said, that it was, for him, the truth.

It was the biggest difference between them: Philip never second-guessed his own motivations. Over the next decade, as the Dymond publishing empire expanded and grew, she watched the way her would put the past together in a pattern that was comfortable, then turn his back on it. She wasn't like that. She kept picking up the pieces and fitting them together this way and that, always hoping to find she hadn't been wrong, that she had done the right thing. But in the end, she always knew she had been at fault, and the admission brought pain especially because she was aware that if she could redo it all, she would undoubtedly choose the same course.

Every autumn, she made her way to rural Virginia to see Albert. After Philip's death, it had been hard to go, but she went, and always she found Albert unchanged. He didn't even seem to age. It was as though time had stopped for him.

It had been almost a year now since she'd seen him. It seemed a much shorter time because she was so busy. So much happened, so much changed from day to day. One constant was the sadness she felt, sorrow for the hurt she had done to a kind and gentle man.

Was it something like this James felt about Helen? The situations were not the same. The people involved were very different. And yet for all the variety of ways there were for unique personalities to hurt one another, Sophie wondered if in the end the same feelings of guilt didn't envelop us all. If we could break out of remorse long enough to look closely at others, surely we would see fellow penitents tortured by similar sorrows for different sins. In a way, the world was a gigantic house of mirrors...

The thought broke off, leaving Sophie gasping, caught halfway between horror and laughter. House of Mirrors. Imagine her mind doing that to her, bringing her unsuspecting to this point, then pushing her right off the edge; letting her think such high-flown thoughts, then tossing her over into absurdity. The House of Mirrors. That's what Ida Hamilton's was called. That was the name of Cheyenne's most elegant whorehouse, the name of the place James said he had been the day Helen died.

- Chapter 13 -

Sally was chasing Tom around the dining table, or perhaps Tom was chasing Sally. Sophie suspected that neither of them knew who was the hunter and who was the hunted—and that neither of them really cared. Sally was screaming with delight, and Tom barked wildly. Esther watched them condescendingly, helping the hurrying maid, who was clearing the breakfast dishes, time her forays to the table so as to miss the small bodies hurtling round and round. Sophie had to shout to make herself heard. "Has your father left, then?"

She addressed the question to Esther, but Sally answered—without breaking stride. "He left before dawn!"

Sophie covered her ears with her hands. The noise was too much. "Sally," she shouted, "please find another game to play with Tom. A quieter game, please."

The din abated and Sophie sat down in the drawing room. Soon Sally approached. "Aunt Sophie," she boomed. "Esther says you're gonna take her to the circus this afternoon." Her words had an accusatory edge.

"Yes, and would you like to come with us? We'll be leaving right after lunch."

"That'd be swell! I'll get all my money together." She glanced at her sister to see if this mention of wealth had the hoped-for adverse effect, but Esther was paying no attention. "I'll get all my money," she repeated loudly, "and be ready after lunch."

And what, Sophie wondered as Sally skipped away, was she to do with herself all morning? She had still not sketched an outline for the article she meant to write on Cheyenne. She could occupy herself with that—except she was no longer sure what she wanted to write. The dreadful encounter with Wilson, her turbulent involvement with James—how could she write about homesteaders and cattlemen? How could she write anything, feeling as she did: restless, yet tired too. Enervated somehow.

Tom began barking excitedly, and Sophie looked up to see the new game Sally had invented. She had laid a small rag rug on the floor and run a measuring stick under it. She would expose the tip of the stick, then draw it back, concealing it from the dog's view. Tom's barking was heavy with conviction that the yardstick was alive and evil, but the activity of his tail betrayed that he also found its threat vastly entertaining. He barked furiously as the tip emerged from under the rug, and he lunged at it once or twice. When Sally pulled it back, Tom waited for its reappearance, his eyes intent on the rug edge, his front end lowered to give him a nearer view.

Sally magnanimously gave her sister a turn, and Esther pushed the end of the stick out again. Both children laughed raucously as Tom renewed his mad barking. All three of them were having an enormously good time—but the noise! How it grated on Sophie's nerves. Rather than ask them to be quiet again, she went outside.

She walked down the steps, down the long curved walk, and when she reached the street, turned and headed toward the Bellavance house. She would go visit Joe.

A maid answered the door, and Sophie showed herself upstairs. For fear of waking Joe, she didn't knock at the sickroom door, and when she entered, the nurse knitting beside the bed gave a small gasp. On the other side of the room, the Widow Bellavance twisted violently around. The old woman was standing beneath the Landseer stag, and when she saw Sophie, she stared at her for a moment. Neither of them spoke, and then the old woman fled from the room, knocking against Sophie as she left.

"Is she in here often?" Sophie asked the nurse.

"The last few days she's been comin' in to look at the picture. The poor daft old thing, she seems fond of it. Though I don't know, it is kind of a pretty picture, isn't it? He's lookin' right at you with those nice eyes."

Sophie was uneasy at the idea of the old woman in Joe's room, but there was nothing she could say about it. This was, after all, the Widow Bellavance's home. As soon as the nurse had left, Sophie made sure the door was latched securely, then sat down beside Joe. He was asleep. He seemed to sleep most of the time, and it was probably just as well. The one time she had seen him awake, he was confused and frightened. Better for him to sleep.

She stayed less than half an hour, a much shorter time than she had intended. The sickroom was too warm, and the lassitude she was fighting grew almost overwhelming. She needed to move her limbs, to walk, and she knew where she wanted to go.

She left the Bellavance house and walked back down Ferguson Street, past the Stevensons' and heading toward town. When she reached the Presbyterian Church, she turned left and continued down the block until she was directly in front of a group of new and expensive row houses. She paused and looked across the street. There it was. Ida Hamilton's House of Mirrors, though one would not immediately guess the function of a rather prim-looking brick building. But Sophie knew. And she knew inside was a woman with whom James had slept. She tried to imagine him making love to... Gabrielle? Wasn't that her name? ...but she couldn't. She had no mental picture of the woman. Was she pretty? What was she like? What would it be like to talk to her?

It suddenly occurred to Sophie that Gabrielle might be easier for her to talk with than the WCTU women were. About some subjects certainly. Gabrielle wouldn't freeze at mentions of preventive devices. By her profession she admits being a sexual creature, Sophie thought, an admission I also make, though not publicly and not at such cost to my reputation. Sophie pondered the moment why she had been able to remain a member of polite society despite having violated so many of its rules, and she decided the reason was her position. As head of Dymond Publications, she could impose her will on others, and as long as she could do that, the world could not entirely cast her down with its opinions.

An insight came to her: this is what men have always known. This is why they can behave privately in ways that violate the public morality and not be ruined. Because they have power. And then, as if to confirm her thought, a well-dressed man came around the corner, pounded the heavy brass knocker on the door of the House of Mirrors, and went inside. Sophie was seized with a crazy urge to follow him, to go to Ida Hamilton's, find Gabrielle, and talk to her.

But someone would see her. There would be gossip. It might even end up in the newspapers. She shuddered at the idea of such publicity, imagining what a gossip sheet like Town Talk would make of it. She remembered how it had been a few years ago when her association with Adah had come to light, and she had no stomach to go through such a thing again. The world might not be able to cast her down with its opinion, but why taunt it to renewed effort?

She forced herself to walk on, and when after several blocks she came to House Street, she turned left. Soon she found herself in front of Amy Travers' home, and decided to stop.

Miss Travers answered her knock almost immediately. The schoolteacher looked exhausted. Her eyes were two dark holes, her braids loose so that her gray-brown hair was falling around her face. The ruching at her collar was soiled and her dress badly wrinkled, as though it had been slept in. "Sophie. I didn't expect a visitor so early."

"I was paying no attention to the time," Sophie apologized. "I was out for a stroll and found myself in front of your home."

Miss Travers made no move to invite Sophie in. There was an awkward silence, and Sophie cast about for something to say, something of substance—small talk seemed inappropriate under the scrutiny of those intense eyes. Why was she here anyway? Sophie asked herself. What had led her to turn up House Street and stop at Miss Travers'? She gave little weight to James' suggestion about a lovers' quarrel between Helen and Miss Travers. He had simply been striking out, trying to hurt as he had been hurt. But there was one thing which troubled her.

"Do you remember when we first talked?" she asked Miss Travers. "When I asked you about Helen's death?"

"Yes." Amy Travers' eyes flicked back over her shoulder, and she closed the door slightly.

Sophie found her actions puzzling, but ignored them and plunged ahead. "I asked you where James was when Helen died, and you said you had no idea."

The schoolteacher nodded, her eyes flicking back again. Then she stepped out onto the porch and pulled the door closed behind her.

Why was she behaving this way? Sophie wondered. Was there something or someone in the house Miss Travers didn't want her to see? "Is it possible he was at Ida Hamilton's?" Sophie asked.

"Yes, he was there."

"But why didn't you...?"

"It didn't seem necessary. Why risk embarrassing the children? Why dirty Helen's memory?"

"I see," Sophie said, thinking this made the second thing Miss Travers had known about James which she hadn't revealed. First she hadn't been willing to talk about what he'd done to Helen, and then she had kept secret his presence at Ida Hamilton's when Helen died. Her knowledge of these things no doubt explained the schoolteacher's disdain for James. And perhaps also his odd unwillingness to confront her. Even a man as strong-willed as he would probably find it difficult to face down someone aware of his most grievous failings.

"If you don't mind," Miss Travers said, "I'd rather we talked later. I'll be over to visit the children this afternoon."

"I'm taking them to the circus at one o'clock."

"This evening, then. Sometime around eight."

"Of course." Until Sophie was well up the walk, Miss Travers stood on the porch as though she were guarding the door to her home. Why would she do that? Sophie wondered. Who could be in the house? Or what? And why didn't Amy Travers want her to know?

* * *

"Look, there's the giraffe! You can see his head!" Sally began shouting while they were still at the ticket wagon. Sophie pushed three dollars across to the man inside, and as soon as he had given her three tickets, Sally dashed toward the roped-off area where the giraffe swayed gracefully above the zebras and horses. Sophie and Esther followed at a more sedate pace, and by the time they'd reached the giraffe, Sally had gone on to the elephants. They were nearby, also in an area fenced off by ropes, but for extra measure, each of them was fastened by a large chain to a thick stake sunk deep in the ground.

Next came a row of gaily painted wheeled cages, recently off-loaded from huge flatbed cars standing in the nearby railroad tracks. The cages were gleaming, and the sunshine in which they sparkled was growing warmer by the minute. It had sucked the last moisture out of the air, and as Sally ran along the row of cages, she kicked up little clouds of dust.

"Come look at this one!" the girl called out from in front of a red-and-gold case with a jungle scene painted on the side. "You gotta see the lions!"

Esther hung back a little, and Sophie suspected she understood why. She herself had always been a little saddened by the sight of wild creatures in captivity, and she guessed Esther shared her feelings. But no such notion troubled Sally. One of the lions was lying with his head very near the bars, and she roared at him, producing quite an impressive sound, discouraged not a whit when the beast ignored her.

As they moved on to see the ostrich, Sophie was suddenly and roughly bumped from behind. She turned to see Jake Rodman's smirking face. "Why, Mrs. Dymond. I do beg your pardon. How clumsy of me!"

She felt certain he had bumped her on purpose, but why? Simply to annoy her? She turned away from him without speaking and walked on to Esther and Sally.

"Look Aunt Sophie, let's go there." Sally had spotted a sideshow advertising "Marvelous Living Curiosities." The ticket booth was framed by paintings of freaks: a woman with snakes coiled around her, a giantess with a tiny man sitting on her lap, a creature who appeared to be half-human and half-ape. A barker in a checkered suit sat in the middle of these portraits and worked to enlarge the small crowd he had gathered. "If you're fainthearted, pass right on by," he shouted. "The man-ape from Borneo isn't a sight for the cowardly!"

"I'll use my money, Aunt Sophie," Sally implored. "I'll buy your ticket. I'll even pay for Esther."

"No. We have to hunt if we want good seats." There probably was time, but Sophie would not go into the sideshow tent. Wasn't it enough that nature played such cruel tricks? It was insult piled on outrage that the only way for such people to survive was by displaying their deformities, and she had no wish to view it.

She and the two girls entered the main tent in time to get seats near the performance ring. The bleachers filled up quickly, mostly with women and children, but there were a fair number of men too, even a few cowboys. It wasn't just their clothes that made them recognizable. When they took off their hats, there was a telltale line across the forehead, white above, where the broad-brimmed hats gave protection, red beneath, where the wind and sun of spring roundup had burned.

As Sophie looked over the crowd, she saw Lydia Swerdlow sitting a few rows above. She had twin boys with her that looked to be about Sally's age. Sophie smiled and made a small wave. Lydia nodded at her gravely.

It was hot in the tent, and the ringmaster, who took the center to announce the grand entry, kept wiping his forehead. He introduced the animals, and while the plumed horses pranced by with their tails held high and the elephants lumbered past with gilded harnesses and blankets, he repeatedly wiped a handkerchief over his glistening brow. He introduced the clowns, who were playing in a ragtag band, and as they passed in a cacophony of horns and drums, it was off with the hat and up with the handkerchief again. Sophie wondered how the poor man survived when the circus played in humid climates.

It made her hot to watch him, and she turned her attention to the circling parade. She saw she had not escaped the sideshow. Several freaks were parading in the grand entry: a midget—"Dr. Petty," the ringmaster called him; a giantess known as "the female Samson"; and an albino family, father, mother, and daughter, all with startlingly white hair. Sophie looked over at Sally and saw that the child was particularly taken with Dr. Petty. She laughed at his baggy pants, at the tumble he took when a clown made a swipe at him.

The ringmaster introduced the first act, a cheerful contortionist in green spangled tights and tunic, who seemed to have an extra joint somewhere in the area of his breastbone. The crowd gasped as he bent backward until his head touched his backside. He smiled, seeming greatly to enjoy doing to his body what it seemed no human body should do.

Esther leaned over Sally. "Aunt Sophie, I just wonder. How do you think he found out he could do that?"

"Do you suppose he just got bored one day and said to himself, 'I think I'll see if I can bend in two backward'?"

"What? What, Aunt Sophie? What did you say?" Sally demanded. Esther repeated for her what Sophie had said, and Sally seemed satisfied. Esther and Sophie smiled at one another over the top of her head.

The elephants were next. A brightly sequined woman named Flora put them through their paces, had them sitting up as though they were tiny poodles. Then the elephants left, and the albino family came into the ring. Even in the dim light of the tent, they were squinting. The white hair, the pink eyes, the pale, mottled skin—they looked so lost, so wrong, Sophie thought. She wanted to rush them to a cool room somewhere and turn off the lights and pull the shades.

Mother, father, and daughter began to sing, and Sophie tried to listen objectively, but it was impossible. The almost physical discomfort she felt made her remember the first freak show she had ever seen. There had been an Indian in it, a dull-eyed, swarthy-skinned man on display as "The American Savage." She hadn't thought of him for years, but as she did so now, she wondered if he accounted for her aversion to sideshows. But there was something too about the freaks being so helpless, as much at the mercy of others as the circus animals were. Only there were no gaily painted and carved wagons for the freaks. The cages in which they lived out their lives were painfully, horribly grotesque.

The albino family sang one sentimental air after another, their voices thin and reedy, their faces unsmiling. Because the light bothered them, they kept their eyes down, but as they concluded "Home, Sweet Home," the woman suddenly looked up, and her eyes found Sophie's. They were pink, edged with white lashes, unlike any Sophie had ever seen, and yet they seemed to say, "I am like you. I am like you."

Without knowing why she did, Sophie looked away.

When the family had finished the song and was leaving the show ring, Sophie scanned the crowd. Was she the only one to react with anything besides curiosity? It seemed so. Face after face was turned toward the ring, face after face avidly watching the exiting figures. Face after face—except one, and it was turned toward her, smiling, staring. Jake Rodman. How dare he? Hadn't he been told to leave her alone?

She turned her back to the show and watched distractedly as the sluggish lions performed. When they were led off, a diminutive figure wearing a lion's mane ran into the ring. It might have been a child, but Sophie suspected it was Dr. Petty. He circled the ring once and then began to jump through the lion's hoop, back and forth, back and forth, hypnotizing the crowd with his motion. Suddenly another figure appeared, a huge figure which seemed even larger when juxtaposed to the tiny lion. It was the female Samson, and the small "lion" began to stalk her. As the huge woman fled from him in feigned terror, the crowd around Sophie roared with laughter. Sophie was horrified. The huge woman acting so helpless—it was awful, partly because she really did seem so terribly vulnerable. Her face was an almost normal size, but at the neck she swelled to grotesque proportions. Her hands were almost delicate, but at the wrists she began to expand and lengthen to extraordinary dimensions. These malproportions gave her such an unhealthy look that Sophie shuddered. And as she did so, she caught sight of Jake Rodman again. He was still staring at her.

After the performance, Sophie let the children talk her into stopping at Ellis' soda fountain on Eddy Street. Esther and Sally both asked for ice cream, and a young man in a stiff white apron put generous scoops into two molded glass dishes. Sophie requested a cherry phosphate, and he mixed red syrup with soda water, adding a dash of phosphate from a squirt bottle. Then he planed a large block of ice and put the cold shavings into the drink. When they had all been served at a round table, Sophie reached into her pocket for her change purse. It wasn't there. She checked her other pocket, but it too was empty. "I... I don't seem to have my purse."

"I'll pay for it, Aunt Sophie," Sally volunteered. "Don't worry, I can pay for it." To prove her point, she pulled several wadded-up bills from her skirt pocket. The young man took one of them and smoothed it out on the tabletop. When he returned a moment later, Sally made a great show of retrieving her coins from the ornate change dish he sat in front of her.

Sophie drank her phosphate and thought about her purse. What could have happened to it? Then she remembered Jake Rodman and the way he had jostled her. Had he taken it? But why would he? And how dare he? Hadn't James told him to leave her alone?

"Wanna see me give myself a headache?" Sally asked, breaking into Sophie's thoughts. And before Sophie had time to answer, Sally took a huge bite of ice cream, waited wide-eyed for a moment, then scrunched up her face in pain and grabbed the side of her head. "There it is!" she shouted triumphantly.

"I'm going to tell you a little-known fact," Sophie said, leaning forward. "It is so little known, I may be the only one who knows it. Listen, now: ice headaches do not start in the head, as you might think, but in the chest."

Both girls looked at her doubtfully.

"No, it's true. They start right here." She patted a place high on her chest. "This is where you feel them first."

As she knew they would, both girls took great bites of ice cream, and in the second before they scrunched their faces in pain, she saw the light of discovery in their eyes: ice headaches do start in the chest!

The girls finished before Sophie and clamored to go outside. She agreed to meet them in a few minutes at the waiting carriage. She finished her phosphate, thinking of Rodman again. Perhaps he was trying to bother her just enough so she was aware of it, but not enough so that she really had anything to report. She had no proof that he had stolen her purse, after all. All she could say for certain was that she had seen him at the circus, and he had jostled her and stared at her.

When she left Ellis', she saw Esther, but not Sally. Esther pointed down the block to where Sally was playing tag with two boys. Sophie called to her.

"In a minute!" Sally called back.

"It's going to be hard for her when she has to put on long skirts," Esther observed of her sister.

"She has a while yet. But what about you? It's not that far off for you."

"I don't mind so much. But how's Sally going to play tag with a long skirt on? Miss Travers says she'll suffer when she gets her long skirts."

"Does Miss Travers have any suggestions for making it easier?" Sophie could imagine the schoolteacher encouraging Sally to play quietly with her dolls, trying to change her now so that adult female life wouldn't come as such a shock.

"No, she just says it's plain gonna be hard." Esther paused. "Even if she did have some ideas, I don't think Sally'd pay her much attention."

"Doesn't she like her?"

Esther shrugged. "She doesn't like hugging and kissing, and Miss Travers is always doing that. And sometimes..."

"What?"

"Well, she says things like, 'Your father never hugs and kisses you, does he?' But that doesn't bother Sally as much as..." She broke off. "Look, who's that Sally's with?" At the next corner, Sally was talking with an unshaven fellow standing beside a tarpaulin-covered cart. After a few moments of earnest conversation, the man lifted the corner of the tarp and Sally climbed up on one of the wheels to have a look inside. She lifted the edge of the tarp and peered under it intently. Then she jumped down and ran toward Esther and Sophie.

"You gotta see!" she shouted. "He captured it way up near the Little Popo Agie and was bringin' it to the circus. Come on, you just gotta see!"

As Sophie and Esther approached the cart, Sally climbed up on the wheel and threw back the tarpaulin. Inside was a tangle of fur, horns, and limbs. "It's got eleven legs," Sally shouted excitedly. "And two heads! He thinks it's some kinda antelope." A horrible stench emanated from the dead creature, and Sophie took an involuntary step backward, covering her nose.

The unshaven fellow caught her expression and seemed embarrassed. "I reckon it's gettin' a little high. Critter was alive when I captured it. I was bringin' it to the circus, but damn thing died on me, and the circus don't want nuthin' to do with it now." His face lightened. "But I been showin' it to folks on the street, and they think it's somethin', all right. That fella right over there, he said he was sure you'd like a look. Ain't it somethin', though?"

Sophie looked across the street where the unshaven fellow indicated. On the opposite corner, leaning against a bank building in an attitude of studied indolence, was a small man in dark clothes. When he saw her look at him, Jake Rodman smiled and nodded in her direction.

- Chapter 14 -

Sally never perceived anything was wrong. She ran back to the waiting carriage, swinging around a light pole on the way, absorbed in her own good spirits. But Esther knew Sophie was upset. She walked alongside her in sympathetic silence, glancing up at her from time to time.

How did he dare? Sophie kept asking herself. What gave Jake Rodman such arrogance? This was too much. He had crossed over the line. The harassment was so obvious now, she would take it to James when he came back. And then, without warning, the thought she had kept submerged shot to the surface: James would come back before she had to leave, wouldn't he? He'd said the better part of a week, and that was time enough for her—but that was before they had quarreled.

They arrived at the Stevenson house, and when Sophie headed upstairs, Esther followed. The girl's expression was worried, and Sophie suddenly felt selfish about the way she was caught up in her own concerns. She searched for something commonplace to say, something to restore a sense that things were as usual. "I think we should change before dinner, don't you? I'm all over dust."

"Which dress are you going to wear? Would you wear the cream-and-lavender one?"

"Is that your favorite?"

"I think so. And that little gold butterfly brooch. Can you wear that too?"

As they walked along the landing, Sophie's glance fell on the mahogany secretary. The writing surface of it was still down, but she was struck that it was so obviously unused. There were no papers stacked up, no notes tucked away in pigeonholes. Except for ink, pen, and blotting paper, the desk part was entirely empty. "Esther, didn't your mother keep her correspondence inside the secretary?"

"Mmmmm-huh. She kept it very nearly organized."

"But where is it now? The secretary's empty except for the books on top."

"Miss Travers cleaned it out. She came over the day after the funeral and cleaned out Mother's closets and her chest of drawers and the desk."

"She took all the clothes and papers?"

Esther nodded. "She was going to give the clothes to the church for poor people. I don't know what she meant to do with all the papers. Did you want to see them?"

"I would have liked to."

"Wait a minute. Maybe there's something." She ran on up the stairs to the second floor and opened a closet near the master suite. "Oh, it's not there anymore," she said in a disappointed voice. "There were some things I thought Miss Travers had missed. Right after Mother died, I remember one of the maids went through the house tidying up because, you know, people were coming over and everything. Anyway, I saw her take a bunch of things that'd been lying around and put them in an old bandbox. I think the loose papers off the secretary went in there. And then the maid put the box here in the linen closet to get it out of sight. But it's not here now."

"Don't concern yourself about it. It's not important." But Sophie was not at all sure. As she undressed, she thought of Amy Travers standing on the porch as if to prohibit entry to her house. Could it be that Miss Travers had things of Helen's in her house that she didn't want Sophie to see? Things she'd spirited away later? Or was there another explanation for the schoolteacher's strange behavior? How Sophie would like a look at Miss Travers' parlor, just a glance through the window next to the front door to see what was in there, to find out what it was Miss Travers didn't want her to see.

She could do it. There was a way. Miss Travers had said she was coming over after dinner, and Sophie could go to her house then. Yes, she could do it. She would do it, she decided, hanging up the yellow dress Connie had laid out and taking out her dark dress instead. Then she remembered her promise to Esther, and she also took the cream-and-lavender dress from the wardrobe. It was important she wear it to dinner as Esther had asked. And the Tiffany butterfly brooch, too. She could put on the dark dress afterward.

As soon as she could get away from the dinner table, she went upstairs to change, then quietly left the Stevenson house. She didn't take the quickest route to Amy Travers' house, but instead walked several blocks away from town before turning toward House Street. The way she was taking was more isolated, a less likely route for encountering anyone, but as she cut through the new city park, she began to think perhaps it was too isolated. The park was planted with saplings, all of them six to seven feet tall. As she followed a diagonal path through the park, it wasn't the rustling leaves she found frightening as much as the fact that each of the trees was the size of a large human being. She kept catching movement out of the corner of her eye, turning to see what it was, and finding herself confronted with a swaying, man-sized shape. It happened several times, until she could feel her heart thundering in her chest. She tried forcing herself not to react to the trees, but the skin at the base of her neck kept prickling. She kept thinking someone was watching her, following her, until finally she began to run. She didn't stop until she had exited from the park onto Warren Street.

Amy Travers' house was a block over and a block down. Sophie had decided the best approach was a direct one, and so when she arrived at Miss Travers', she mounted the stairs to the porch, went up to the door, and knocked. It wasn't the kind of action likely to arouse suspicion should a neighbor be watching, and it would help her make sure Miss Travers had indeed left.

"Yes, it's Sophie Dymond," she said to the imaginary voice. Still in a panic, still pretending, she turned the knob as though the voice had invited her in. Then she realized her playacting would soon fool no one. The door would be locked, and why would a voice from inside bid her enter a locked door? The person in the street would have to wonder at that.

But the door was open. She heard the latch click, and she pushed inward. She stepped inside and hastily shut the door behind her.

It was darker here than outside, and she had to wait for her eyes to adjust. After a moment, she saw that the room she was in was wallpapered with stiff forget-me-nots. On one wall was a rack holding a row of plates; below it was a tufted sofa with claw feet. In the center of the room was a bow-legged table covered with a fringed cloth, and on the farthest wall, behind the table from where Sophie was standing, was a large photograph of Helen, framed by a hair wreath biggest than any Sophie had ever seen. She moved across the room, around the table, and put a hand on the wreath. Her touch set it quivering like a giant spider's web. It looked like the spider itself, she thought with a shudder, dark and bristling and venomous. Helen's hair. It must be Helen's hair woven into a frame for Helen's picture. But so large a wreath, so much hair. She shivered again, imagining Amy Travers leaning over her sister's body with a pair of shears. Then she looked at the wreath closely and saw that the hair tied and wound and braided onto its wire skeleton was of different colors. The small, swollen buds were a light brown, almost blond; the padded flowers somewhat darker; and the leaves darkest of all, an ash-brown color. So perhaps it was not all Helen's. Just the leaves. They were Helen's color.

There was a smell in the room, a heavy sweet fragrance, which Sophie began to find overpowering. It emanated from a trunk set just below the wreath-framed picture, and when she bent to open it, the tongue of the metal fastening made a loud rasping noise. Startled, she hesitated a moment, then raised the lid. The smell was stronger than ever, and Sophie saw that it came from pomanders nestled amid delicate lace and freshly ironed cottons--Helen's clothes! Her sister's clothes were lovingly packed away with spices and perfumes and set beneath her picture as though... as though it were a sacred shrine.

She lifted several layers of neatly folded undergarments from the trunk. Below them was a purple velvet needlework box with gilded strapwork mounts, and beside it a tissue-encased roll of cloth, which Sophie took to the table and carefully unrolled. It was an almost completed sampler. Flowers were being worked around the edges in stitches so delicate the cloth might have been a page from an illuminated manuscript. Except it was not so bright, Sophie thought. It was more subtle, and with depth and texture. In the middle were the words: "How blest the sacred tie that binds/ Its union sweet according minds!" And in the lower-right corner, penciled in but not embroidered, "Helen to Amy, 1885."

Sophie rolled the sampler back up, but when she started to replace it in the trunk, she saw it had been resting on top of two ribbon-tied bundles of letters. She paused uncertainly, then set the sampler aside, gathered up the letters, and took them to the sofa, where she untied one of the satin ribbons and picked an envelope at random. It was plain, unaddressed, and a notepaper with Amy Travers' perfectly formed script slid out easily. The note was short. "Helen, my joy and my beloved," it began:

"Why do we stay? I have no reason beyond a few pupils who would miss me briefly, and your life would be infinitely better away from him. Let us go away together, away from the anger and imperatives of men. We shall find ourselves a secluded bower where they dare not venture. There will be only the two of us, and we shall linger through long afternoons of sweet refinement. In the evenings I shall read to you while you work your cross-stitch in the firelight. And then we shall go to bed, our bed, my dearest girl..."

Sophie read on through the letter, then glanced up at the top. It was dated May 1885, a little over a year ago.

Mechanically she pulled out another note. This one was dated a few months later:

"The sampler you have began with Mrs. Barbauld's hymn—know it will be a gift I shall treasure always. How well her words describe our love—or the way it would be if we could remove all impediments, leave this place, and join together as the Ladies of Llangollen did. Then our union would be complete. Our lives would flow together, twin streams merging into a single river."

Sophie kept looking at the note when she had finished it. She had no idea what the reference meant, who the Ladies of Llangollen were, but it didn't matter. The note was clear. Miss Travers wanted Helen to run off with her, to leave James, perhaps the children, so they could go away together. But surely she couldn't have been serious. This was fantasy, wasn't it? But even if it were, Sophie argued to herself, this was fantasy of a sort one did not expect to find in correspondence addressed to one's sister. A woman pleading with another woman to go off with her—one might suppose it the plot of a French novel! But even as the thought occurred, Sophie knew it wasn't quite correct, because the letters were so unselfconscious; the writer seemed to have no awareness she suggested anything shocking. The ingenuousness reminded Sophie of something, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was.

She untied the other bundle, observing that these letters were older, with a more fragile feel to them; some had even begun to yellow: The first she picked up was in an envelope which had been mailed to Helen in Cheyenne. She took out the letter and saw at the top: "August 1874," the date of Helen's marriage. She ran her eye down the page. "Being separated from you has been an agony," she read, "and now I must endure uncertainties as well. Will you still love me? Or 'will you rent our ancient love asunder,/ To join with men in scorning your poor friend?"

The iambs were familiar. They were the lines from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the ones Amy Travers had underlined in the book Sophie still had on her bedside table. Had the thin leather volume been a wedding present, perhaps? A gift to Helen from a lonely schoolteacher hundreds of miles away at Fort Martin?

Wanting to know when the correspondence had begun, Sophie took the first letter from the bundle. It was quite dark in the room now, and she had to angle the envelope toward the window before she could see that it too had been mailed to Helen in Cheyenne. It must be from when Helen first visited the Bellavances in Cheyenne, Sophie thought, from around the time she met James. She started to read the note, but had so much difficulty making out the words, she moved to the window. There in the moonlight, she read:

"My darling Helen:

I have thought of you incessantly since your departure, and I found comfort in your letter since I am now assured that your thoughts have also been with me. But knowing that you are unhappy at our separation is a double-edged sword, one that brings pain as well as pleasure, for I suffer when you suffer, and your anguish only increases the agony your absence causes. How I long to see you again, to hold you, to kiss you a thousand times. My darling, my own precious darling. What I would whisper in your ear were you here this moment with me.

Your own Helen"

* * *

Sophie carefully folded the note and put it back in its envelope, remembering as she did so the notes that Helen and Miss Travers used to exchange at Fort Martin, the long hours they had closeted themselves away together. These letters were not the beginning, she thought. The beginnings were back further, back when Helen was a child and Miss Travers, only a girl herself, had come as a schoolteacher to Fort Martin. Almost involuntarily, Sophie's eyes went to the wreath on the wall. Blending with its own shadows in the darkness, it seemed even larger than before. It was all Helen's hair, Sophie realized. It had been collected over a lifetime so that one could trace its gradual darkening, its shading from the pale ghostly color of childhood to an ashy brown. A picture, startlingly clear, came into Sophie's mind: she saw Miss Travers sitting on the tufted sofa, her lap full of varying shades of Helen's hair, and the plump, babylike fingers selected and twisted, moved in and out. Sophie shook her head, refusing to go as far as her thoughts wanted to carry her. But it was wrong, all of it. The wreath, the picture, the trunk of memorabilia. Unmistakably wrong. And Miss Travers must know, for she hadn't wanted Sophie to see this room, this shrine.

With a start, Sophie realized she had no idea how long she had been at Miss Travers'. She looked at her watch—well past nine o'clock. Miss Travers might come back at any moment. Hastily Sophie tied the letters together again and put them back in the trunk, covering them with the sampler and the scented linen. She moved to the door. With her hand on the knob, she glanced around the room. The trunk lid! She had left the trunk lid up. Quickly she closed it, then opened the door just enough so she could see the street in front. It seemed to be empty, so she moved out onto the porch, shutting the door behind her. She hurried down the stairs and turned left, then left again in another block, heading for the park. She had almost entered it when she sensed she was no longer alone. She glanced back and saw someone walking slowly up the street toward her.

She had no idea who it might be. The moon was behind a cloud now, and it was too dark to see. Probably the person had nothing at all to do with her; nevertheless, she stepped quickly into the park and walked hurriedly up the gravel path.

After she had gone several hundred feet, she stopped, stepped to the side, and looked back to where she had entered. He was down there—or she, whoever it was, was down there—hovering uncertainly at the bottom of the path. Then the shadowy figure disappeared. If it had been someone after her, Sophie thought with relief, he would have followed her into the park.

Then suddenly she saw the layout of the park in her mind's eye. There were other paths like the one she was on, all of them radiating from a circular path which went around the park's grassy center. The shadowy figure could enter at any of the paths and lie in wait for her at the center.

She turned and ran further into the park. She would cross the point where the paths came together before anyone else could reach it. If she were fast enough, no one would be able to intercept her.

When she came to the circular gravel path, she decided against following it around the central area. She would save time by cutting across instead. She ran between two saplings and started across the round grassy area—where her left foot slipped into a prairie-gopher hole.

She fell hard, knocking the wind out of her. She lay on the grass and tried to catch her breath, tried to assess the pain shooting up her leg. Had she broken something? Should she try to move her foot? She lay still for a moment, listening to the sounds of the night, thinking how loud each one was to her, but how silent the park must seem to anyone outside it. She doubted anyone outside could hear her if she cried out, not with the close-planted saplings and the grass muffling her cries. How long before her absence would be noted? And then how long before anyone thought of looking in the park for her?

What was that? A footstep? Had she heard a footstep on the gravel path? Or had it been the rustling of the leaves again? Fear pricked at her and she forced herself to move her foot. New pain shot up her leg, but not, she thought, the kind she would feel if a bone were broken. Still, she couldn't walk. The wrenched ankle hurt too much. But she thought she could crawl, and then she began to form a plan. It made no sense for her to stay here. Those who wanted to find her wouldn't think to look here, and if the shadowy stranger came, she was quite helpless. She needed to make her way to where people were, and she tried to think what lay on the outskirts of the park. She didn't remember seeing anything across from it on the north and east sides, but across on the other two sides there were houses, and if she remembered correctly, they were clustered near the southwest corner. That was where she should head.

She gathered up her skirts with her left hand and crawled toward the circular path, intending to follow it around a short distance before taking the path which headed where she wanted. But the gravel bit painfully into her flesh, and even before she reached the path which led where she wanted, she knew she couldn't do it this way. She stopped and held her right hand close to her face. She could see the torn flesh, the dark stains of blood. Then she heard a sound, and she scrambled awkwardly off the path, frantic for the shelter of the saplings. She lay curled on the ground listening, listening, but she heard only the leaves rustling above her.

She would not venture onto the path again. Instead, she crawled alongside it in an awkward three-legged manner. She would put her right hand forward, then her right leg, then bring the left even with it. But she kept her weight on her right knee as much as she could because of the pain when she let her left knee support her. As she made her way along, she thought about the noises she had heard, the overwhelming sense she had that someone was pursuing her. It could be imagination, of course. Or it could be Jake Rodman trying to frighten her again. But the shadowy figure she'd seen at the pathway entrance—there'd been something... feminine about it, hadn't there? Amy Travers? Could Miss Travers have found out she was in her house, that she had read the letters?

Sophie was near exhaustion when she saw the street. There were lights in the houses on the other side, but she was so drained by fright and effort, she wondered if she could cry out loudly enough to draw attention. And then she saw the barbed wire. Of course, she thought. To keep cattle and antelope out, and any other animals that might be tempted to graze in the park, the perimeter was fenced except where the pathways entered. She approached the barbed wire and decided she would crawl under. That would be easier than braving the gravel pathway again. She lay on her right side and worked her head and right arm under the fence, until her skirts became entangled. She tried to free them, but no sooner would she get them loose from the fence in one place than they would become caught in another.

The effort was too much. She put her head down on her arm, wanting to sleep, to retreat from pain and exhaustion. She wouldn't try anymore. She didn't need to. It wouldn't be long before they began looking for her, and now she would be easy enough to find, sprawled half in the roadway as she was.

Footsteps! This time there was no mistake about it. She jerked her head up and saw a huge figure approaching, a huge female figure, skin pale in the moonlight, an unreal color, almost blue. Looked at from the street where Sophie was lying, the woman's huge neck tapered even more oddly into the face of almost normal size. And when the hands reached down, it seemed some perverse trick of perspective that they should balloon so quickly into those monstrous oversized arms.

The hands grew nearer and nearer, and Sophie screamed, waiting for the hands, thinking they would close around her throat. Instead there was a gentle touch on her cheek and the giantess began to speak in a soft voice. "It's all right, Mrs. Dymond. You don't need to worry none. I just wanted to bring you your purse. A gentleman asked me to. But I think maybe you're needin' some help.

Sophie found herself weeping, crying like a small child. And the hands which had seemed so threatening released her from the wire, and the huge arms gathered her up.

- Chapter 15 -

"Now, now, you'll be all right. Don't you cry."

"Why are you here? Why? I don't understand." Within the warm protection of the giantess' arms, it was difficult to want to understand. Sophie felt like shutting her eyes and letting the rhythm of the giant woman's stride lull her to sleep. Indeed, in some way she felt she already was asleep, dreaming an ancient dream in the moonlight.

"It was that little fella in dark clothes. He said I should follow you and give you back your purse."

"Rodman? Was his name Jake Rodman?"

"He didn't give a name, but he was a little fella, and he seemed half-lazy, slow-like, you know. Maybe I shouldna let him talk me into it, but he said I'd be helpin'."

Sophie saw a troubled look pass over the woman's face, and suddenly it was very important to her that the giantess not be upset. "You did help me. You did. Thank you very much."

The woman stopped for a moment to shift Sophie's weight, and as she did so, she looked down and smiled. The effect, Sophie thought dreamily, was beatific. For a moment the woman's size did not seem grotesque, but magical.

When they arrived at the Stevenson house, Honoria--for such Sophie found the giantess' name to be--did not wish to come inside. She turned Sophie over to Connie and Mrs. Syms at the front door, and then disappeared into the night. The maid and the housekeeper bathed Sophie and put her to bed, where she immediately fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

* * *

When she awoke the next morning, anger began to build within her. She had been tricked again, duped. She kept thinking how she had not only fallen into a trap, but how she had done so in truly spectacular fashion. It galled her to imagine Rodman's satisfaction when he heard, for she was sure it was he who had set in motion the events of the evening before.

Well, it couldn't continue, certainly not for a week. She simply wouldn't wait for James to return, wouldn't sit by passively while Rodman devised ways to frighten her off. There was little she could do today, since it was Sunday, but tomorrow she would go on the offensive. She'd find out exactly who this Rodman was, seek out his vulnerabilities just as he had sought out hers.

Sophie heard a noise, turned over, and saw Sally, looking unusually well-scrubbed, sitting in the chair beside her bed. Tom was in the girl's lap.

"The giant brought you home," Sally pronounced loudly. "The one from the circus."

Sophie hadn't seen Sally when she arrived at the Stevenson house last night, but the girl must have seen her. What awe that arrival must have inspired, Sophie thought. "Yes, she helped me when I fell and twisted my ankle."

"She carried you like you were a baby."

"She gave me my purse, too. Remember when I lost it at the circus?"

"Did she find it there?"

"Something like that."

Sally fidgeted in the chair; Tom jumped down, then up onto Sophie's bed. She scratched behind his ears. "You look pretty this morning," she said to Sally. "Are you going someplace special?"

"Just church. Mrs. Syms takes us."

"If you could, I'd like to talk to Mrs. Syms. Or if she's busy, Connie. Would you ask whoever's coming to bring a glass of juice?"

Sally ran from the room, and Sophie, forgetting her injury for a moment, braced herself with her left foot in an attempt to sit up. The effort caused her to wince. She'd certainly made a mess of it, she thought. No one had really been trying to harm her, just frighten her, that was all. Imagining that they were trying to hurt her, thought, she managed to do quite a creditable job of it herself. Perhaps it served her right for peeping and prying, reading someone else's letters. The letters. Sophie recalled the love words: "And then we shall go to bed, our bed, my dearest girl." There had been no notes from Helen, but Sophie didn't doubt their existence. The trunk had obviously contained things retrieved from the Stevenson house after Helen's death. The letters in there were the ones Helen had saved, and somewhere else were some Amy Travers had lovingly put away, ones Helen had written to her. Sophie was sure of it, and she was certain those notes were as passionate as the ones her sister had received. Everything pointed to it.

Everything except the person Sophie had thought her sister to be. Cool, controlled, dispassionate, that's how she had thought of her. And what James had said about their marriage seemed to fit. But now she was beginning to see there had been another Helen, though she still didn't know what to make of her. Clearly, there had been a love affair between Helen and Miss Travers, but of what had it consisted? The letters seemed explicit enough, but if this had been a... sexual relationship, would Helen and Miss Travers had seen a hymn, a religious song as a fitting description of it? Would they have dared save the letters? Again there was a tugging at Sophie's mind, something she was reminded of, but whatever it was eluded her, frustrated her.

She so much wanted to understand the relationship between Helen and Miss Travers, because James' words kept echoing through her mind: "I can imagine Helen and Amy having quite a violent lovers' quarrel." She had dismissed the idea at first, but now she was no longer sure. Did the attachment between the two women have the potential for violence, even murder?

She shook her head as if to rid it of the thought. She hadn't even established that there had been a murder. Yet here she was looking for a murderer. It was as though she'd got in the habit of thinking this way and couldn't stop. Or was it the things she kept discovering about her sister? They took her so far along the path of the unthinkable that it became a relatively easy matter to imagine Helen had been pushed down the stairs.

Sally returned with the housekeeper, who was carrying a breakfast tray. "Mrs. Dymond, how are you feeling this morning? How's your leg?"

"It's my ankle. I've wrenched it, that's all. I wonder, is there a cane in the house I might use?"

"I know where there's one," Sally exclaimed. "Up in the tank room. I'll get it."

"You let Esther help you," Mrs. Syms called after her. Then she began to arrange the tray on the bed. "There've been so many calls askin' after you. Mr. Bellavance is real concerned. Do you want visitors?"

"A little later. I want to get dressed and go downstairs first."

"It might be wise to stay up here today."

"I'm sure with the cane I can manage."

The cane Esther and Sally brought had a handsome carved ivory handle. After Sophie finished breakfast, she experimented with different ways of using it. "It would seem I'd want it in my left hand," she said to Connie, who had come in with the girls. "Since it's my left ankle that's injured, the left hand seems more logical. But it works better for me in the right." Better for the ankle, at any rate, she thought after a few more steps. The cane did her right hand no good where she had cut it on the gravel.

When she had dressed, Sophie started downstairs and quickly perceived she had more assistance than she needed. "Why don't you two go ahead?" she said to Esther and Sally. "You take Tom and go on down and wait for me." Connie stayed by her, but Sophie declined the offer of her arm. She decided there would be better times to trust her well-being to the girl, times when she had two good legs, for instance, and could afford to put one at risk. Ah, that wasn't kind. Her injury was making her irascible, she decided as she put her weight on the bannister and made her way down.

She settled herself in the drawing room. Esther was arranging the mantelpiece pictures again, while Sally was rolling an iron toy back and forth across the carpet. It was a chariot in the shape of a swan, and the wings flapped and a bell rang as it moved. Sally tried to interest Tom in chasing it, but he was comfortably curled up and refused to do more than eye it suspiciously as it clanged across the room. Busy with her thoughts, Sophie watched without really seeing as Sally stopped the chariot for a minute, went into the dining room, and returned with a tiny object which she put into the chariot's passenger seat."

"Esther, ring for Mrs. Syms for me, will you?" Sophie asked. When the housekeeper appeared, Sophie told her she would be happy to see Paul Bellavance now. "And there's one other person I'd like to see. Could you telephone Lydia Swerdlow and tell her I very much want to talk with her? Explain about my ankle and ask her if she could pay a visit."

Tom had begun to follow the swan chariot now, and Sally was wheeling it across the carpet faster and faster. The wings were flapping frantically, the bell clanging, and Tom began to bark.

"Land's sake, child, quiet down now," Mrs. Syms admonished. "What you got here?" She bent over. "It's the jelly pot! What you doin' with a crystal jelly pot in your chariot? If was to spend a whole day makin' a list of everything you aren't supposed to do, I'd never think to put this on it. Here, give it here."

"It's my cattle baron," Sally protested.

"Your what?" Esther asked sharply from over beside the fireplace.

"I lost the real passenger somewhere. Outside, I think. Me and Jonas were playin' Custer with it behind the carriage house and it just disappeared. So I thought the jelly pot'd fit. See, it's my cattle baron, ridin' in his landau."

"Sally, that's dumb. You don't know anything," Esther said.

"I do too!"

"'Cattle baron' is what Easterners say about men like Father. It's an insult to Father."

"Cattle baron! Cattle baron!"

Esther raced across the room and delivered a loud smack to Sally's arm. "Don't say it again!"

Sally's eyes widened; then she threw herself at her older sister, managing to knock her over before Mrs. Syms intervened. "Both of you upstairs right now! And don't come back down, either of you, until I call you for church!"

"Don't you ever say it again," Esther hissed at her sister on the way out of the room. Sally's desire for confrontation had waned but not disappeared. As the girls went up the stairs, she hummed the tune to which she had chanted the taunting words moments before. Esther glared at her venomously, but by the time they had reached the landing, both of them were giggling. They ran up the rest of the flight and across the upstairs hall to the back stairway.

Listening to their pounding footsteps, Sophie had a thought. "Mrs. Syms, when my sister fell, you were downstairs, down in the basement."

"I'd gone down there to talk to one of the maids."

"Did you hear Mrs. Stevenson fall? Did you hear anything?"

"I... I did hear her, but I didn't know it till later. When I heard the noise, I didn't know what it was. Thought it was the children playin' maybe. It was around the time for them to be home from school, and Sally's always runnin' and jumpin', I thought it was probably her. But then a little later when Sally came to get me and I saw Mrs. Stevenson, I knew that it was her fallin' I'd heard."

"How was she lying when you found here?"

"She was on her back. Her neck was bent strange."

"On her back? Didn't that strike you as odd? If she tripped coming down the stairs, wouldn't she have fallen forward and landed face down?"

"I didn't think about it. She bumped against the wall, maybe, and that threw her over."

"Was there anything that'd strike you as strange? Something you might have wondered about at the time and then forgot when everyone started rushing around?"

Mrs. Syms knotted her brow, then shook her head. "Nothin' important."

"Was there anything? Tell me."

"It's just not important..."

"Please, Mrs. Syms."

"Well, it was the back door, just the screen really. You know, it's right at the top of the basement stairs, and while I was down there, I heard someone go out, and then it slammed shut. It's got a tight spring on it, so you have to hold on to it or it does that. But whoever went out didn't hold it, and it banged."

"Was that before or after you heard the falling noise?"

"Oh, it was after, right after. I remember hearin' the door slam and thinking it was Sally again. I heard some runnin' footsteps, then a loud bang and I said to myself, 'Oh, it's Sally.' But it wasn't her, because she and Esther were still on the front porch then. It was before they came in and..." Mrs. Syms seemed suddenly dumbfounded by her words. "It's a hard thing talkin' about what happened. Those poor little girls."

"Have you ever thought who it might have been going out the back door?"

The gray-haired woman shook her head. "I dunno. A friend of Sally's maybe. When I remember that day, the only thing I really think about is the missus dead."

The housekeeper was close to tears, and Sophie didn't press her further. But it could be important that Helen had been lying on her back. That's how she would have been if she'd had her back to the stairs when someone pushed her. And the detail about the screen door--whoever had pushed Helen would have run away, and because the girls were playing out front, she would have had to go out the back. She... she. Ah, her thoughts were going too fast, rushing her into judgments for which she had no evidence. She laid her head back on the chair, closed her eyes for a moment, and forced herself to take a mental step or two backward.

* * *

Paul arrived, deep furrows of concern in his face.

"It's only my ankle," Sophie said, seeking to reassure him. "By tomorrow I think I'll be able to walk without the cane."

"Tell me what happened. Don't leave anything out."

She told him everything, though she changed her excursion to Amy Travers' to an evening stroll. "I'd missed my purse at the circus, and I thought perhaps Rodman had taken it. From Honoria Bender's description--"

"She's the giant lady?"

Sophie nodded. "From her description, I'm sure it was Rodman who took my purse. He probably had no idea what he'd do with it when he took it, but he knew he'd find something. Then he hired Honoria when he realized how she'd frighten me."

"I just can't believe he'd do this to a woman!"

"I'm surprised he'd do it after he'd been warned off."

Paul began to pace. Sophie had never seen him look so agitated.

"James did ask you to get word to Rodman and Huber to leave me alone, didn't he?" She blurted the question out, hating that she needed to ask it.

Paul nodded distractedly. Then he stopped in front of Sophie, reached out as if to touch her, but drew his hand back. "He hurt you. Actually hurt you," he declared, anger and amazement mixed in his voice.

"I really did it myself. I think he only meant to frighten me."

"No, no. He did it. He's a... savage!"

It's because Rodman regards me as part savage that he felt so little compunction, Sophie thought. But she didn't say it to Paul. No need to increase his agitation. She let him pace another moment or two before she changed the subject. "Paul?" As he turned to her, she felt awkward about what she was going to ask, but she plunged ahead. "Just how close were Helen and Miss Travers?"

He looked at her quizzically, obviously puzzled that she would ask. He shrugged. "Real close. Had been for a long time. You remember how Helen used to trail after Miss Travers at the fort. That something you never did. You were always out riding on the prairie, getting into some kind of trouble or other. But Helen, she was quieter. Used to like to draw and sew, and Amy Travers had patience with her. I'll say that for her. She was hardly more than a girl herself then, and she'd spend hours with Helen."

"How did Amy feel about Helen's marriage?"

"A little unhappy, I suspect, that Helen'd go away. Miss Travers moved here, you know, as soon as there was a teaching job for her."

"Did James mind that?"

"Mind? I don't know... sometimes I think maybe... But it was just a feeling. I mean, what's to mind? You know how women are. Like to get together and visit and talk about... women things, I guess, and sew. I mean, you know, they all do it, so why would James mind?"

"Maybe he thought Helen would leave him. Go away with Miss Travers."

Paul looked at her as though she had taken leave of her senses. "Leave? Where would she go?"

"Do you know who the Ladies of Llangollen are?"

"The ladies of who?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Never mind. I just thought... Well, never mind." It was useless to ask Paul such questions. He hadn't paid attention to what the women around him were doing. He had no more idea of what had passed between Amy and Helen than... than of what was going on at the WCTU meetings. How surprised he would be if he knew what Anna May and her friends talked about at the Presbyterian Church on Friday afternoons. Men thought it was all about whiskey. How little they knew. And while they were looking the other way, the women began to live the ideas they discussed, until one day came the jolting intersection with their husbands' lives. That's what had happened to James. He had been in his world and Helen in hers, and she was talking to the other women and feeling more and more intensely, and James didn't know. Even after that night when Helen screamed at him that he had raped her, he didn't understand what had happened.

"Sophie, have you seen a doctor?" Paul asked.

Of course. If my behavior puzzles him, she thought, it means there's something wrong with me. But the resentment she felt dissipated as she looked up and saw him leaning over her, his brow more deeply furrowed than ever. How much he cared for her and worried about her. And how much she cared for him. She assured him a doctor was unnecessary and gripped his hand tightly as he took his leave.

"That Rodman fellow won't be bothering you anymore," he declared with more fervor than she'd ever seen in him. "You've heard the last of him."

* * *

When Lydia Swerdlow came, she brought a dozen jars of plum preserves. It seemed an extraordinary amount of jam to Sophie, and she wondered if this was typical Cheyenne hospitality or a heroic effort on Lydia's part to give her visit a homey air, the kind of atmosphere in which Sophie would hesitate to bring up her shocking ideas.

Lydia sat uneasily on the edge of the sofa, and Sophie considered how best to begin. She looked into the intelligent eyes of the woman across from her and doubted that any strategem would pass unnoticed. Honesty seemed the only possible approach. But if she were too direct, too brutally honest, she was certain Lydia Swerdlow would be up off the edge of the sofa and gone.

"Do you have a sister, Mrs. Swerdlow?" Sophie asked.

"Yes, two. Both younger. One's here, and the other's still back East. In New York State.

"I ask because I know it's difficult for us to talk, and I want to find a... a bridge between us. Perhaps it can be our sisters. Perhaps yours can give you some sympathy for my situation, because you can imagine the loss I feel now that Helen's gone." Sophie paused a moment, then continued. "I suppose some would say that Helen's death ought not to have brought me the grief it has, because we were never close, not in the way I'm certain you and your sisters are. As children, Helen and I were very different, and then, when we were little more than children, our lives diverged. We wrote to one another, but not about the things that were really important to us. But that hasn't kept me from grieving, only given a particular cast to my feeling of loss, a yearning to know Helen in a way I never did when she was alive."

"I... I see."

"I don't want to persuade you or anyone to different viewpoints. It's not the least important to me to impose my way of thinking on anyone else. All I want is to understand how Helen thought and felt, and I have no way to do that without asking questions. I am aware that my questions are likely to offend. Not because I mean to shock or annoy, but because I can only frame them out of my own life, out of experience woefully ignorant of Helen's life... and yours."

"What exactly did you want to ask?"

Sophie hesitated. She didn't want to begin with Helen and Amy. It would be too sudden a leap. "Perhaps we should go back to the last time we talked."

Lydia's eyes slid away from Sophie's.

"If you thought I felt as you do, would it be easier?"

Lydia considered for a moment. "I suppose it would. I've had conversations with my friends about... preventive devices." She gave a rueful smile. "Short conversations. We reject them and go on from there."

"Is it possible for you to forget how you think I feel? Don't suppose you have to argue or convince me. Just explain to me. I saw Alice Lassawell and what childbearing has done to her. I know about Helen's many miscarriages. These are stories repeated thousands of times, thousands upon thousands of times. And it doesn't have to be that way. Why do you condemn the devices for prevention?"

"They're wrong. It's as simple as that."

"But why?"

"They're unnatural."

"But there are so many things 'against nature' that we accept. Like all the clothing we wear. People aren't born with clothes on."

"But clothes go along with a higher nature. A spiritual one. That's the one I'm talking about. We aren't animals, and so we cover ourselves."

"Whatever relates to our bodies, then, relates to a lower nature, an animal nature."

Lydia nodded.

"Particularly the sexual act."

Lydia nodded again and looked at Sophie straight on. "Unless it is transfigured by the possibility of generation."

"And the devices, when they're present, make this transfiguration impossible."

"Of course."

Sophie looked at Lydia. Her color was high with feeling, and her eyes bright. Sophie noticed her lashes, long, dark, and upward-curving. This was no frail, other-worldly creature whose body was incapable of response. "Is it not possible," Sophie asked, choosing her words carefully, "that the pleasure of two human beings who love one another is transfiguring?"

"That's not how women are!" Lydia burst out. "It's not pleasure for women. That's only how men would like it to be." She paused, then leaned forward and continued, "And it is my perfect right to be as I am, to be as God meant me to be. Why should I demean myself by pretending I find so much pleasure in the act that I would seek it as an end in itself? And that's what the devices do. They don't emancipate. They reduce a woman to the level of a prostitute."

"There are women, then who enjoy--"

"Degraded women, dragged down by men. But they can be brought back to their true nature, rescued by good women showing them the way."

"And there are no good men?"

"A few. J. H. Stead in England. Anthony Comstock in New York."

Sophie recoiled inwardly. She thought Stead a fool, and Comstock was a dreadful man, absolutely obsessed with the notion of suppressing vice. He had so harassed Madame Restell, a Fifth Avenue dispenser of pills and powders, that the poor woman had finally cut her throat.

"But there will be more in due time," Lydia said. "It's a matter of evolution. That's what Frances Willard says. Women have advanced ahead of men, but men will one day climb to the same level."

"I just... How do you know women have caught the upward curve? How can you be sure that this progress you see is indeed progress?"

"It just has to be," she declared feelingly. "It has to be." She put her head down and closed her eyes as if to compose herself. "Let me think how to explain..." She was silent for what seemed to be a long time; then she nodded her head slowly. "Just before I came here, I visited a friend. Her husband is... was a railroad fireman. Last week he was run over by a switching engine and mangled horribly. He can't live, not possibly, but he won't die. He just lies in the hospital and screams and screams." She looked up at Sophie. "There just has to be more than the pain and dying our bodies bring us."

She paused again and turned her eyes to the window. When finally she spoke, her voice was very soft. "Sometimes I feel that I'm standing with all my friends around a cavernous pit, and the edges of it are constantly crumbling away. If one of us loses our footing, the rest of us can pull her back, because we're holding hands, you see. But it's so important that none of us slips over the edge, because she would surely drag the rest." She shrugged and shook her head. "I'm not making myself clear."

"I think you are. I think I've felt what you're describing."

"But it's more here. We feel it more here."

"More than where?"

"More than where you live. I was in New York City once, and I remember it felt heavy to me. So many things everywhere, layers of things keeping you from earth and sky. But they protect you too, all those layers do, wrap you up so life isn't so painful, so... raw."

"Or perhaps they just distract us, help us forget." For a moment, just a moment, Sophie had a sense of the pressures which molded Lydia's feelings, and she saw that the way the other woman felt was not perverse, but a right response to her life. It had to do with wanting control; it was a different path to a goal Sophie herself was always seeking. But the understanding she felt was like water held in the hand. No sooner did she cup it in her mind than it started to slip away. "Lydia, who are the Ladies of Llangollen?" She spoke quickly, wanting to understand more while she still understood a little.

"They're the ones Miss Willard speaks about. Two women who went off together to a valley in Wales where they could live together. I don't know how long ago it was, quite a long time, I think. All kinds of famous people visited them and admired the way they loved one another."

"No one thought their behavior was... scandalous?"

"I seem to remember Miss Willard saying their parents had objected at first, but the strength of their attachment was so great that finally the parents relented. Wordsworth was one of the notables who visited them. He even wrote a sonnet about the beauty and purity of their love."

"I don't know the poem. Tell me about it."

"I don't remember the words. It just makes them seem like angels."

"Why was Miss Willard talking about the Ladies of Llangollen?"

"Oh, it wasn't part of her regular presentation, but somehow the subject came up, and she acknowledged how common it is for women to love one another. She has her own special friend in Anna Gordon, you know, the quiet lady who's always with her, but she cited the Llangollen ladies as the most conspicuous example. And she talked about the remarkable friendships Margaret Fuller had."

Suddenly Sophie knew what she'd been trying to think of ever since she'd read the letters at Amy Travers' house. That peculiar novel of Henry James', "The Bostonians" it was called, and it had been serialized in The Century Magazine last year. Everyone had whispered about it, scandalized that James would satirize a gentle philanthropical lady like Elizabeth Peabody. But Sophie hadn't been surprised by that so much as by the passionate relationship James had depicted between two of the women reformers in his book. How could he so openly set forth such an attachment? And why was no one buzzing about that? "Sometimes these... friendships are quite passionate," she said to Lydia.

"Decidedly so."

"But still, no one sees anything wrong--"

"Oh, no, of course not!" There was shock in her voice. "These are women. The flame they nurture has no heat or smoke. It's a sublime kind of ardor."

So that explained why James' female lovers hadn't scandalized. Quite the contrary, society encouraged such pairings in the belief sex couldn't be involved, not where nice women were concerned. With women, attachment couldn't be physical, it had to be spiritual and pure. It was immortal, uplifting, beyond the flesh. "Helen and Amy Travers...?"

"Ah, yes," Lydia answered. "Theirs was one of the most beautiful friendships I've seen."

Sophie was startled to realize she had lived so set apart from other women that she had failed to recognize a way of bonding together obviously central to many of their lives. But if her experience had blinded her to some things, it had made her clear-visioned about others. Society as a whole might conclude that women were sexless creatures, but she knew otherwise. And she also knew that claiming a relationship was not erotic, thinking it could not be, would not keep it from being so. Oh, doubtless such convictions dictated limits one could not go beyond without destroying the myth. There could be no tearing off one's clothes and lustily hopping into bed, not if one would preserve the love-religion. But the loving words and the warm embrace were permitted, and the kiss before sleep, the arousal gentle enough so that its nature would not have to be acknowledged.

There were no limits on the emotions which might explode out of such a relationship, however. Ecstasy, jealousy, rage, all were possible, perhaps even heightened by the dampening of physical passion. Amy Travers might well have reacted violently when Helen refused to go away with her. She could have come to the Stevenson home in a fury, found Helen working at her desk on the landing, and bitterly confronted her. Helen had stood, and they had argued. And Miss Travers had reached out with those oddly childlike hands to force Helen into understanding what she would not otherwise see. Only, the hands were stronger than Miss Travers had thought, and the beloved more fragile, and Helen had fallen.

It so easily might have happened that way--but how could she be certain? Someone had left the house right after Helen's fall, but that was the only real clue she had, wasn't it?

Suddenly another thought occurred. If Amy Travers had pushed Helen down the stairs, surely it would have altered her subsequent behavior. She was not a hardened criminal. If she were guilty, she would act guilty. And did that explain her behavior on the porch when Sophie had unexpectedly dropped by yesterday?

"Lydia," Sophie said, "you've helped me so much. I have just one last question, a rather peculiar thing perhaps you can explain. Yesterday, I stopped by Miss Travers' house, and it was quite clear she didn't want me to come in--or even see in her house. Why would that be?"

"Have you ever been in her parlor?"

"No," Sophie answered hastily.

Lydia nodded. "Amy has a hair wreath on the wall. It's Helen's hair, of course, and Helen's picture is framed in it. It's quite unusual, very large. I've never seen one like it. It's quite... arresting. We're all used to it, of course. We expect it. But she may have thought it would startle you." Lydia smiled gently. "And she would have been quite correct, wouldn't she?"

- Chapter 16 -

Walking was still painful enough the next day so that Sophie chose to use the cane, but with it she could get around fairly well. She made her way down from the landing, then through the hall, the drawing room, the dining room, the rear hallway, and the kitchen to the back door. Then she went back to the front hall and followed another route, the one through the library and back hall to the kitchen and back door.

So, there were two ways someone could have fled after Helen's fall. Through the library was a little shorter distance, but the library door was usually closed, and opening it would take time. The routes were probably equally attractive, but having established that, what had she proved? She grimaced in frustration. "Nothing," was the answer, and she didn't know how to go about finding "something." She thought of Monsieur Dupin, Edgar Allan Poe's detective. He would notice some detail—perhaps a window which appeared nailed shut, but really wasn't—and then with ratiocination alone, he would deduce every other detail of what had happened. But I, though Sophie, am not, unfortunately, such a trained observer. And real life is not, unfortunately, so amenable to logic.

Mrs. Syms appeared to let her know the carriage was ready, and the housekeeper walked with her down the front steps and watched closely while the boy who was driving helped Sophie into the phaeton. Once settled, Sophie directed the boy to the Clarion office. She might be puzzled about how to gather information about Helen's death, but she had an idea where to begin when it came to Jake Rodman. She was going to see the young reporter who had interviewed her. She had first thought about going to see the sheriff, but rejected that idea when she remembered something James had said the day she'd arrived, something which implied the sheriff was enlisted in the cause of the Stock Growers' Association. But the young reporter wouldn't be hampered by such allegiances, and there was the additional advantage that he knew who she was, really knew. She wouldn't have to waste time getting him to take her seriously.

The Clarion was on Seventeenth Street, just down from the opera house. It butted up against Meanea's Saddlery, and the sharp tang of printer's ink hung in the air with the rich, male smell of leather. Sophie stayed in the carriage while her driver went into the Clarion office. He came out with the young reporter, who was putting on his hat as he came through the door. "Mrs. Dymond, nice to see you again so soon. I knew that article hadn't run yet, but you'll like it when it does. Sometime this week--"

"That's why I came. I thought perhaps you could help me."

"Sure, be glad to. What can I do?"

"There's a man who's been bothering me--"

"Here in Cheyenne? Bothering you?"

"Very much so, and what I want is to find out something about him. I thought you might be able to tell me one or two things."

"Better than that, why don't I have a little talk with him, if you know what I mean."

"No, no. Just tell me what you know about him. His name's Jake Rodman."

"Jake Rodman... Jake Rodman... you know, that sounds familiar, but I just can't..."

"He's a detective for the Stock Growers' Association."

"Oh... oh..." The young man took a step backward, and for a moment he seemed speechless. "Uh... uh... you know, I really haven't been here very long, and I don't know too much. You better talk to my boss." With that he fled back into the Clarion office.

A moment or two later, a short stocky man came out of the newspaper building and approached the carriage. He had fair skin permanently burned by the sun, small eyes, and a paunch which he emphasized by walking with his thumbs in his belt loops, thus pulling his trousers low enough so that the whole white-shirted expanse of his belly protruded above them. "Virgil says you're lookin' for some information," he said.

Virgil. She had not known the young reporter's name before. "Yes, that's so. I'm trying to find a little background information on someone."

"One of the Stock Growers' detectives, Virgil says. Whatcha need information like that for?"

"I'm Sophie Dymond, Mr...?"

"Coover's the name."

"Mr. Coover, I'm the publisher of Dymond's Monthly, and I still write for it occasionally. I'm in Cheyenne visiting my ailing grandfather, Joe Martin, and while I'm here I'm working on an article. That's why I'm asking questions." At Coover's unexpected interruption, Rodman's "bothering" her seemed too vague an excuse for checking into his background. But if she kept falling back on the story she was writing, she thought to herself, someday soon she was actually going to have to work on it.

"So, what're ya writin' that you want to know about Jake Rodman?"

She hesitated, beginning to resent the questions. "About the conflict between the homesteaders and the cattlemen."

"Whose side ya on?"

"No one's side."

He gave her a cynical look. "Mrs. Dymond, I seen your type before. I know what the story'll be like. People like you don't get what it's really like out here. You come out here from the city with your namby-pamby sentiments about how we should treat rustlers and you don't know what it's like out here."

"I said homesteaders, not rustlers."

He spit into the dust. "Comes to the same thing mosta the time."

"I guess it's clear whose side you're on, isn't it?"

"Where I am is on the side of the law. That's not an easy thing out here, but if this territory's gonna grow and progress, we gotta have it. I'm on the side a whoever's gonna help keep the law."

"Men like Jake Rodman, then?"

He shrugged.

"Does the Stock Growers' Association pay you too, Mr. Coover? They advertise in your paper, perhaps?"

His tiny eyes narrowed. "Look, we don't need some fancy lady comin' out here from the big city to mind our business for us. We don't need you, Mrs. Dymond, and we don't want you. It's time you figgered that out." He turned on his heel and walked back to the Clarion officer. Through the window, Sophie could see him pick up the telephone and ring the operator.

She was so angry, she took a moment to calm herself before directing the driver to take her back to the Stevensons'. Fancy lady! The gall of him, of all of them. For just a moment she wished she were a man. She imagined the satisfaction of hauling Coover up by his shirtfront, hissing at him through her teeth, then shoving him away so he sat down foolishly in the dust.

But there was another way to exact revenge, a more effective one, really. She'd write the article, since that's what seemed to upset them so much. She'd really do it, not just talk about it or use it as an excuse. And she'd put everything in it, not just her conclusion, but everything that had happened, all the attempts to frighten and intimidate. She might as well, she thought. Since they believed she was going to, they would be coming against her with full force anyway.

Back at the Stevenson house, she gathered some paper, sat down at Helen's desk, and thought about where to begin. She wrote a paragraph, read it, reread it, crossed it out, and tried another. No, that wasn't right either, she decided after a few sentences. What was wrong? Usually the words came more easily than this. Perhaps she was trying to write from too personal a viewpoint; perhaps she needed to distance herself further from the subject. She sat back for a moment and found herself studying the satinwood inlays in the desk. She shut her eyes and could smell the faint, sweet odor of beeswax polish. Helen's desk. Helen. Why was she letting herself be distracted from the matter of Helen? Someone had pushed her sister down the stairs--she was sure of it. And yet here she was--

Screams interrupted her thoughts, the high-pitched agonized wails of a child. Bumping against the desk, she pushed back the chair, gathered up her skirts, and ran down the stairs, hardly noticing the pain in her ankle. Where were the screams coming from? Outside, but where outside? She threw open the front door and stood on the porch listening, straining to listen. Down the street, just down the street.

She flew to the front gate, ignoring the curved walk and the pain in her ankle. She unlatched the gate and looked down the street. There, down there, just by the telephone pole, someone was lying on the ground. She ran down the board sidewalk toward the crumpled figure, and as she neared, she saw it was Esther, not lying on the ground, but hunched over, and not screaming now, but moaning, the knuckles of her hand jammed in her mouth, her face distorted with pain.

"Esther, what's happened? Where are you hurt?"

The girl didn't answer, but she made a gesture with her hand, an unclear motioning. Some instinct told Sophie the girl meant for her to look up. She raised her eyes to the telephone pole and saw a rope hanging from a hook and a black-and-white shape hanging from the rope, a small furry shape she refused to recognize at first, though she saw it with shocking clarity.

She stood and looked at the protruding eyes, glazed over now with death. Tom. She touched the silky fur and felt that the dog's body was still warm, and though she knew he was dead, she was impelled to frantic activity. She tried to reach the hook, jumping and jumping again, but it was no use, and so she struggled until she had loosened the noose around his neck. She stood with the small body in her arms, trying to think what to do.

"Esther?"

The girl was gone.

"Esther!" Sophie had to find her, comfort her. She limped back toward the house, through the gate, and laid the small body in the shade of a lilac bush. She entered the house.

- Chapter 16 - (continued)

"Esther?" There was no one on the first floor, so she walked up to the second, where she heard sounds from still higher. She climbed the back stairs to the third floor and saw Sally standing in the doorway of her room. Her eyes wide, the child started explaining even before Sophie asked a question.

"Esther came running in making a funny noise like she was going to be sick. She's up in the tank room now. Mrs. Syms too."

The housekeeper might be in the tank room. Sophie thought, as she climbed the ladder stairs, but Esther wasn't. She knew now, knew for certain, where Esther was, and it wasn't in the tank room.

Esther was on the ledge outside the tank-room window. When Sophie emerged from the tank room, she saw Esther on the ledge, saw her rock forward, balance at the point of equilibrium, then fall back, then rock forward again. Mrs. Syms, who was kneeling beside the open window, turned a despairing face to Sophie. "What'll I do?" she mouthed.

Sophie knelt beside her and looked at Esther. The girl seemed locked in a trance as she rocked back and forth. Perhaps that was the purpose of her motion, to anesthetize the mind, to block out pain by rocking back and forth. But it was so dangerous. Sophie shuddered as she looked down at the ground, three floors away. She spoke softly to the girl on the ledge. "Esther, it's sad and awful what happened to Tom, but it doesn't help for you to be out there. It doesn't make it any better. And if you should be hurt, it will make it so much worse for all the people who love you."

There was no reaction, and so Sophie tried more words, keeping her voice soft and calm. But the child seemed dead to what she was saying. She rocked forward, balanced, then fell backward; forward and back.

Sophie could almost, but not quite, touch the girl from where she was kneeling. She leaned out the window. "Esther?" When there was no response, she put a tentative hand on the girl's shoulder, and though her touch was light, the rocking stopped. Esther was still looking straight ahead as if it made no difference whether she was moving or not, as if she didn't even know she had stopped rocking. "Esther, I'm going to help you in now." Sophie put her hands under the girl's arms and pulled her toward the window. "Mrs. Syms, help me, please." Together the two of them got her into the tank room.

Once inside, she was compliant and cooperative, though she did not respond to words and had to be gently prodded along. The two women got her down the ladder stairs, took her to her room, and not knowing what to do, put her in bed. She closed her eyes immediately and seemed to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

"What happened to upset her like this?" Mrs. Syms asked.

Sophie realized the housekeeper didn't know about Tom, and she told her how Esther had found him.

"Who'd do such a thing?" Mrs. Syms gasped. "Why would anybody do that?"

"It's a warning to me, I'm certain. A way of telling me that inquiries I've been making aren't appreciated."

"So they hanged the poor little dog? And right where the child would find it? It reminded her of when she found her mother. I know it did." Mrs. Syms nervously adjusted her spectacles. "Do you think I should call a doctor?"

"I don't know what a doctor could do. Let her sleep." Sophie looked down at the face on the pillow. It was so pale, with dark smudges under the eyes, and it was oh, so still, like a figure carved in stone, remote and unperturbable."

"Poor little thing," said Mrs. Syms as Sophie smoothed and tucked the coverlet.

The two women left the room together, Sophie limping noticeably. "You've done too much on your ankle," said Mrs. Syms. "You ought to get off it. I'll get you some warm water to soak it in."

"First I must take care of Tom."

"No, no, let me have one of the boys do it."

"Send someone to help if you like, but I have to be there."

"Can I help?" It was Sally.

"Of course you can." Sophie took her hand, and the two of them started downstairs.

"Here, take this," Mrs. Syms said. She handed Sophie a pillow cover. "To wrap him in," the housekeeper said.

Outside, while Sally watched, Sophie shrouded Tom's body in the pillow cover. Had he been heavy enough to strangle himself at the end of the rope? Sophie wondered. Or had they put the noose around his neck when he had come running to sniff at them, and then had they drawn it tight, tighter until he was head? She hoped that was how it had happened, because it would have been a better death than if they had strung him from the hook live. And she couldn't bear to think of him dying slowly, filled with dim wonder that human beings, whom he had always known to be kindly, would do this dreadful thing to him."

The boy who had driven Sophie to the Clarion office dug the grave behind the carriage house. Sophie put the shrouded bundle into it, then stood back with Sally as the boy filled the grave and tamped the earth.

"Could we put some flowers on it?" Sally asked.

"That's a nice idea."

Sally gathered a few pink petunias from the sunny side of the carriage house and put them on the freshly turned earth. Then she stood very still beside the grave, and Sophie realized she was trying not to cry. Of course. Just because she was the kind of child who wasn't given to tears didn't mean she never felt sad. And she'd loved Tom. Of course his death affected her. Sophie put a hand on her shoulder, thinking the gesture might release the tears, but the child help them back, fighting them until she won. Something about her stubborn resistance moved Sophie deeply, and she drew the child close.

"Mrs. Dymond..." It was a man's voice.

Sophie jumped, startled.

"Mrs. Dymond..." The voice again, coming from a shadowed alcove of the carriage house. "I'll be right back," she said to Sally. She approached the carriage house carefully and saw it was Virgil, the young reporter from the Clarion.

"Mrs. Dymond, I'm really so sorry about your dog. I didn't know they'd... they'd do this. I would never have had you talk to Mr. Coover if I'd had any idea."

"Why did you have me talk to him?"

"You were asking about Rodman, and I didn't know what you knew or what I should say to you. Rodman's heading up a lynching party this afternoon."

"A lynching party?"

"It's something to do with the spring roundup. The stock growers' counts were all way low, and they found too many calves with homesteaders' brands. There's been even more thieving going on than they thought, so they want to make an example of somebody. It'll maybe put a lid on the thieving for a while, but they don't want you writing about it in your magazine, at least not in the way they're sure you would write about it."

"And they hanged Tom to let me know that?"

The young man nodded, his eyes refusing to meet hers.

Suddenly a horrifying thought occurred to Sophie. "Virgil, where are they going this afternoon?"

"Pardon me?"

"Where are they going? Whom are they going to hang?"

"Somebody named Wilson, I think they said."

"When are they leaving?"

"They left already. About an hour ago. They must of stopped by here and... taken care of your dog on the way outta town."

Sophie turned and hobbled toward the house as fast as her ankle would permit. Sally watched her wide-eyed. "I have to hurry," Sophie shouted over her shoulder to the child. "It's an emergency!" Sophie didn't care in the least what happened to Zack Wilson, but what would a lynching party do to Baby? Not let her sit and watch, very likely. They thought her a thief, too, but would they dare string her up? A woman? "Mrs. Syms! Mrs. Syms!"

"Yes? Yes?"

"Is there a split skirt around here anywhere?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"Then please get me a pair of Mr. Stevenson's trousers. A shirt, too. Hurry, please. And I'll need boots, too. Are there any of Helen's? And have one of the boys saddle a horse for me. A fast one."

"There's a sidesaddle you could use--"

"I don't have time for that! Please, Mrs. Syms!"

The housekeeper brought the trousers and shirt. "Here's a belt, too. I know the waist'll be way too big for you." She helped Sophie roll up the trouser legs and shirt sleeves, then stood back and looked at her. "Do you think you ought to put a skirt over the top of those trousers?"

"There's no time," said Sophie, struggling to pull a boot on over her swollen ankle. "I'll worry about my reputation later."

Sophie headed for the stable, limping, but moving fast enough so that Mrs. Syms had to scurry to keep up. The stable boy had saddled a buckskin, and Sophie checked the cinch and let the boy help her mount.

"Better take this with you," said Mrs. Syms, handing up Sophie's cane, which she had been carrying. "Here, and this too." She handed up a broad-brimmed hat. Sophie tucked the cane in the saddle, put on the hat, and dug her heels in the horse's sides. She headed first for Paul Bellavance's house. She didn't want to ride out to the Wilsons' by herself unless she had to. Paul was the one person she could think of she would trust to help.

But he wasn't home. The maid who answered the door showed her into the parlor, where Anna May was sitting with Lydia Swerdlow.

"Whatever is it, Sophie? What's wrong? Your hair's all flying, and those clothes! My word!"

"There's a lynching party headed for the Wilsons'."

The women sat silent, looking stunned.

"Baby has to have help, don't you see? No telling what they'll do to her? Where did Paul go?"

Anna May sprang to her feet. "I don't know where, exactly. Looking for that Rodman fellow's all I know. I'll get the wagon hitched, and we'll pick up Amy and get out there right away."

Sophie started to dissuade them, thinking they wouldn't be of any use. Then she thought about going out there by herself--and doing what? Bearing witness so the lynching party wouldn't dare hang Baby? If that were her purpose, then it would help to have the women along. Four witnesses were better than one. The idea of Amy Travers' coming troubled her, but she wouldn't argue. For now the thing was to save Baby. "I'm riding on ahead," she told Anna May and Lydia. Come as quickly as you can."

As Sophie turned to leave the parlor, she almost bumped into the Widow Bellavance. As always, the black-gowned old woman was staring at her, but not in quite the same way as usual. This time there was a mingling of fear and disbelief in her eyes. It reminded Sophie of the way that Joe had looked at her the one time she had seen him awake--as though she were a ghost, a specter come to haunt him.

She brushed past the old woman and opened the front door, and as she did so, the widow said something Sophie didn't quite catch. "Emile?" Is that what she had said? Sophie kept going. There was no time to worry about it now.

She galloped the buckskin across the prairie. The only sounds were the thudding hoofs and the creaking saddle, and the quiet gave her a chance to reflect on what she was doing. Her response had been almost automatic when she had heard Baby was threatened. Had she reacted so immediately because of Helen, because she knew this was what her sister would have wanted? Partly perhaps, but there was something else too: this was what she wanted. For reasons she didn't quite understand, it was very important to her that Baby not come to harm.

She saw the shapes on the horizon, made out tiny figures near the cottonwoods on the far side of the creek--figures mounted on horseback, she saw as she rode nearer. There was a spot of red--Baby's dress. But it was up off the ground, alongside another dangling... My God, they had hanged her! They had done it, they had hanged her! She felt bile rising in her throat, and she reined the buckskin in as she started to retch.

When she straightened, she saw that two figures on horseback had broken away from the group and were riding across the creek toward her. She sat there stupidly, watching them come. One rode a powerful-looking black horse and had a bandanna pulled up over his face. The other was Jake Rodman.

"You can't do this," she said to them as they approached. Her voice caught in her throat as she spoke, and she thought she would be sick again.

"It's done," said Rodman flatly.

Sophie looked at the other man. All she could see were his eyes, but they looked familiar. Black and shiny like marbles. Was it Huber, the man from the Cheyenne Club who'd been so angry with her? "I won't write about this," she said to him, trying to sound firm, in control of herself. "I'll see you go to jail for it." The man didn't respond, so she shifted her gaze back to Rodman.

He met her eyes. "Let's get her into the shack and tie her up," he said.

"Jake, dammit, I don't think--"

"Let's get 'er in there! She's nuthin' but a damn squaw. Look at her. Look how she's dressed. A squaw, that's all."

The one thought was Huber looked at the shirt, the trousers, and seemed emboldened. He rode up her her on the left and reached for her reins. As soon as she saw his hand go out, she pulled the buckskin to the right, gave the animal a hard kick, and set out across the prairie. She could hear the two men shouting; they she heard the pounding of hooves behind her. She kicked her horse again and again, urging him on, but the sound of the hooves behind her grew nearer and nearer. She turned to see how close they were, and felt her hat fly off, her hair come loose. But none of it mattered, because they were very close indeed, and gaining.

Within seconds the black horse was alongside. She knew the riding would be reaching out either to grab her or the reins, and so she reached down and closed the fingers of one hand around the tip of the cane she had tucked in the saddle. She looked over, and when she saw the rider's shiny black eyes flick away from her for a moment, she pulled the cane out and swung the heavy ivory handle at his head. She connected, not solidly enough to knock him from his mount, but she heard him grunt, saw his hand go up to his face, saw him drop back.

Suddenly she was jerked from the buckskin with a force that took her breath away. It was as though a huge vise had closed around her waist, and she struggled against it, struggled to breathe. Rodman had ridden up on the other side of her, and with an arm around her middle, pulled her from her horse. With a strength his side belied, he held on to her with one arm as he reined his horse around and headed back toward the Wilson homestead. When Sophie realized what had happened, she struggled, but he had managed to imprison her arms, and when she lashed out with her feet, she only kicked his horse.

Finally she quit struggling and let herself go limp. She watched the ground rushing past and knew what she had to do. She was afraid, but but as afraid as she was of what would happen if Rodman got inside the shack. She waited, giving him time to conclude she had given up. Then she tensed her body, twisted around suddenly, and sank her teeth into the flesh of his cheek. With a shout of pain, he released her, and she felt herself falling. She remembered to relax, tried rolling herself into a ball, and while the impact jolted her, it did her no injury. But when she got up to run, she fell immediately. Her ankle had given way.

She saw Rodman riding back toward her, saw him take a coil of rope from his saddle, and she got up and tried to run away. And failed again. Tears of rage and frustration ran down her cheek as she watched his lasso arc through the air and settle around her. She grabbed hold of the rope to prevent the loop from drawing too tight, and felt herself being dragged over the prairie. She was bumped and twisted and turned, pulled gasping through the icy creek. When finally Rodman stopped his horse, she found herself unable to release the rope. Her fingers were cramped around it, and every one of her bones felt broken, every inch of her body cried out in pain.

Rodman pulled her up roughly, pushed her inside the shack, and tied her to a chair. She managed a few words. "Others are coming. You won't get away with this."

"We'll be through with what we have to do by the time they get here."

He left her alone, and she looked around dazedly. Baby must have been washing dishes when the lynching party came. There were broken plates on the floor, and two buckets of water on the kitchen table, one still with soapsuds in it. Sophie struggled with the ropes for a moment, but the knot was tight--and she hurt so many places. She'd wait, just wait until someone came. Lydia and Anna May and Amy would be here soon.

But what was it Rodman had said? "We'll be through by the time thye get here." Through with what? What else were they going to do? She shut her eyes and listened, suddenly frantic to know what was going on outside the shack. She could hear the creek, and somewhere high in the sky an eagle cried out. Voices, too--she thought she heard voices, but their murmur was low and far away, and she wasn't sure.

Then she heard something else, an almost imperceptible sound from beneath her feet, and she knew instantly what it was. The children. Baby had hidden them down in the cellar.

Before she had time to think what to do, there were voices close by. "What're we going to do with her?" Wasn't that Huber?

"Get rid of her," Rodman answered.

"How? Can't have her found with a bullet in her, wouldn't look right. Could cause a lot of trouble. Back East, she's a big name. I mean, it's one thing to hang that whore, but, hell, that one, I don't know..."

Screw back East. She's nothin' but a squaw."

"But a famous one, dammit."

"We'll make it look like an accident. Like she was out here and got caught in a prairie fire."

The other voice took a moment to consider. "Ought to be easy to manage, parched as the grass is. But you'll have to cut her loose to make it look right."

"Get everybody across the creek. Then I'll get a fire going along this side of it. I'll cut her loose just before I get outta here myself."

The voices faded away, but what they had said stayed with Sophie. Her mind was muddled with pain and exhaustion, and she kept hearing their words: "... hangin' that whore... nothin' but a squaw..." Whores and squaws together. No difference to these men. Whores and squaws, no better than animals to them, things that could be killed with little compunction. Stupid. She'd been so stupid not to think how that attitude endangered her.

Suddenly she thought of Helen. She would have faced the same danger! Deer Woman was her grandmother too, and Helen must have been a thorn in the side of these men, coming out here, taking up with the Wilsons. Could these men have killed Helen? The thought sent a shot of adrenaline through Sophie, and she began to struggle anew with the rope. Rodman could have killed Helen. He could have gone to the Stevenson house to warn her off and Helen had refused to listen and Rodman had pushed her down the stairs. It was easy to imagine how it could have happened. And now he would kill her! And the children in the cellar. My God, she'd forgotten about them. The children! If she told him they were there, he'd let them go, wouldn't he?

She heard a far-off crackling noise. It sounded as if someone were wadding up a piece of paper, but she knew what it really was: fare! Rodman had begun setting the grass near the creek on fire. Her mind raced, trying to think what she should do, and then Rodman was in the doorway of the shack. "The children!" she cried out. "You must get them out of the cellar!" But his eyes were glittering with a peculiar excitement, and he ignored her, seemed not even to hear her as he cut her ropes with a bowie knife and ran from the shack.

She pushed herself out of the chair and limped after him. "Rodman! Rodman!" But when she reached the doorway and looked out, he had ridden his horse almost to the creek. The flames along the edge of it had begun to quicken, and she saw his horse shy away. He jerked the animal around roughly, lashing it until it jumped the fire, carrying him to the water on the other side.

Then she saw the bodies. They were hanging from a limb bent by their weight until their feet almost touched the ground. The hanging tree had begun to smolder, but the grass was burning more quickly, and flames beneath the dangling feet leaped up, and Sophie saw Baby's red dress catch fire. In the flare and the motion of the flames, she imagined she saw the body move, jerking in a macabre dance. Then, as though the finale had come, the flames reached the rope around the neck, parted it, and the body fell to the ground. Baby no more, merely a burning lump of a thing lying alongside another lump that had once been Zack Wilson.

Suddenly a great flame shot out the top of the cottonwood from which Baby and Zack had been hanged. It was as if the flame had eaten through the heart of the tree and was being funneled skyward, blown to the heavens by a giant's breath. Then the tree burst open, exploding outward with a loud bang and sending flames in every direction.

Sophie saw how quickly the fire was moving toward the shack, creeping along under the grass like a bright liquid, then setting the stalks ablaze. She turned from the doorway and went to the trapdoor at the cabin's center. The children! Amid the pain and fright, a single thought prevailed. She had to help the children. She struggled with the trapdoor until she finally got a hand underneath and could pull it aside. From the cellar, Jenny looked up, her mouth a round O of fright. The boy slept in her arms.

"Here, can you lift him so I can reach?" Sophie asked. As she pulled the boy up, the pain in her arms and shoulders was almost unbearable, but through it she noted that the child's sleep was unnaturally deep. Baby must have drugged him, used laudanum to keep him quiet. So they didn't completely surprise her. She'd had some time to prepare.

But now the boy would have to be carried, and Sophie didn't know if she could do it.

Suddenly it occurred to her that the best thing might be to leave the children where she'd found them, crawl into the cellar with them, pull the lid tight, and let the fire burn over them. But the shack was all wood, would burn fiercely, and how would they breathe down there? The cellar would not save them; likely it would become their grave. She laid the sleeping boy on the floor, helped the girl out, and knew she had to think of another plan quickly.

When she stood, she knew for certain she could not carry the boy and outrun the fire. Her ankle was the main reason, but there were other pains, bone-deep ones, and she knew no effort of will would move her very far, especially if she were carrying the boy.

What could they do? How could they escape? Smoke was heavy in the air now, stinging her eyes, and the crackling noise grew louder. She knew she hadn't long to devise a scheme, but what? What could they do?

She saw the water in the dish buckets. It was so pitifully little, but she used it in the only way she could think. Pulling the blankets off the beds, she wet down three of them until the water was gone. She would wrap herself and the children in wet blankets. That would give them a few minutes.

The girl screamed, and Sophie whirled around to see a ball of flame shooting through the window. It streaked around the floor of the shack, making an unearthly noise. Cuhh-ruck! Cuhh-ruck! Sophie saw the feathers, knew the half-live fireball was one of Baby's chickens. She grabbed a broom from the corner and struck the bird again and again until she had killed it and extinguished the flames.

The smell of burned flesh and feathers added to the smoke, and Sophie knew they had to flee. She wrapped each of the children in a wet blanket, then herself, instructing the girl to hold onto her no matter what. Sophie picked up the sleeping boy and stepped out the door.

She had not realized the fire was so close. Just yards away, the flames were roaring, turning the world bright and hot as though the sun had fallen. Sophie ran, but each step was agony. How long could she keep it up? Even without the pain, how long could she outrun the fire carrying one child and pulling another?

Then she saw the sod house, and she knew that's where they had to go. The earth wouldn't burn. No, the earth wouldn't burn, though everything on it might turn to ashes. As she ran toward the soddie, a huge jackrabbit ran across in front of her, nearly causing her to fall, but she held on to her footing until she had stumbled into the sod house with the children. She turned to close the door behind her, to shut out the approaching flames, but there was no door! Nor windows either!

She pulled the wet blanket off her shoulders and held it up to the door, trying frantically to jam the top edge of it into the dried earth over the door. She pounded with her fingertips until she had bent all her fingernails back. Each jab with her fingers pained all the way to the shoulder, but she finally managed to get the blanket hung at the door, and she put the children's blankets up at the windows.

She pulled the girl to the floor where the sleeping boy lay, and they waited. The room grew hot, then hotter still, and the air was thick with smoke. The noise of the fire grew louder and louder, sounding like the roar of a huge, hungry beast. Jenny began to whimper, and Sophie tried to soothe her, stroking her back. Breathing was even more difficult by the second, and the child would only make it worse for herself by crying.

Sophie fought to keep her panic down, tried to ignore the aching tightness growing in her lungs. Would they die here? Had all her effort simply brought them into an oven where they would die?

It was hot, so hot. Sophie could feel rivulets of perspiration running off her, stinging the scratches and abrasions. HoT! It was so hot! How long before the fluids inside their bodies began to bubble, bursting them apart just as the boiling sap had exploded the cottonwood tree? She struggled for each breath, pulling and pulling with lungs frantic for oxygen.

The great growl of the flames approached a crescendo, and she felt herself growing faint, slipping away. Louder and louder grew the roar of the flame, louder still...

And then the heat and noise began to fade. Gradually she came fully conscious and realized the fire had passed over them, by them—and they were alive! She rolled over and breathed deeply. The air was acrid still, but it fed her starved body, and she lay there gasping at it, pulling at it, as grateful for its ash-filled nourishment as if it were the sweet air of the mountaintop.

- Chapter 17 -

When Sophie could no longer hear the fire, she struggled to her feet and went to the doorway, pulling down the scorched blanket that covered it. The world had turned black. From the soddie to the edge of the creek, there was no other color. It was a sloping black expanse, with a mound here where an animal had fallen victim to the flames, a larger heap where the shack had been. She felt something move beside her, and looked down to see the girl clinging to her leg. The child was black too, her hands, her dress her face, even her hair covered with a layer of black ash.

Sophie looked across the creek. The brown prairie with its tinge of sagebrush green looked colorful now against the nearer fire-blackened land. She could see a plume of dust rising from the horizon across the creek, and leaning against the doorway of the sod house, she watched it come closer and closer. After a long while she saw it was a wagon, and then it drew close to the creek, and she saw figures in it. Two horses were pulling the wagon, and they started through the creek, but when they came to the other side, they stopped, seemingly unwilling to go farther. Smoke was still rising from the land. Was it hot? Sophie wondered. Is that why the horses hesitated? One of the figures in the wagon—a woman, Sophie could tell by her skirts—jumped out into the creek, filled a vessel with water, and poured it on the land in front of the horses. She repeated the action again and again, until finally the animals were persuaded to step onto the blackened land.

No sooner had the horses pulled the wagon from the creek than another figure jumped from it and ran to where the blackened shapes of Baby and Zack Wilson lay. Sophie saw her lean over the bodies, then turn away. She made jerking movements, and Sophie realized she was vomiting. The figure that had leaped into the creek approached her, and the two figures melted together. After a few minutes they moved back to the wagon.

The horses, apparently convinced now that walking on the still-smoking land would not hurt them, pulled the wagon up the gentle slope. One woman was driving and two were sitting behind, their arms around one another. Sophie watched the wagon advance, feeling simultaneously exhilarated and at rest, as though the ordeal she had been through had both lifted and calmed her. Perhaps it was the psyche's response to physical pain, she thought, a cool turning outward because concentrating on the self was agony. Perhaps it was the sudden surge of air and blood and brain when they had been deprived of it. Or perhaps it was the essentially foreign nature of the fire-blackened landscape.

Whatever the reason, she felt detached, almost as though she were floating, and for a moment she imagined herself in another age. She was an onlooker to a medieval mystery play, credulous, eager to grant mythic qualities to the mortals before her. The women who embraced in the wagon were Adam and Eve crossing a dark cathedral stage—no, Eve and Eve, loving one another as they would not be able to once they ate of the fruit and knew themselves as they truly were. She felt curiously moved, curiously envious of them. She had never to this moment thought Eden a particularly attractive paradise, based as it was on naivete, but she saw that the women in the cart had a passionate, loving intimacy forever closed to her. How strong it made them. What comfort it gave.

The wagon came closer, and Sophie saw with surprise that it was Lydia and Amy sitting behind, embracing and comforting one another. How very odd! She had thought it was Helen and Amy. But that couldn't be. Of course it couldn't be. Helen was dead.

It was then she realized how thoroughly exhausted she was in body and soul. The wagon drew close to the sod house, and she let the woman help her in. No, no, not in front, please. She'd rather lie in back. They put the sleeping boy on one side of her, and on the other the girl, who soon curled herself into the hollow of Sophie's body. There were blankets which reeked of the stable, but Sophie found she didn't care about the smell in the least as the women arranged them under the children's heads and then under hers. The boy still didn't waken, and almost as soon as the wagon moved off, the girl slept too.

Sophie stayed awake, looking at the sky, a wide blue vault without a single cloud. How far from Park Place she was. How unbelievable that just a few weeks ago she had sat in her spacious office, beautifully dressed and groomed, editors, writers, and artists coming in and out, checking with her, making sure everything was as she wanted. And now she lay covered with dirt and black ash, dressed in men's clothes, lying on top of a filthy blanket in the back of a wagon. And men had tried to kill her. My Lord, people had wanted her dead.

And why? Of all the reasons, the one that astonished most was her Indian blood. It had never made a difference to her; she had never felt it important. Indeed, almost from the time she could remember, she had found her grandmother's ways and ideas alien and turned away from them. But to Rodman and his cohorts, the Indian blood made the difference between respect and disrespect, and in a land where law was weak, that translated easily into the difference between life and death.

Had Helen found that out, too? It no longer seemed in the least likely to Sophie that her sister had simply fallen down the stairs. It was much easier to imagine a violent quarrel, and then hands reaching out, pushing, and the gasp of surprise, the sudden intake of air as Helen had fallen. Rodman could have done it, gotten rid of a nuisance as easily as the children got rid of prairie gophers. Or Amy Travers could have done it, this woman she had only to turn her head to see, whose soft sobbing she could hear. She had loved Helen, but that could also be a path to violence.

Sophie was in a frame of mind which encompassed these contradictory possibilities without demanding resolution. It would all come together in time, she was sure. Her last thought before she slept was that she would know the truth. Of that she was as certain as she had ever been of anything.

* * *

Sophie slept nearly twenty-four hours. When she awoke Tuesday morning, she was very still and very sore, but she felt herself again, was even able to see some humor in her situation. Just yesterday morning she had been imagining herself an investigator of sorts, a female version of Monsieur Dupin, except superior, because she knew life didn't lend itself to logic as readily as Dupin thought. Well, it didn't lend itself so well to her brand of investigation either. She couldn't recall that Dupin had even hobbled home in such a sorry state.

Mrs. Syms came in check on her, and while the housekeeper was fluffing and bustling and clucking, Sophie thought how safe Dupin had kept himself—and how wise he was to do so. In *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, he'd gotten his main clue by reading newspaper accounts of the witnesses who heard the cries.

Witnesses who heard the cries. The thought brought her up short. There might be two in Helen's death. The landing was not so far from the front door. Voices would have carried down the stairs, if not words, and Esther and Sally playing on the front porch might have heard.

"Mrs. Syms, how is Esther? Is she better now?"

"Much better. She's slept almost as much as you. I wanted her to take another nap this afternoon, but Sally came in to play with her after lunch, and when I tried to shoo her out, Esther said she wanted her to stay, so they're playing. I thought that's a good sign."

"I must talk to them."

"Oh no, you must rest some more."

"No, I want to talk to the girls."

"Mrs. Dymond, perhaps you should... well, wouldn't you be more comfortable after you've bathed and dressed?" The housekeeper paused. "Well, what I mean is, we couldn't get you very clean last night."

Sophie looked down at her hands and arms and saw what the housekeeper meant. There was still soot embedded in her skin and under her nails. She'd be lucky if one more bath took care of it.

In fact, she bathed twice before she felt clean. Then she put on the cream-and-lavender dress. It wasn't the time of day for it, but it was Esther's favorite. Before Sophie left her room, she pinned the bold butterfly brooch to her left shoulder.

Esther was sitting up in bed—perhaps because there was no room for her to lie down? Sally's crazed-looking dolls had the pillow, and Sally herself was sitting cross-legged on the end of the bed. She was looking into a stereoscope. "Here, this one's Niagara Falls. You can practically see the water move!" She handed Esther the stereoscope, and then she saw Sophie. "Aunt Sophie, what happened to your cheek?"

Sophie put a hand up to a large ugly-looking bruise, one of many she had, but the only one of which showed. "I fell. It will go away." She moved some of the stereoscopic photographs on the bed so she could sit by Esther. "How are you feeling?" she asked the girl.

Esther only nodded.

"It's a very sad thing, Tom dying. I'll miss him very much. But he had a nice life. He was happy when he was alive, and that's what we should remember."

The girl was silent, then asked, "What did you do with him?"

"Sally and I buried him out behind the carriage house. We picked some petunias and put them on his grave, and maybe when you feel like it, we can plant some flowers there, pansies maybe, something that will grow in the shade."

Esther jammed the stereoscope to her face and didn't respond.

"There are some questions I want to ask you girls. I hope they won't be too hard for you to answer."

"What, Aunt Sophie? Ask me! Ask me!" Sally demanded loudly. "I bet I can answer anything!"

"I didn't mean 'hard' because you might not know the answers, but 'hard' because it may be difficult to talk about. It's about the day your mother fell down the stairs."

Sally looked her expectantly. Esther kept the stereoscope pressed to her face.

"You two were playing on the front porch after school, and then, when you came in, you found your mother."

Sally nodded. Esther didn't move.

"What I want to know is whether you heard anything while you were on the porch."

"Like what?" Sally asked.

"Oh, voices from inside, maybe."

"Sure we did," Sally said.

Sophie looked at Esther. She had still not moved. She seemed frozen with the stereoscope to her face. "Whose voices were they, Sally?"

"Oh, I don't know that. I mean, one was my mother's, I'm pretty sure, but I don't know about the other one. All we could hear were just like, you know, the sounds of the voices going up and down."

"The one besides your mother's. Was it a man's voice or a woman's?"

"Oh, a man's voice, for sure."

"No!" Esther shouted. She dropped the stereoscope and it fell clattering to the floor. "You're a liar!" she screamed at Sally, her face contorted, the tendons standing out in her neck.

"What's wrong with you, Esther?" Sally asked, bewildered.

"You're a liar!"

"I'm not lying, I'm not," Sally said, her eyes appealing to Sophie.

Sophie put up a hand out to Sally to be silent; then she asked Esther, "What do mean? Did you hear something else? Another voice?"

"It wasn't a man! It wasn't! It was mother and some lady, yes, one of her friends."

"Esther, that's not true!" Sally interjected. "I remember you said it sounds like mother and father quarreling again, like they used to do at night."

Esther's eyes flew to Sophie, her entire face taugth and terrified.

And suddenly Sophie understood. "Oh, Esther, oh, dear little girl. It wasn't your father. It wasn't." She saw suspicion join the fear in the girl's eyes. "He was somewhere else," Sophie said. "When it happened, he was somewhere else, and people saw him. He couldn't have been here."

Esther shut her eyes and leaned toward Sophie, then collapsed against her and began to sob. Sophie stroked her hair, wiped her tears. "Oh my dear, my dear little girl, you've thought that all along. How hard it's been, being afraid someone would ask about the voices and loving your father so much, and thinking he'd done something dreadful. But he didn't hurt your mother, he didn't. And it will be all right for you now." The girl's body was against her, warm, with fast-beating heart. Sophie rubbed her back, felt the delicate ribs and vertebrae, thought how fragile she was, how fragile she was.

There was a touch on her arm, adn when Sphie turned her head, she saw Sally looking forlorn. She gathered the younger girl into her arms, and the three of them embraced on the bed, finding comfort and warmth and closeness.

When Esther had fallen asleep, Sophie loosened the child's arms from around her, moved the dolls, and gentle laid her head on the pillow. Sally was still very much awake, so Sophie took her hand and they tiptoed from the room, Sophie the slower because she was limping slightly.

Donwstairs in the drawing room, Anna May was waiting. "Oh, Sophie, I called, and Mrs. Syms said you were awake and feeling so much better. I knew you'd want to know about Amy."

I know about Amy, Sophie thought. She wasn't here. She didn't kill my sister.

"She's still very upset, but Lydia's with her," Anna May was saying.

Anna May was talking about yesterday, Sophie realized, about Amy's reaction to Baby's death. "I... I was surprised she reacted so strongly. I never sensed that she was... well, involved with Baby personally. Helping her was simply a duty, and not a very pleasant one for her. Or at least that's the impression she gave."

"You may be right. Baby's situation shocked Amy, don't you know, and I'm sure she found it hard to be sympathetic. But she didn't turn her back on Baby, no matter how she felt about her, about her life." She paused a moment. "But maybe that doesn't seem like enough to her now. Maybe her sadness is regret that she couldn't be friendly, more... more sisterly toward Baby." Anna May looked down. "Helen could do that, d'you know, take some woman whose habits she found completely foreign, and look beyond the difference to where things are the same."

After a moment she looked up at Sophie again. "Would you like me to drive you down to the sheriff's office? Lydia went down yesterday to tell him about Zack and Baby. He sent some men out to... to take care of them. Anyway, I know you'll want to tell him what you saw."

"There's something I want to check first." Looking at Anna May, Sophie realized that this was the first time she'd seen her when she wasn't smiling and bright. Sophie had always thought she wanted Anna May to drop her cheery mask, but now that she had done so, Sophie felt a curious letdown. All the determination that had gone into Anna May's smiling good cheer—it was sad to see it give way. "How tired you must be, Anna May. This has been hard on you, hasn't it?"

"It's partly Paul. He was gone all day yesterday looking for Rodman, and when he got home last night and heard what had happened, he was certain Rodman had been involved."

"He was right about that."

"Paul was like a wild man when I told him about you and the fire. I don't think he slept at all last night. And he left before dawn, looking for Rodman again."

"And you didn't sleep all night either, I'd venture. Why don't you go on home and rest."

Sophie walked the older woman to the door. Sally followed Anna May outside into the sunshine and sat down on the porch steps. Sophie closed the door and rang for Mrs. Syms. "There was a bandbox in the linen closet upstairs some months ago," she said when the housekeeper came. "Esther told me that some of Helen's papers had been put into it, but when we looked for them, we found the box wasn't there any more."

"That closet was so crowded, it was gettin' hard to get sheets and pillow covers in and out. I had one of the maids pack up some of the things in there to clear it out a little. I had no idea the missus' correspondence was in that old bandbox."

"Where did the things get packed away?"

"The tank room, most likely. Probably in one of the trunks up there."

"Thank you, Mrs. Syms." Sophie made her way upstairs, favoring her left ankle. Before she went to the sheriff to tell him about what Rodman had done at the Wilson homestead, she wanted to see if there wasn't something that might connect him to Helen's death. She had seen Rodman's capacity for violence, knew he worked for those who might have felt threatened by Helen's activities. And now she knew as well there had been a man arguing with Helen before she died. It might be a long shot to hope she would find evidence in Helen's correspondence that it had been Rodman, but it was the one place she could think to look.

There were many trunks in the tank room, and Sophie opened several before she saw a bandbox. She lifted off the lid, anxious to get at what was inside, but what she saw was not correspondence. Instead there were ribbons, bright red ones, pale blue ones, velvet, satin, a richness of color and texture. She took the bandbox from the trunk, intending to carry it downstairs when she went. It belonged down there with Esther and Sally, not locked away up here.

The next trunk was full of old books, the next had a leopardskin saddlecloth packed on top. It was edged in scarlet, with a coat of arms and a gilded number fifteen in the corner. Sophie lifted it out, realizing it was from the King's Hussars, and thinking it must have been James' father's. She laid the fur blanket aside and saw another bandbox, this one covered with scenes from the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. When she opened the lid, she saw what she had been looking for—paper, a confusion of papers.

The first thing she picked up was a bill for three hundred dollars from the Bellavance Emporium for a set of china. There were other bills, then a marriage certificate testifying that Helen Marie Talbot had married James Archibald Stevenson on August 3, 1874. Beneath that was a packet of letters, all in different-sized envelopes and addressed in a variety of handwritings. She opened and scanned several, quickly concluding they were all about her mother. A detective named Marcus Kerrison wrote that he was certain that he had located Julia Talbot in Leavenworth, Kansas. The next letter, dated the following year, was on Pinkerton National Detective Agency letterhead. An operative in the Denver office wrote that he was investigating reports Julia was in that city. The next letter, dated that same year, was from a detective agency Sophie had never heard of. It reported that Julia was in Socorro, New Mexico.

Sophie leaned back against a wall. She was exhausted, and though it was evening, the attic still held the day's heat, and she wanted to take the letters downstairs where it was cool. She spread them out in front of her. There must be twenty of them, and that probably meant twenty different stories about Julia. What had kept Helen going? Why hadn't she become discouraged? If not from finding Julia, then with detectives who continued to provide her with unreliable information.

Well, the least she could do was spend a few minutes right now examining the fruit of what had been months, years, or labor for her sister. She opened the rest of the envelopes, one after another, until she came to a salutation different from the rest. "My dearest Helen," one of the letters began, prompting Sophie to turn it over and look for the signature. There it was, far down, in a delicate feminine hand. She squinted at the signature, then her eyes grew wide, her mind at first refusing to accept what she read. "Julia Talbot," the letter was signed. And just above the signature, in the same fine hand, were the words, "Your loving mother."

- Chapter 18 -

"My dearest Helen,

"My dearest little Helen," I almost write, because you were so small when I saw you last. And now you have children much older than when I remember you. How odd that seems to me, and how sad it makes me feel.

"Your letter came as quite a shock, I must confess, and I wanted to ignore it, throw it away unopened, not because of you, dear Helen, but because of myself. So many years have been layered on top of pain and guilt, and I was reluctant to have them torn away.

"But as I stood with your letter in my hand, and I saw your name, your writing, and I could not set the envelope aside. And once I had opened it and read your dear and loving words, I could not help but answer. For you to be so full of forgiveness, so anxious to see me, after I left you, deserted you and your sister—oh, my dear Helen, how could I not respond to such love, not tell you how much I love you and Sophie, how I have prayed for you, thought of you daily, hourly, over the last thirty-six years.

"But, my dear, I think these words must be the last between us. You have your life, a good life with your husband and daughters. I know Sophie is happy and successful, and I think we would be wrong to open the past. I wish I could put my arms around you as I write this, so you would know I speak from love, know how much I love you and your sister. But even as I think these words, I can imagine how hollow they will sound to you, how little they will seem to suit my past actions and my present wish that we not meet.

"Paul Bellavance lives near you. He is a good, kind man. Speak to him, and perhaps he can phrase better what I am saying so poorly. There are times, dear Helen, when it is better to leave the past alone. I am certain that is true, no matter how much I yearn to see you and your children. And so I am leaving Denver. By the time you receive this letter, I will have gone. But wherever I am, I shall still hold you in you in my heart.

"You loving mother,

"Julia Talbot

* * *

Sophie stared at the letter, for a moment unable to sort out her feelings. Julia. Her mother. These were her words, her her thoughts, and Sophie was as amazed by them as she would have been by whispers from a ghost. Helen had found Julia! And then lost her again. How could Julia do that, turn her back after so much work to find her? Well, it was probably no more difficult than it had been to leave two small children, babies really, in the first place.

Sophie checked the unkind thought. The words in the letter sounded so sincere. And there was the evidence of the letter itself. If Julia did not love her children, why would she have bothered to write?

But if she did love them, why wouldn't she see Helen? It was little enough to do for one who was flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood. What was this woman like, that she would flee instead?

Sophie had never been sure if she remembered her mother. She had something that was like a memory. In it, a woman with dark brown hair picked her up. It was outside, because the sun was shining on the woman's hair, and a breeze was blowing it. They must have been standing some way up the side of a gentle incline, because Sophie had looked down to see soldiers on horseback galloping by. That was all there was to it, and she didn't know if it had really happened or if she had imagined it. The one person in the world who might know had written the letter she was holding, and she felt a tenuous connection with her past producing a strange emotion in her, a comforting feeling which was all the odder for her not having suspected she wanted it.

But where had Julia gone? Sophie opened the remaining letters. One was from the Pinkerton detective who had found her mother. Julia Talbot, he reported, was running a successfully millinery establishment in Denver under the name Julia Martin. And he gave the address. Another of the letters was from the same detective, reporting no success in finding where Julia had gone. "I hope you will forgive the delay in responding to your query," the letter ended. But Helen had obviously not been entirely forgiving, for here was a letter from the Bloom and Dignan Agency on the same matter. Despite "lengthy inquiry," they reported no success in determining where Julia Martin had gone.

"Mrs. Dymond, are you up there?" It was Mrs. Syms.

"Yes, I am."

"It's so dark. Why haven't you turned on the light?"

Sophie had not realized how dark it was growing. "I lost track of the time. I'll be right down."

"There's an important message for you."

"I'll be right there."

She put all the letters back in the bandbox, except the one from her mother, which she tucked in her pocket. She put the leopard blanket on top on the box, closed the trunk, and started down the stairs. She saw the bandbox of ribbons she had set aside and thought about fetching it, but decided she would get it later.

"Was your search successful?" Mrs. Syms asked.

Sophie paused at the bottom of the stairs, taken aback by the housekeeper's question. She hadn't really found what she was looking for, had she? There had been no mention in the papers she had found of Jake Rodman, nothing to tie him to Helen, except perhaps for the fact he was a detective. Was it possible Helen had hired him to look for Julia? But that made no sense. She wouldn't have hired someone who worked for the Stock Growers' Association.

No, she hadn't found what she had been looking for; indeed, the only name she recognized in Helen's correspondence besides her mother's was Paul Bellavance's. Interesting that her mother would send Helen to Paul for counsel and comfort. He must have been exactly the same when he was a young man as he was now, she decided, the sort of person who was natural to that role: calm, wise, enough at ease with himself so he would view the situation of others objectively. After all these years, did her mother still feel some regret she hadn't married Paul?

"Did you find what you needed?" Mrs. Syms repeated.

"No, not really. Perhaps I'll look again later. There was a message?"

"The sheriff phoned."

"Yes, I'll go there first thing in the morning."

"He said he has to talk to you tonight. I asked him to come out here, but he said he needs to see you at the Inter Ocean Hotel. As soon as you can get there. After everything you've been through... well, it's not right, and I told him so. But he kept saying you have to go down there." Her head bobbed as she spoke, her silver spectacles flashing indignantly.

"It's all right, Mrs. Syms. Please get one of the boys to drive me."

The young man who helped her into the phaeton a quarter of an hour late was the same one who'd driven her to the Clarion office. "Thank you very much for taking me out so late," Sophie said.

He blushed and avoided her eyes. "No trouble, ma'am. No trouble at all." He took a left at the first corner, then turned right down Hill Street.

As they approached downtown, Sophie thought how deserted the streets were. There wasn't a person in sight, and the only sounds breaking the quiet came from several blocks away, where loud music and raucous whooping could be heard. Probably that's where everyone was, Sophie thought.

Listening to the horse's hooves thud softly on the fine dust of the street, she leaned back against the leather seat. She fought against closing her eyes, because she knew if she did, she would sleep instantly. She rolled her head slightly to the right, looked out of the phaeton, and noted there were alongside the opera house.

And then a shot rang out. And then another, and the boy fell against her.

"What!" Sophie gasped. "What is it? Who's shooting?" She reached out for the reins and stopped the horse.

The boy started to right himself, then seemed to think better of it. "Better get down, ma'am. I don't know who it is, but they're sure enough shootin' at us."

She felt something damp, looked down and saw the boy's arm was bleeding. "They've hit you. Is it bad?"

"Just the arm--"

The sound of another shot cut off his words.

"We can't stay here," Sophie said. "Can you walk? Can you run?"

He nodded, but his face was pale and clammy-looking, and she wondered just how bad his wound really was. Another shot rang out. Sophie heard it hit the side of the carriage, heard the horse whinny, felt the phaeton move as the animal made frightened sidesteps.

They had to flee. She jumped out on the far side of the carriage, being careful to favor her bad ankle, then helped the boy. Where could they run? Where could they hide? The nearest building was the opera house. It was dark; there was obviously no play tonight, but it could still provide shelter. Keeping low, she ran to its huge walnut door and pulled on it. It was open! She motioned for the boy to follow, and opening the door as little distance as possible, she urged him in, then went after.

When she shut the door behind her, it was very dark. The only light came through the window from a streetlight outside. Sophie could make out a ticket counter to her immediate right. Directly ahead was a short flight of stairs going up to a hallway where a large opening on the right led into the auditorium.

They had to move on. Whoever had shot at them might have seen where they had gone, and follow. She led the boy up the short flight of stairs and down the hallway past the auditorium entrance. Perhaps the hallway would lead them to some sort of rear exit. In any case, she liked the closed, protected feeling of it much more than the idea of the auditorium's openness.

She gently urged the boy down the hall. It got darker as they got farther away from the windows at the front, and Sophie put her left hand on the wall to feel her way. Suddenly the wall ended, and she saw they they could turn left down another wide passage. She tried to orient herself with outside, and decided this passage must be to the opera house's other main entrance, the one on Seventeenth Street. That would do them no good. If whoever shot at them was still out there, he might well be able to use the Seventeenth Street door from his vantage point. It wasn't that far from the Hill Street entrance.

She put her hands out in front of her and walked forward until she touched another wall. She felt along it to the right until she came to an opening, a small back hallway, she decided, which must lead deeper into the building. "Here," she whispered to the boy. Her left hand on the wall again, she led him down the hall—until it ended in a water closet. "We'll have to go back," she whispered, trying to keep fear and frustration out of her voice. They had retraced their path only a short way when she felt a door in the wall on which she now had her left hand. She opened it quietly, very quietly, and saw that it led into the stage wings.

She had taken a few steps toward the stage, when suddenly the lights went on! Bright arc lights, they blinded her for a moment, stunned her after that, so it took her a moment to realize the lights must have been turned on from the front of the opera house. Whoever was after them couldn't have advanced any farther, and as long as he was at the front, she and the boy were safe. Standing in the wings as they were, no one in the front part of the opera house could see them.

But they had to hide. Someone was in her looking for them, and they couldn't just stand here waiting to be discovered. She looked around for a place, and saw the boy's face. He was deathly pale, on the verge of fainting. They needed a place he could lie down.

Looking to her right, she saw a box entrance. She put her arm around the boy, and walked him to it slowly, quietly. Once inside, she helped him lie on the carpeted floor and knelt beside him. His jacket was soaked with blood. She had no idea how bad his wound was, but she knew she could not let him to continue to bleed this way.

"Have you a knife?" she whispered.

"In my pocket. The right one."

She reached in and got the knife, a small two-bladed affair, and started to make a cut in her petticoat so she could tear off the bottom and bind his arm. But then she realized the ripping noise would be too much noise. She thought of her stocking, and as quietly as she could, she took it off and would it tightly around the boy's arm.

When she had finished, she shut her eyes and listened hard. Did she hear footsteps? Yes, definitely footsteps. Someone was walking slowly down the dress-circle stairs. Or was he closer? She didn't want to risk looking over the edge of the box, but how else to see who it was, where he was? She examined the partial wall which surrounded the front of the box. A wine-colored plush fabric covered it. She pulled at the fabric and saw it was only loosely attached to a wirework screen. Working silently, she pulled enough of the fabric aside so that she had a small opening through which she could see.

Yes, there he was. Rodman. He had reached the bottom of the dress circle and was stepping onto the parquet. The muzzle of his rifle glinted in the light from the arc lamps on the walls. Unfortunate that he had not illuminated the great overhead chandelier, Sophie found herself thinking. The refracted light from its crystals would no doubt show off the gun barrel to even more dramatic effect.

She shook her head. These were the thoughts of exhaustion, and too much was at stake to let her mind wander. Rodman was moving slowly up the parquet aisle, turning his head from side to side, looking behind each row of seats. He reached the orchestra, scanned the stage, then looked up at the boxes. Sophie thought his eyes lingered a moment on the box in which she and the boy were hiding, and her heart pounded so hard she was sure he could hear it. But then his eyes moved on, and he slowly turned around. He walked back up the parquet aisle, then up the dress-circle stairs. She saw him move through the wide opening into the entry hall. He would search there now. He would go down the hall, see the small passageway, follow it to the stage wings. And then he'd surely look in the boxes.

They had to move on! But where?

She raised her head above the box rail just enough so she could see the stage. It was set with a garden scene. They could hide behind one of the pieces of scenery, she thought, behind the backdrop perhaps, but it would be only a matter of time until he found them. Then her eyes fastened on the oblong shape on the left side of the stage floor. A trap! Yes, and there was another one on the other side. That's what they should do, go down into the trap room, but they would have to expose themselves so long to do it, have to walk out on the stage, slide the door to the trap back, and then climb down into it.

And then she thought: there must be a center trap. She looked farther back on the stage to where two cardboard barriers painted to look like marble rails jutted out, one from each side of the stage. Between the barriers was an opening meant to represent a gate to the stairway painted on the backdrop. And on the floor of the opening, she could just make out the outlines of the center trap. It would be possible to crouch down behind one of the cardboard barriers and slide the trap open. Getting down into it, then, would require only a moment's exposure.

She leaned down to the wounded boy: "Can you walk? Not far, just a little way."

Without opening his eyes, he nodded.

Sophie took off her other shoe and stocking, noted how discolored and swollen her ankle was, and then quickly took off the boy's boots and socks and shoved all the footgear behind a drapery. It was crucial that their footsteps make no noise, essential that they not slip on the stage boards. She helped him up, put one of his arms around her shoulder, and trying to be quick and yet utterly silent, walked him out of the box and through the wing until they came to the cardboard rail. She helped him lie down behind it; then she crawled to the edge. There was the trap, but the finger groove for opening it was on the far side of the cover, and she couldn't reach it from where she was hidden.

Then she heard him walking. Rodman. Where was he? In the narrow hall! He was coming down the back hallway! She moved out into the opening between the barriers, put her fingers in the groove, pushed down on the trap cover with the palm of her hand, and pulled back at the same time, praying it would open quietly. It slid back noiselessly, and she looked down into it. The trap mechanism, which could be raised and lowered from the trap opening to the floor of the trap room below, was only a few feet below the level of the stage. She roused the boy and got his feet into the trap opening. The suddenly, unexpectedly, his whole body slipped forward, and he lay fainted on top of the trap mechanism. Quickly she got in after him, half-expecting that his weight would start the mechanism descending. But instead of lowering them to the floor of the trap room, it stayed in place. Probably locked, Sophie thought.

Again she heard Rodman, closer now. She reached up to slide the trap cover shut. It had a metal handle on the underside, and she grabbed it, pulled on it. Frantic to shut the cover, she pulled too hard, and it slammed closed. The noise rang in Sophie's ears, echoed through the opera house.

Now he'd know where to look for them! They had to find a way out! And it was almost completely dark. Some light came from right above them, thin lines of light from around the center trap opening, and there were similar lines of light where the left- and right-side traps were. But it was so little! She could hardly see anything, and she knew she had to climb down from the trap mechanism and find a door.

She pushed her feet over the side and found a foothold on a metal support. She made her way down inch by inch, and it seemed forever before she touched the floor. Then she put her hands out in front of her until she came to a wall. Her back against it, she edged her way around, feeling for a door.

She bumped into something in the corner. Reaching out, she felt a wooden handle. She took hold of it and moved the object. It was heavy, very heavy, a long polelike thing. She felt it, moving it through her hands until she came to the end, a heavy metal hook. What was it? What was the hook meant to fit into? And then she realized the instrument was for closing the trap from the trap-room floor. One could reach the trap cover with it, fit the hook into the metal handle, and slide the cover shut.

She heard him! He was on the stage. And then suddenly the side trap directly above her head slid open. She was standing enough away from the wall so that the light from above flooded down on her. Rodman was looking down. She saw his face, saw him put his rifle to his shoulder. She screamed and plunged into the dark on the other side of the room.

He began to fire wildly, randomly, into the darkness. The firing stopped for a moment, then started again. The noise was deafening. Sophie was crouched down behind the trap mechanism, and she could feel the room vibrate with the noise from the rifle, rock with the impact of the bullets. He was mad, she thought, a madman.

She felt fury pour over her as though a vial had broken, and clutching at the long hook she had dragged with her, she waited for another break in the shooting. It came, and she looked at the open trap to see him withdrawing the rifle. She edged out of her hiding place, waited until she saw him lower the rifle into the trap again, and then she charged.

She pushed the hook up into the opening, shoving with all her strength. She felt it hit him, heard him grunt in surprise. And then she twisted it and pulled down.

Yes! She had him. Where, she wasn't sure, but she could feel the hook was in his flesh, and she pulled with all her strength. She heard him cry out in rage, felt the hook move as he tried to roll away. And then he grabbed the handle, pulled it out of her grasp. And she knew she had to run again.

She looked around, and now, with the light from the open trap, she could see two doors, one very near her, the other across the trap room. She decided on the far door. It would put her farther away from where Rodman had last seen her.

But the boy? What about the boy? She looked at the trap mechanism. He couldn't be seen from the floor, and now that Rodman knew where she was, he wouldn't bother with opening the other traps. No, unless she'd wounded him too badly, he'd be coming down here after her. Probably there were stairs behind the stage, and he'd be coming down them into the trap room to find her. When he did, he wouldn't see the boy.

She threw open the trap-room door and saw an exit right across the hall. She flung herself against it, but it was locked, and it was a solid wood door. There was no glass she could break in it, nor were there any other windows in this short hallway. Other doors opened off it, but they were on an inside wall. She was sure they led to dressing rooms, useless places to hide, because once she was discovered, she would be cornered.

At the west end of the hall, a narrow stairway led upward. As she frantically surveyed the situation, she kept glancing at it anxiously, thinking Rodman might at any moment appear on those stairs.

But no! He'd been on the other side of the stage. These stairs were probably one of a pair, and he'd be coming down the other ones, entering the trap-room door from the other side, and when he saw she wasn't there, he'd come out the trap-room door she'd just existed. If only she had something heavy and could wait for him to open the door and deliver him a blow. If only she still had the hooked pole! But all she carried was the boy's pocketknife, and that was useless. Before she could do Rodman any harm with it, she would she shot dead.

She ran for the stairs at the end of the hallway. Her only hope was to get up to the stage level and then run for one of the front entrances.

As she neared the top of the stairway, she tripped on her skirts and fell to her knees. As she scrambled to her feet, she saw the trap-room door open, saw Rodman come out. She ran up the few remaining stairs. He'd see her! Surely he'd see her!

Just as she reached the top of the stairway, a shot rang out, a bullet ricocheted off the wall.

What could she do? He was so close now. If she ran across the stage and up the aisle of the auditorium to one of the main entrances, he'd pick her off easily.

Almost without thinking, she rapidly climbed a ladder hooked against the back wall of the stage. She thought it would take her to the rigging loft. She wasn't certain of it, but she was sure it was dark above, and she wanted the darkness to hide in.

She reached the top of the ladder and found herself on a suspension bridge which ran across the back of the stage. She lay down on the bridge, hoping Rodman wouldn't be able to see her.

He burst from the top of the stairs, and from where she lay, she could see for the first time what she had done to him. The hook must have sunk into the muscles of his left shoulder, because his coat and shirt were ripped and bloodied there. She thought she could even see red, gaping flesh.

He was breathing hard, his eyes darting around. "Goddammit, where are you?" he screamed. His eyes came to the ladder. She lay perfectly still. He lifted his head and scanned the area above the stage. "Up there, are ya?" He lifted the rifle. She could see it pained him to hold it. He grimaced, and shots rang out.

Again, they were random, scattered. He hadn't seen her! He didn't know exactly where she was. He emptied the gun. He paused to load it, then lifted it to his shoulder again. But this time he didn't shoot. She saw him lower the weapon, then nod to himself.

"Well, you just stay up there, hear?" And then, more quietly: "It'll be better this way, anyhow. Look like an accident, maybe." He pulled a box of matches from his pocket, slid it open, pulled one out, and struck it on his boot. "See this?" He held the burning match up. "Do ye see this? You seem to be havin' bad luck with fires." He laughed and tossed the match into the side curtains. Its fringe quickly caught fire, and Sophie could see flames.

Rodman walked to the side of the stage and started down the stairs to the auditorium, keeping himself turned so that the rifle still pointed to the stage. Did he want her to run? Did he hope she'd try to escape so he could shoot her?

She had to do something, and she realized it was little use being quiet now. She got up and ran across the suspension bridge, then across a short catwalk. She threw herself into the rigging loft just as another shot rang out. He'd seen her move, but he couldn't hit her now, not where she was. And he wouldn't come up the ladder after her. He'd just leave her to the rigging loft and let the flames do their work.

She looked around at a mass of wheels, ropes, pulleys, and levers. She saw the windlasses, saw which ones raised and lowered the pieces of scenery in the overhead grooves, which one operated the drop curtain. She could lower the curtain by herself, she knew. A child could do it, since the cord attached to the curtain and running through the windlass was balanced by a counterweight. And if she lowered the drop curtain far enough, fast enough, it might smother the flames in the side curtain.

But what good would that do? Rodman would simply come back and start another fire. Or perhaps pursue her and gun her down.

Then she saw a windlass which didn't seem to be attached to scenery or curtain. What could it be for? And then she remembered the chandelier in the auditorium, a huge heavy thing of brass and crystal. It hung over the parquet, and this was the rope and windlass to lower and raise it.

She peered down from the rigging loft and saw the stage was empty, but she could hear Rodman still, hear his footsteps. He must be in the parquet, she thought. In her mind's eye she could see him backing slowly up the aisle. She pulled the boy's knife from the pocket, opened it, and sawed frantically at the chandelier rope. She ran the knife back and forth, back and forth, until she was almost through it, and suddenly it gave. She heard a counterweight fall somewhere below, and then an instant after, a great tinkling crash. And... yes, a cry of pain, and surprise.

She'd got him!

But before she went to see exactly what she had accomplished, she cut through the rope to the drop curtain too. There was the sound of rope running through pulleys, then a great dusty thump. She looked down and saw the curtain had caught most of the flames.

She crossed the catwalk, the bridge, climbed down, and went to the front of the stage. She could see Rodman sprawled in the aisle, motionless, a great brass section of the chandelier lying across his groin.

Slowly, exhaustedly, she turned to the few flames still burning. She pulled a curtain down from a nearby box and beat them out.

Then she limped down the stairs, off the steps, and approached Rodman. Before she did anything else, even before she went for help, there was something she was determined to find out. His eyes were closed. He seemed unconscious. She slapped him. "Rodman!" And then again, until he had raised his eyelids a little.

"Did you kill my sister?" she demanded.

He shook his head, and his eyes rolled back.

She slapped him again. Perhaps he had not understood her. "Did you kill my sister? Helen Stevenson. Did you kill her?"

He looked at her, his eyes swimming. "No," he said groggily.

"Who killed her?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I never even heard of your sister."

"You're lying. You hated her, all of you, because she helped the Wilsons."

"I never heard of her."

"She was Baby Wilson's friend. She tried to help her."

"Help... Baby?" He struggled with a thought. "Was she... one of them temperance ladies used to go out there?" He looked at Sophie, saw her nod. "Hell, nobody cares about that. Christ, who'd care?"

She rocked back on her heels, stunned. What Helen had been doing hadn't mattered to these men, hadn't mattered to any of them. The thought focused her angle, focused the hate she felt for the man on the floor. She raised her hand and slapped him, and then again. His head jerked with the repeated blows. His groans grew fainter.

It was the sound of her own sobbing that finally brought her to herself. Her hand raised to deliver another blow, she heard herself and stopped, horrified at what she was doing. Beating a man who was probably dying. My Lord, what had come over her?

She had to get out of her, had to get help. She pulled herself to her feet and managed to stagger up the aisle.

And at the foot of the dress-circle stairs she ran into someone, quite literally bumped right into him.

She looked up.

It was James.

And she fell into his arms.

- Chapter 19 -

"The boy," she said. "In the center trap. You must get him out.

He looked at her, puzzled.

"They boy who drove me. He was wounded. Please. He's in the center trap, and you must get him out."

Other men were coming into the auditorium now. There was Paul Bellavance, and one or two other faces she thought she'd seen before. "The center trap!" James called out. "There's a wounded man in there! Get him!"

He sat down on the dress-circle stairs, holding her all the while. She buried her head in his chest, glad he was here, glad for his nearness.

"Hey, this un's dead," someone called out.

She twisted around, thinking they meant the boy, but no, the voice came from the man bending over Rodman. Up on the stage, she could see them gently lifting the boy from the trap. "He's been bleeding a lot," someone shouted. "But he's still alive."

She put her head back on James' chest, glad it was over.

"I just got back," he said softly. "Mrs. Syms told me what happened out at the Wilsons', said you'd gone to see the sheriff. But it didn't seem right to me he'd want to meet you at the Inter Ocean, so I rode down here. And I saw the empty phaeton—the horse had pulled it that far. And then I thought I heard shots from up here. I shouted into the hotel for help to follow me, and then rode up here."

"He must have been waiting for me," Sophie said. "But how did he know we were coming?"

"I'd guess he's the one who called you. Probably just told Mrs. Syms he was the sheriff."

"Wouldn't she know his voice?"

"No reason she would." He seemed to sense that the explanation didn't fully satisfy her. "Sophie, I don't think the sheriff was in on this, if that's what you're thinking. Rodman wouldn't have wanted his help, for one thing. Sheriff Milsap isn't the brightest fellow around, or the most closed-mouthed. And Rodman wouldn't have needed him. He could manage all by himself to keep you from talking about what you saw at the Wilsons'."

"He wasn't the only one I saw."

He looked down in surprise. "Who else?"

"Huber, I think. George Huber." Leaning against James, his arm around her, she felt sleepy, so sleepy, but still she could tell something was troubling him. "What is it, James?"

"I just don't understand Huber's trying to harm you. Not after I told them to leave you alone. Rodman either. How would he dare to do what he did to you at the Wilsons'? But especially Huber. It just doesn't make sense."

Something was nagging at Sophie too, but she was too tired to think what it was. Tomorrow. She would remember tomorrow. And then she slept.

* * *

When she awakened the next morning, the thought was fully formed in her mind: if Rodman hadn't killed Helen, then who had? Not Huber, nor any of the big landowners. Rodman had made her see they hadn't sufficient motive. Helen's work hadn't been important enough to them to warrant violence. Not important enough—the idea made her angry, even though she knew that was an irrational response.

She sat up on the edge of the bed and rang for Connie. When the girl came, Sophie dressed quickly despite her sore muscles. Her ankle, she thought, hurt hardly at all. Perhaps it was simply a basis of comparison, she thought, smiling wryly to herself. Now that the rest of her body had been through a battering, a wrenched ankle had trouble getting attention.

Connie told her the sheriff was coming by at nine a.m., but Sophie had trouble focusing on what she would say to Milsap. In the forefront of her mind was an image of Helen standing on the landing, her back to the stairs, Helen arguing with a man. And Helen dead. Surely these things were connected. Who had been with Helen? Who had reason to push her down the stairs?

Just before she went to wait for the sheriff, she remembered the letter that she had found from her mother. "Connie, the dress I had on last night? Where is it?"

"Downstairs, ma'am. I thought I'd try to clean it, but I don't know. It's all black down one side."

"There's a letter in the pocket. Would you get it for me?"

The girl returned quickly, and when she had left, Sophie looked around for a place to put the envelope. She saw the slim leather-bound copy of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" on the bedside table, and she slipped the letter between its pages.

* * *

The sheriff was an overweight man in his mid-forties. The thin material of his light blue shirt stretched tight around his middle, and even though the day was not yet hot, there were dark perspiration ovals under his arms, almost to his waist. As Mrs. Symms showed him into the drawing room, he suddenly remembered he was still wearing his hat, and he snatched it off his head. But then he couldn't think what to do with it, and he awkwardly shifted it from one hand to the other.

"Mrs. Dymond, ma'am, I understand you witnessed the incident at the Wilson homestead yesterday."

"Yes, I was there."

"Well, ma'am, I wonder if you'd give me some idea what you saw."

She recounted it all for him, how she'd seen the Wilsons hanging from the cottonwood, the way Rodman had dragged her with the rope, how he'd tied her up and tried to use the fire to kill her.

"Was there anybody out there you could actually identify? Besides Rodman, of course."

"I think George Huber was one of them. I'm not absolutely certain, but there must be others you can talk to. Someone who overheard them planning the expedition or saw the group riding out there."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, nodding so vigorously the sweat flew. "I already got one fellow says Huber was in on it. I got a warrant out for him now."

"For Huber?"

Milsap nodded, and Sophie asked another question quickly, hoping to catch him off-guard. "Sheriff, did you call here last night?"

"Ma'am?"

She could tell from her face he had no idea what she was talking about. "Never mind. It's nothing important."

* * *

Amy Travers came not long after Milsap left. She put out her hand, and Sophie took it, struck once more by its heavy warmth. She deliberately kept hold of it a moment longer than necessary in an effort to deny the uneasiness Amy Travers aroused in her.

The schoolteacher's eyes were swollen, the whites stained pink. "I hope you'll forgive my coming by so early. Lydia suggested it."

"Yes, of course."

"She wanted me to give you this." Miss Travers held out a book, and Sophie took it, looking at the title. "The Friendships of Women," it was called, by William Alger.

"Thank you."

Miss Travers stood silently for a moment, then suddenly began to speak. "Since yesterday, I've felt such a need to talk to Helen." Her high, flat voice had a quaver in it. "Last night was worse for me than almost any time since she died. I think what I feel is almost a need to confess."

What was she saying? Sophie deliberately kept her voice calm. "Confess what, Miss Travers?"

"The way I've always felt about Baby. That's what's been bothering me most. I was never able to love her like Helen did. Whenever I'd look at her, I'd see her with men..." She broke off and gave a quick, convulsive shudder. "It was so grotesque, so horrible to me that she'd let men do that to her, again and again, as though she were merely a vessel of flesh, an animal, and nothing more. I couldn't get beyond that."

Sophie thought back to her first reaction to Baby, the way she had thought her eyes look like a clever animal's, her face like a monkey's face. She hadn't been as repulsed by that aspect of Baby as Miss Travers had, but neither could she say her response had been absolutely different.

"Well, I don't mean to burden you with this," Amy Travers said. "It isn't why I came. I wanted to tell you about the children. Lydia said you'd want to know. I'm going to keep them, raise them for Baby." She looked directly at Sophie as she spoke, as if to challenge her objections. "That's what Helen would have done."

At that moment, Esther burst into the room. "Have you seen my father?" she demanded. "I want to show him what Sally's learned."

"I haven't seen him this morning," Sophie said.

"Sally can ride the bicycle by herself now."

"Does it work? The front wheel--"

"Father had the carriage maker fix it. It's fine, and you should see Sally!"

They all went outside to watch Sally make a short, wobbly ride. She fell and the end of it, scooping up some dirt with her face, but by unspoken consent, her three watchers clapped instead of hurrying to her. "Oh, Sally, that was good!" Amy Travers exclaimed. "Can you do it again?" Sally, who had clearly considered calling it a day on account of injury, got up out of the dust and got on the bike again.

When Miss Travers left, Sophie decided to go see Joe. She still had the book Amy had given her, so she slipped it into her pocket as she started toward the Bellavance house. As she walked along, she thought how she had misjudged Amy by thinking her Helen's murderer. Indeed, she was about to conclude she had entirely misjudged Helen's death. She had learned something about herself last night when she had become aware she was beating the unconscious Rodman. There was violence in her nature, violence she hadn't been aware of before. Could she be projecting it onto what had happened to Helen, seeing violence where there was none?

And her conviction that it wasn't an accident--couldn't that be a product of her unwillingness to believe that one's fate was a matter of blind chance? She had always needed to feel that she was in control of what happened, that life was, in fact, controllable. Perhaps that made her fight too hard against the idea that death could have simply happened to Helen, just... happened one day.

She remembered Philip dying, and the way she had sat at his bedside willing him to be well, thinking she could dominate the cancer, make it go away if she just tried hard enough. And she had focused her mind on ridding him of it, focused all her energy, but still it grew, a dumb, unfeeling destroyer, oblivious to human wish. Surely that ought to have convinced her that the essence of life is a roll of the dice, a spin of the wheel, not a plan or plot. But perhaps she hadn't learned, hadn't wanted to. It was easier to think someone had killed Helen than to think she had just fallen, simply stumbled and been unable to catch herself. If there was a killer, then one could rant at the evil of his act, seek him out, seek revenge. But if Helen were the victim of pure happenstance, what then was one to do? Nothing, of course. Nothing at all.

- Chapter 19 - (continued)

The maid who answered the door at the Bellavance house told her Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Bellavance were in the front parlor. Would she like to join them?

“No, I don’t think so. I’ll go on upstairs.” She walked slowly up the stairway, still deep in her thoughts. She had such inner certainty that Helen had been killed. The feeling was so strong, it was hard to believe it was nothing more than the product of self-delusion, but perhaps that’s all it was.

She knocked quietly at the door to Joe’s room, turned the knob, and pushed it open. As usual, the nurse was knitting her black wool. And the Widow Bellavance was there too, standing on the other side of the room, holding a large rectangular object. It was the Landseer Stag, Sophie realized. The old woman must have taken the engraving off the wall to look at it more closely.

“Emile!” the old woman gasped, looking up at Sophie.

Sophie looked at her in puzzlement. What was she talking about? She’d said exactly the same thing yesterday when Sophie had been hurrying to the Wilsons’ and come across her downstairs.

“Emile,” the old woman said again, and then the surprised expression in her face turned to a hatred so intense, Sophie was stunned by its savagery. “Tu mens, Emile. You are a liar. You think I will not see how it is as Fort Martin, and so you never tell the truth, never, never. And I am your wife. Always you try to hide things from me, and you think you have success, but you are wrong, Emile. I see what is happening, I see with my own eyes, just as I see you now, hiding in the clothes of a woman.”

Suddenly the old woman raised the picture she was holding high over her head, and she brought it down on the edge of the oak washstand. The frame broke apart, and the glass broke, falling to the floor in pieces. The old woman bent over, picked up a foot-long shard and advanced toward Sophie, the sharp point of the fragment pointed at her. The end of the shard was squared off, but the edges of it cut into the old woman’s hand, and Sophie could see blood. It began to drip on the floor, but the widow seemed unaware of it.

“Madame Bellavance, please,” Sophie said. “You must put down the glass.”

“The old woman made a thrusting gesture with the shard. It was inches from Sophie’s breast. The nurse at Joe’s bedside began to weep. Sophie could hear her, and she could sense there was someone behind her in the hallway now, probably James and Paul. They must have heard the noise. But how could they help her? Sophie looked into the old woman’s eyes, and what she saw there told her the old woman would not hesitate to plunge the glass into her heart. She was maddened with age and hatred, walled up inside some fantasy of the past.

“Madame Bellavance, I am not Emile. I am Sophie Dymond, here visiting.”

“Menteur! You to lie to me.”

“I’m Joe Martin’s granddaughter. You know Joe.” Sophie glanced over at the bed and what she saw made her forget the Widow Bellavance. Joe’s eyes were open, looking at them. And then he was struggling to sit up, light fighting cloudiness in his eyes, his lips moving as if he were struggling to speak. Then suddenly he fell sideways. The nurse barely caught him, and his body hung over the edge of the bed. “Oh, my God!” Sophie cried out.

Her exclamation caused the widow to glance at the bed, and when she did, a hand closed around her wrist. Paul’s hand. He and James had come from behind Sophie, and Paul gently took the glass shard away from his mother. “You’ll hurt yourself,” she said softly.

“Yes, Jean-Paul.” As she gave up her weapon, all the fire went out of her. She seemed uninterested in her wounds, uninterested in Sophie or in anything as Paul led her from the room.

Sophie moved to Joe’s bedside. The nurse had got him back onto the bed, and she had her ear close to his mouth, listening for breath. “Is he alive? Is he breathing?” Sophie asked.

The nurse straightened, nodded. She was still weeping. “But it’s not strong. Someone better get the doctor.” She began to cry harder, whether from fright or sorrow wasn’t clear.

“I’ll go,” James said. He left the room, and only Sophie and the nurse remained with Joe.

There was a sound from the bed, a noise so faint Sophie barely heard it, like a very small animal choking. The nurse, who’d been drying her eyes, quickly moved Joe’s head, then put her ear next to his mouth again. She looked frightened. “I hope the doctor’s not gone out somewhere.” Tears started down her cheeks again.

“Please stop crying,” Sophie said.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. It was just seein’ that old woman come after you scared me so. I can’t make myself stop crying.”

“Of course you can. Stop, please.”

The crying ceased, and they waited, watching the man in the bed. Sophie willed him to breathe, willed his lungs to fill with air. Breathe, Joe, breathe. And the chest rose. It was barely perceptible, but it rose and fell, and then, after what seemed a very long time, it rose and fell again, so little, but it was life.

“Should you sit down, ma’am?” Sophie saw the nurse was looking at her worriedly now, and she realized she was doing with Joe what she had done with Philip, willing him to live, demanding with all her force that he not die. And she did it even though she knew it would not work, had had it proved to her it would have no effect.

She forced herself to sit down, tried to relax, let her glance go around the room. There was blood on the floor near the doorway, the widow’s blood, darkening now as it dried. A piece of broken picture frame lay near the washstand amid pieces of scattered glass which reflected the late-morning light. The engraving of the stag was leaning against the washstand, about half the frame still intact. On one of the sides where the frame had broken away, something was sticking out from behind the engraving, a yellowed corner of heavy paper with a drawing on it. It was a face, Sophie saw, and thought only a portion of it was visible, there was something hauntingly familiar about it. She knew that person, she thought, getting up and crossing the room. Just from the little she could see of the drawing, she was certain she did.

She reached down and pulled it out from behind the engraving. It was a man, a handsome man with wide cheekbones, deep-set eyes, and a full, sensuous mouth. And all at once Sophie understood so much and yet so little. Because even though the face in the picture was a man’s, it was also, somehow, hers. The softness was gone, and most of the delicacy, but it was she in the picture, herself she was looking at, a male version of herself.

- Chapter 20 -

Even before she looked at the back of the picture, she knew who it was, and when she turned the drawing over, it was only for confirmation. On the back was written, "Emile Bellavance, 1849." It was a picture of Paul's father.

She also knew why she looked like him. So instinctively certain was she of it, she didn't even pursue the thought immediately, but instead let her mind go off on a tangent. Esther will be pleased to know about this picture, she thought, remembering how the girl had asked for one, how Paul had so abruptly denied he had one.

And then she considered herself, how she had always believed she looked like her grandmother, believed the high cheekbone were the Shoshone in her, but here were her bones in this man's face, his wide-set eyes looking out from this picture, her full lips caught in a grim expression. Emile's hair didn't look as heavy as her own, perhaps that she owed her grandmother.

James came through the doorway with the doctor, a young man, tall, thin, with cadaverous hollows in his cheeks. He nodded curtly to Sophie, then looked in disgust at the nurse, who had started to cry again. "Get the women out of here," the doctor said to James. "Let me have a few minutes with the patient alone."

The nurse fled the room. Sophie saw James look at her, saw him understand she would be angry, and she was, but she wouldn't do anything about it now. As she left the room with James, she wondered if this were the same doctor who had tended Helen when she came to childbed, the doctor who'd been so protective of her modesty, so embarrassed by her pain and her blood.

She didn't ask. She descended the stairs with James in silence, Emile Bellavance's portrait in her hand. Paul was in the front parlor when they entered. A liquor bottle was open on the table, and he had a glass of amber-colored liquid in his hand. "What'd the doc have to say, James? Here, I'll get you a drink."

"I'll get it. He didn't say much of anything yet. Wanted a few minutes to examine Joe."

James had his back turned when Paul's eyes met Sophie's. Slowly she raised her arm toward him, holding the picture. "I understand now, Paul, why your mother thought I was Emile."

He kept his eyes on hers, reached out for the thick, yellowed paper. He glanced down at it quickly then laid it aside as though it were unimportant. "Yes, this old picture..." He broke off when he saw the way she looked at him.

"The likeness is quite close, isn't it?" Sophie asked. "Your mother saw that right away. Or saw something in my face that made her uncomfortable. She's been troubled since I arrived, though I'm not certain she pinpointed what bothered her until she saw me in man's clothes yesterday. She knew then. Saw how much I look like Emile, thought I was Emile, in fact. But how could I resemble him so much? We're not supposed to be related, Emile and I? How could it be?"

"Sophie, I..."

"But even though we're not supposed to be, Emile and I are related, aren't we? Through you. Lieutenant Talbot wasn't my father, was he, Paul? Even though he and my mother were married when I was born, he wasn't my father, was he?"

Paul shook his head. "No," he whispered.

"You're my father, aren't you, Paul?"

He nodded wordlessly and reached out to her, but she ignored his gesture. "I remember as a child at Fort Martin hearing things, hints that you'd loved my mother." He nodded again, and she puzzled a moment over what she saw in his eyes. Behind the pain and sadness, wasn't there a glint of fear? But why fear? What was there for him to be fearful of?

She let her anger propel her past the question. "And I found a letter, Paul, a letter from my mother to Helen. After all these years, she had found her, wanted to see her. But Julia said no, said Helen should turn to you for help in understanding why. I thought at first it was because you're like you are, easy to talk to, a comforting person to be around. But it was because of this, wasn't it?" She picked up the picture of Emile Bellavance from where Paul had laid it on the table. "She didn't want to tell Helen the truth, of course, but to convince her to stop digging in the past. And maybe she even wanted to warn you to hide this picture. With Helen attuned to the past, you wouldn't have wanted her looking at it. She might have started asking why I so resembled Emile." Sophie paused for a moment, then added, "But Julia couldn't have been warning you to hide the picture, could she? She probably doesn't even know what I look like."

“My mother hid the picture, Sophie,” Paul said. “She put it away behind the Landseer stag years and years ago. She did it not long after my father died. The stag was hers. She brought out with her from St. Louis.” He turned and walked to a window. “Your mother knows what you look like,” he said, looking out. “I’m sure she’s followed your career closely. Don’t be so bitter about her. Don’t blame her.”

“Why shouldn’t I? Why shouldn’t I finally blame her for something? She left me, deserted me when I was a child, and now I find she would have let me go forever without knowing who my father really was. Didn’t she owe me that at least?”

“Sophie, I—“

“And why, Paul? I just don’t understand why it had to remain a secret all these years. Did you think it would shock me too much to learn I was conceived out of wedlock? You know better. You know how my life has been. I’m not caught up in that kind of hypocrisy. I’ve spent my life facing it down.”

It was a moment before he answered. “It was the habit of deception, I suppose. It went on so long, so many years with no one knowing, it got harder and harder to break out of the lie. And more and more people became involved in my life. How could I have told Anna May and the children?”

“They didn’t have to know. Couldn’t you have just told me?”

“Paul...” It was James speaking. He had been silent until now. “Paul, does this explain why you weren’t able to deliver my message to Rodman and Huber?”

Sophie looked at James in confusion. What was he talking about?

“That’s what I came over here this morning to see Paul about, Sophie. It just didn’t make sense that Rodman and Huber, Huber especially, would do the things they did to you after I’d warned them off. I began to wonder if they’d ever got my message. Paul admitted this morning they hadn’t. Said he hadn’t been able to deliver it. That’s as far as we’d got when we heard the noise upstairs. We heard the glass shatter when the widow broke the picture, and we both ran upstairs.”

James turned to Paul. “What I’m wondering now is if you chose not to deliver my message, thinking that Huber and Rodman would distract Sophie, keep her from looking into what Helen’s concerns had been.” He glanced over at Sophie. “I didn’t know Helen had found your mother, Sophie, but I’d wager Paul did, especially if your mother suggested Helen talk to him.”

“Is that right, Paul?” James asked, turning back. “Is that what happened? Did Helen come talk to you? What a shock it must have been, finding out she’d located Julia. But then when she died, the secret was safe again.”

“Until I came along,” Sophie said. “You probably thought I wanted it myself, that I was lying when I said it was for Esther.”

“I didn’t think they would hurt you!” Paul shouted it almost, turning abruptly from the window. “I didn’t think they’d hurt you,” he repeated more softly. “I thought ... prairie gophers through the window, pranks to frighten you a little. That’s what I thought they’d do. And then on Sunday I saw you after they’d set that circus freak on you at the park, and they had injured you. I set out to find them, but they weren’t in town, not anywhere. I figure now they were holed up on a ranch somewhere, making plans for the next day at Wilson’s. But I didn’t know that then. And I didn’t know you’d go out there again and they’d try to kill you.”

He shook his head and began to pace. “When I found that out, I went out after ‘em again, but there was no sign of them, not until I saw Rodman at the opera house. I still can’t figure out where Huber is.” He stopped pacing and looked at Sophie. “You must believe me. I’d never do anything I thought would bring you harm.”

Now she remembered the fear she’d seen in his eyes. “And did you feel the same about Helen?”

A new emotion flashed across his face, but it was gone before she could identify it. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Someone was with Helen before she died. A man. And they argued, and she fell. Or maybe she was pushed. Her death was so convenient for you, so helpful in terms of keeping your secret about Julia, about me. Was it you, Paul? Did you and Helen quarrel? Did you try to get the letter from Julia away from her? Did she fall in the struggle?”

Paul shook his head once, then twice. His shoulders sagged.

“How did you know there was a man with Helen?” James asked her.

“Esther and Sally. They heard a man quarreling with her before she fell. Esther thought it was you.”

“Me?”

Sophie nodded. "I told her you were... someplace else. And that people had seen you, so you couldn't have... argued with Helen."

James looked stricken, but Sophie had no time for him now. She turned to Paul. "And where were you that day, Paul?" As she spoke, she was struck by the oddity of her question. Not that it was illogical. It followed quite naturally from everything that had gone before. But how strange that she should be asking it of this man—and he was her father! The situation called for love and reconciliation, and instead there was suspicion and distrust.

When Paul spoke, it was as though he had read her thoughts. "This is wrong, Sophie, all wrong. It shouldn't be like this. I... I love you, Sophie. Ah, why is that so hard to get out when I've wanted to say it so many years? I've always loved you, Sophie, and I've been so proud of you, of everything you've accomplished. I would never deliberately hurt you, don't you understand? That's the main reason I didn't want you to know. I was afraid the truth would hurt you." He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "I see why you might think... But I couldn't harm Helen just to keep you know knowing I was your father. Because her death would cause you even more sorrow than knowledge would. If I were forced to choose between the two, I'd have to let you know, don't you see? Because what concerns me most is your happiness. I would do whatever least threatens your happiness."

She could quite literally feel his affection and concern. And she believed him. She looked deep into his eyes and knew with every atom of her being that he spoke the truth. "Oh, Paul." She reached out, but the gesture was cut short when a figure appeared in the doorway. It was the doctor.

"He hasn't long." They all turned to look at him. "Someone should be with him—someone besides the nurse. He doesn't need sniveling women now."

"I'll go," Sophie said. "I want to." Realizing her sex had made her suspect, she deliberately looked full in the doctor's face as she moved past him and started upstairs.

James caught her before she had gone very far. "I'll be back in an hour or so. I want to go and see Esther."

"Don't talk about it, James. Don't make her think all those thoughts again. Let it be over."

"That's what I intend. But I want to spend some time with her, just be with her and talk about anything she wants."

Sophie nodded, watching him go, then went upstairs. In the bedroom, she took the nurse's chair beside the bed, picked up Joe's hand, and watched the shallow and uneven breathing.

Paul came in after a few minutes, but he didn't speak to her beyond a bare greeting nor she to him. There was an awkwardness between them now, and difficult as it would be for them to talk in any room, it was more so in this setting. This was Joe's time, his place, his last place but for the grave, Sophie thought.

Anna May came in after awhile, sat for a half-hour or so, then came to Sophie's side. "Would you like some lunch?" she whispered. "I'd be happy to stay here while you eat."

Sophie wondered if Paul had told her. Looking up, she didn't think so. Anna May wasn't likely to accept with no visible effect the news that she, Sophie, was Paul's daughter. "No, I'm not hungry," Sophie said. "You please go ahead," and Anna May and Paul left the room.

Keeping hold of Joe's hand, Sophie laid her head on the bed beside his shoulder. She was so tired, bone-tired, tired as she was in her dreams when he had to run and run until she found the end, the object drawing her on. But the comparison wasn't quite right, she realized, for the exhaustion she felt now wasn't in her body, but in her spirit. Nor was the tiredness the kind that comes at the end of the quest, when everything is finally resolved for better or worse. What she felt was a frustrated weariness. Paul was her father, and that explained some things; but there was so much unanswered. It was as though she had found the last piece of a puzzle, and the shape was right, it fit the empty space, but somehow when it was put in place, it didn't complete the picture.

She started a mental list of all her unanswered questions, and the first item, of course, was Helen. What had happened to Helen? She tried to set aside her intuitive feelings that her sister had met with violence and concentrate on things concrete and certain. There had been a man with Helen. Before she died, there had been a man with her. Who had it been?

Sophie heard the door behind her open and shut, and she turned to look. It opened and shut again, and she saw that the breeze coming in the window was doing it. She remembered the first time she'd been in the room with Joe and the door had opened a crack. It had been the Widow Bellavance. No, her grandmother. How hard that was to accept, that she was related to the Widow Bellavance just as she had been to Deer Woman. And this grandmother had tried to kill her. She'd thought Sophie was her dead husband, Emile, but what did that explain? Why did she hate Emile? Why had she hidden his picture.

And then there was the thing she had never understood. Oh, she could offer a string of words of explanation, but they were unrelated to anything in her head. Why had her mother left her and Helen? She had more understanding now of the events leading up to Julia's flight. Just a few months' pregnant with Paul's child, marrying the lieutenant, then bearing Paul's child, herself, Sophie. Then, a year later, another daughter, Helen, child of Lieutenant Talbot. And not long after, Talbot was killed. But why had Julia run away? Why hadn't she married Paul then? He'd still been single. Indeed, why hadn't she married him when she first discovered she was carrying his child?

Joe stirred. Sophie lifted her head, watched him carefully for a moment before she laid her head back down. She gathered his hand close to her face, and suddenly her memory carried her back to her earlier years. She was small, no more than three or four, and she had loved it so much when Joe was around. The weeks he was at Fort Martin were the happiest for her, and she'd trail around after him, protesting loudly when she was separated from him to lie down for an afternoon rest. To assuage her, he had taken to lying down with her. She should make him promise not to leave if she fell asleep, to waken her if he had to go somewhere. And for insurance, she would slip a finger into his belt loop, so he couldn't get up undetected. But when she would awaken after a long nap, he wouldn't be there. She would inevitably find he had slipped away.

Lying with her head on the bed beside his shoulder, she slept now. And when she wakened, she still had his hand in her own. But she knew she was alone. Without checking his breathing, she knew. Joe was gone. He had slipped away from her, this time forever. And she held on to his hand and wept.

- Chapter 21 -

The women came. Within the hour, they were there, bringing food and comfort. The front parlor filled with their murmurs, the house with the smells of their cooking. Amy Travers, Lydia Swerdlow, Alice Lassawell all came in together. Cleantha Kempton came with an old, old woman on her arm, whom he introduced as Mother Davis. The crone up a hand on Sophie's shoulder and fixed her with a watery eye. "It's not to cry, dearie. Your granddaddy got his dyin' done."

Anna May approached, carrying a folding chair under her arm. "Why don't you come outside, Sophie? Out by the roses. It's so stuffy in here."

Sophie looked around doubtfully, thinking it would be rude to leave.

"They'll understand," said Anna May. "They'll come pay their respects outside."

Anna May unfolded the chair in a small patch of shade near the front rose garden. "Sophie, about Paul's mother—you don't need to be worried. She's locked in her room."

"Locked in?"

Anna May nodded. "There's a nurse with her. And it's for her own safety too. She cut herself quite badly on the picture glass."

Sophie settled herself into the chair's tapestry sling and decided against telling Anna May she would rather sit by the side of the house where she could look out over the prairie. Anna May was trying so hard to please, she simply hadn't the heart.

Anna May went back into the house, and Sophie shut her eyes and rested her head on the chair. She heard a train whistle in the instance, hooves clopping not far away, a gentle rustling of leaves from the late-afternoon breeze.

"Sophie?"

She opened her eyes. It was James. He had his hat tilted back.

"Hello," she said. "How is Esther?"

"She'll be fine now." He shook his head. "Imagine all these months, her thinking... Well, she'll be fine now. I'm so sorry about your grandfather."

"I miss him. It's like something fine and strong I measured against myself is gone."

He nodded. "Did you talk to Paul again?" he asked after a moment.

"Not really. It's awkward. I think it'll be a long time before I get used to the idea that he's my father..."

"Is there something else troubling you?"

"Yes, but I can't say what exactly. It's... it's as though there's something I still don't understand, something that would explain, for instance, why the widow wanted to kill me when she thought I was Emile."

"She's a very old woman, not entirely rational."

"It's still not altogether right in my mind. Perhaps it comes from being uneasy about Helen's death. I have been for months, long before I came to Cheyenne. I would never have said the things I said to you Friday night if I hadn't been thinking about it so long, plagued by it really."

"You still think someone killed her?"

"I just can't believe she died accidentally, though. I don't know, perhaps I should accept it." She was silent a moment. "Well, there's no sense going on about it. Would you help me move my chair around to the side of the house? I'd like to be able to see out across the prairie."

"Of course." James picked up the chair, and they walked around the corner of the house. Sophie heard a noise coming from out back, a sound like someone picking up a heavy object and dropping it. While James set out her chair for her, she went on around and looked. There was a wagon in back with a blinkered horse harnessed to it. The wagon had a high driver's seat and a U-shaped cover over it on which the word "ICE" was painted in foot-high letters. A man was lifting a block of ice out of the wagon with large metal tongs.

Sophie half turned away and started back toward James when she realized what the ice was for. Joe. For Joe's body. The women would pack it in ice so it wouldn't... turn. "That's why Anna May had put her in the front yard, so she wouldn't see the ice wagon. That's why Anna May had suggested she go outside, so she wouldn't see them carrying the ice to his bedroom."

She sat down, feeling weak.

“Will you be all right now?” James asked. “I really should go inside and pay my respects.”

“Yes, I’m quite all right,” she said, sounding much surer than she felt.

As she arranged her skirts, she felt something in her pocket. It was the book Amy Travers had given her. She opened it to the title page. “The Friendships of Women,” she read, by William Rounseville Alger. The book had been published in Boston in 1868.

She idly leafed the pages. Alger had gathered together a whole history of female friendship. Here were the Ladies of Llangollen, here Mrs. Thrale and Fanny Burney; Madame Recamier and Madame de Stael; Bettine von Arnim and Gunderode. “Though art the sweet cadence by which my soul is rocked,” Bettine had written to the canoness, and Sophie read the words over, charmed by their poetry.

And here with Mary Milford and Mrs. Browning... Sophie looked up from the book, thinking of the way the world associated Elizabeth Barrett Browning with her husband and their romance. But there were passages in her poem “Aurora Leigh” about how comforting it could be for a woman to love another woman. Sophie clearly remembered a few of the lines, because at the time she had read them, they had been so apropos of frustrations she sometimes felt with Philip. Aurora Leigh comparing the woman she loved with the man, for instance:

She at least
Was not built up as walls are, brick by brick
Each fancy squared, each feeling ranged by line,
The very heat of burning youth applied
To indurate form and system! Excellent bricks,
A well-built wall, –which stops you on the road,
And into which you cannot see an inch
Although you beat your head against it—

The memory started a train of associations in Sophie’s mind: Tennyson in “The Princess” showing Psyche and Ida in love; Clarissa, that purest of all pure heroines, who had only one true love, her friend Miss Howe. And Ruth, yes, Ruth in the Bible. Almost the whole world assumed it was a man to whom she pledged, “whither thou goest, I will go,” but it was a woman, her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Sophie sensed someone standing beside her. She looked up and saw Lydia Swerdlow. “I don’t know how I didn’t see it before,” Sophie said.

“Perhaps you were blinded by thinking women incapable of bonding fast together,” Lydia said. “Much of the world is. Here, Alger says it right here in the preface.” She took the book from Sophie, turned to one of its first pages and read: “I was often struck... by the commonness of the expressed belief, that strong natural obstacles made friendship a comparatively feeble and rare experience with them.” She looked up at Sophie. “I’ve sometimes wondered if passionate friendship is considered too important for women to be capable of. Or perhaps it’s that anything women do is generally considered beneath notice.”

“A little of each, I suppose.” And a third factor had been at work in her own case, Sophie thought. She understood passion so differently from the way these women did that she had been frightened by the fire with which they burned, afraid to recognize it.

“Perhaps you’d like to come inside now,” Lydia suggested.

“Yes, yes. Thank you.” As they walked into the house together, Sophie spoke of Helen. “It’s odd, but the more I find out about the differences in our lives, the less I feel we are different.”

Lydia was thoughtful a moment. “I’ve heard it said the hardest thing any human being can do is fully to acknowledge the actuality of another. To admit, truly admit, that their thoughts and cares, their ardors and aversions are—or were—as real as our own.”

“Perhaps that’s so,” Sophie said. “Perhaps that’s the beginning of wisdom.”

“Or of love.”

* * *

The day of the funeral, the sky was gray, threatening rain. Sophie rode to the graveyard in the Stevenson family carriage. James was driving; Esther and Sally were in back. The air was very still as they rode along, and Sophie thought how different everything appeared in the gray light. Colors were subdued and yet at the same time more noticeable because they didn't have to compete with the golden sunlight or blue sky. Gold and blue, especially blue—those colors dominated the palette with which the West was painted, and in their absence, the landscape looked unnatural.

"Sophie, there's something I must tell you," James said. "I regret having to bring it up now, but I don't want you to be surprised by the news."

She looked at him expectantly.

"The sheriff's no longer trying to find Huber."

"Why not?"

"The witness he had? The one who said Huber was part of the group with Rodman? He's disappeared. And so have two others who named names of those in the party with Rodman."

"So the sheriff's just giving up?"

"There's not much point in his doing anything else. There won't be an indictment without witnesses."

"I'll testify."

"And say what? The way I understand, you saw only one man besides Rodman, and you weren't sure he was Huber or not."

She was quiet a moment; then: "Disappeared! Where'd they go? What's happened to them?"

"I suspect someone's bought them tickets to California or back East or wherever they wanted to go."

"The Stock Growers' Association."

"Probably."

"But they can't get away with that! These men can't get away with hanging Baby!"

James didn't answer.

"Do you think it's right?" she demanded. "Do you?"

"No," he said finally. "I don't think it's right, but my reasons are different from yours. I think it's wrong because you were involved. You were threatened, harmed, and I'd like to see whoever did that punished. And it was wrong for them to hang Baby. No matter what kind of woman she was, she was a woman, and they shouldn't have hanged her."

"But if she'd been a woman, it would've been all right?"

He looked at her directly. "Yes."

"Didn't they deserve a trial? Some impartial assessment of their guilt or innocence before they were strung up?"

"There aren't any impartial assessments out here. Not yet. A jury would have found them innocent, and they were guilty. That's why this sort of thing happens. There'll never be an end to rustling and thieving if we don't put an end to it."

"You sound like that wretched fellow Coover at the Clarion."

"I don't happen to like him either. But that doesn't mean that what he has to say is wrong."

She was angry, furious with him for being so confined within his own thinking he couldn't see the other side. She knew it was useless to argue further, so she turned away from him and stared straight ahead in silence until they reached the graveyard.

* * *

James and Paul helped lift the pinewood coffin from the glass-sided hearse. They put it down so that it rested on two long ropes beside the open grave. As Sophie went to stand beside the coffin, she paused for a minute at a headstone near where Joe would lie. "Helen Stevenson," it read. "Beloved wife and mother. April 10, 1849 – August 12, 1885." A half-dozen or so white carnations lay at the foot of the stone.

As she took her place beside Joe's coffin and looked down into the grave, Sophie found herself thinking what effort must have gone into digging it. The earth was reluctant in this dry land, and fiercely resisted penetration.

Anna May came and stood by Sophie. Across the grave was the Widow Bellavance with her right hand bandaged. Lydia Swerdlow was standing on the other side of her, Amy Travers on the other. They were watching over the widow, Sophie realized, so that Anna May could be with her.

“Dear Lord,” the minister began, “thy son Joseph loved this land, and we ask thy blessing as we lay him to rest in its bosom.” At a nod from the minister, James, Paul, and two other men began lowering the pinewood box into the grave. It was hard work, with each of them having the watch the others closely so that the coffin wouldn’t slip. The sky was growing darker by the minute, and when they had almost put the coffin to the grave floor there were rumbles of thunder.

“As we commit thy servant Joseph to the darkness of the grave,” the minister intoned, “we pray that you will receive him into your everlasting light.” He threw a handful of dirt into the grave. “From dust we come, to dust we return.” Sophie’s head was lowered, but her eyes were open, and most of the dirt, she saw, was dry and hard and bounced off the coffin.

The mourners sang:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,

Let me hide myself in thee;

Let the water and the blood...

A drop of rain fell on the coffin, leaving a dark spot on the new wood.

Be of sin the double cure,

Save from wrath and make me pure.

There was another drop and another. Sophie found herself counting them as they spotted the coffin.

Foul I to the fountain fly,

Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

The group began to sing more rapidly, many of them casting anxious glances at the sky. And as soon as the hymn had finished, they broke apart and moved quickly toward the carriages.

Sophie and Anna May happened to fall in behind the Widow Bellavance and her two escorts. “How is Paul’s mother?” Sophie asked. “How is her hand?”

“I hope it will be all right. I worry it will heal slowly. She’s so old.”

Sophie nodded, regarding the widow’s back, thinking of all the old woman had seen in her time. “Now that Joe’s gone, she and Paul have probably lived in Wyoming Territory longer than anyone else.”

“Probably so. They came out more than forty years ago. It was well over fifty years ago your grandfather came out. He used to tell me the date. Eighteen-twenty-eight. That’s almost sixty years now, isn’t it? He was a real young man then, don’t you know. And so was Paul’s father, Emile. He came about the same time.

“Emile was out here a long time before he brought his family. Paul said he was fifteen when his father brought them out.”

“Emile’d get back to St. Louis to visit them every couple of years. But the rest of the time he was in the mountains. Joe was his family. Joe and Deer Woman.”

The rain started coming down hard now, but instead of hurrying for the carriage, Sophie grabbed Anna May’s arm and stopped her still. “They were his family, Joe and Deer Woman.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Anna May looked at her in puzzlement, not understanding her intensity. “What is it, Sophie?”

With a force which shook her to her heels, everything Sophie knew about the past lurched over in her mind and came to rest at a new angle. It all fit together now. Yes, she understood.

She spun away from Anna May and began to run. Without thinking what she was doing, she headed down the road toward town. She was crying, the tears coming in a flood, and they mixed with rain on her face until she had difficulty seeing. Puddles were already forming on the hard surface of the road, and she plunged into them, through them, hardly aware how wet she was getting.

She heard voices far behind her, but there were more immediate sounds: the noise her wet shoes made, the sound of her feet hitting the earth. And there was a harsh, rasping noise which she finally realized was her own breathless sobbing.

A carriage drew alongside her, and she knew it was James. "Leave me alone!" she screamed at him through the rain.

"You're getting soaked! You'll make yourself sick!" he shouted back.

"Just leave me alone!" She veered off the road and ran across the grounds of the county hospital, then across open land, then alongside city back toward Ferguson Street.

She was wet now, wet through. She could feel tendrils of hair pasted to her face; her lashes were heavy with rain and tears, but still she continued to run. And to weep. Sometimes they were her own tears she was crying, sometimes her mother's, sometimes her grandmother's. And once when she looked down at the hands clutching her skirts, she felt puzzled about whose hands they were.

When she reached the Stevenson house, Mrs. Syms was in the hallway. "Mrs. Dymond, why, you'll catch your death!"

Sophie brushed past her and ran up the stairs. She stopped on the landing, stopped dead still, her hand on the newel post. Then she approached the chair with the buffalo robe folded over it, reaching out slowly, slowly, until her hand rested on it, caressing the soft leather. A dark spot appeared on the robe, and then another and another, and she realized she was dripping rain. She pulled her hand away and looked at the floor. Rain from her clothes had beaded in puddles on its waxed surface.

She went on up the stairs to her room and took off her dripping clothes. Connie came in as she started undressing. "Go away, Connie, leave me alone." She took off her dress, her petticoat, her corset, her stockings. Even her lacy undershirt and drawers were wet, clinging to her body before she stripped them off. Standing naked, she opened the volume on the bedside table and took out the letter she had put there earlier. Clutching it with one hand, she pulled back the bedclothes with the other and got into bed, burying her face in the pillow.

The first time Connie knocked, she ignored it. And the second. When the third knock came several hours later, Sophie bid the girl enter.

"It's Mr. Stevenson, ma'am. He's awfully concerned about you."

"What time is it, Connie?"

"Two-thirty, ma'am."

"Give him a message for me, Connie, then come back and help me dress. Tell Mr. Stevenson I'd like to see him at four o'clock. And tell him I'd like Mr. Bellavance to be there too."

- Chapter 22 -

They were waiting for her in the drawing room. Both stood as she entered.

She looked directly at Paul. “Emile Bellavance was more than a grandfather to me, wasn’t he, Paul?” She paused. “He was my only grandfather.”

Paul reached back, clutching at the arm of the chair. He found it and sat down heavily.

“Julia wasn’t Joe’s child, she was Emile’s. And you were Emile’s child too. That’s why you couldn’t marry. You were half-brother and half-sister. That’s why you couldn’t marry. You were half-brother and half-sister, you and my mother.”

“We... we didn’t know,” Paul said, his voice so low she could barely hear him. “Even they didn’t know...”

“How could that be? How could they not know?”

“Not for years and years, they didn’t.” He furrowed his brow and rubbed at his forehead. “It... it started one winter when the three of them lived together, Joe and Deer Woman and Emile. It seemed all right in the beginning. Emile told me that years later, when he had to talk about it. But then Deer Woman was pregnant, and they didn’t know whose child it was, Joe’s or Emile’s, and it didn’t seem right any longer. After that winter camp, they were still close, but they were never... together again, the three of them.”

“And Deer Woman had no more children.”

He nodded. “That made them suspect that Julia was Emile’s child, though they never said anything much about it, even to one another. And they didn’t do anything—what was there to do? Julia called Joe her father, and he raised her, and, as I say, they didn’t talk about it, not even among themselves.

“Then Emile brought my mother, my brother, and me to Fort Martin. Julia wasn’t there in the beginning. She’d gone away for schooling. But she came back a year or so later, and oh, she was lovely, Sophie. Your mother was so lovely. And she loved me. And then she was pregnant with my child, with you.

“We wanted to marry. Both Joe and Emile were violently opposed, but they wouldn’t tell me why, any more than we would tell them why it was important that we marry soon. But when they finally saw there was no other way to stop us, Emile and Joe told Julia and me about the winter camp, about the likelihood Emile was her father as well as mine.”

“And how did Julia react to the news?”

“Calmly,” Paul said, seeming not to notice the sarcastic edge to the question. “Or at least that’s how she appeared. She sat very still when I told them she was pregnant, and then she went off by herself and was quiet. She didn’t want to see me, didn’t want to talk to me. Lieutenant Talbot had just come to the fort. He was in the Corps of Engineers and had come to see about making Fort Martin into an Army post. I was never certain what happened between them, but within a month, he and your mother were married. And then you were born.”

“Didn’t Talbot think it odd I was born so soon? I must have been born earlier than—“

“As far as I know, it never bothered him. I think he loved your mother, truly and deeply loved her. And, oh, she was a lovely thing. She had fine large eyes, doe eyes I called them...” His voice trailed off, and it was a moment before he began to speak again. “About a year later, Helen was born.”

“And then Talbot died.”

Paul nodded. “Joe and my father had sold to the Army by then, and there was an explosion in the powder magazine. It was an awful thing. Two men were killed. Talbot was one.”

“Is that why she left us? Because he was dead?”

“She did depend on him, lean on him. He gave her strength and support against the knowledge of the terrible thing that had happened between her and me. Or at least that’s how it appeared. After the day Joe and Emile talked to us, I never spent any time with your mother again, never knew for sure how things were with her. But there was something besides Talbot’s death that caused her to leave. I could sense that. It was you, Sophie. It was the way you looked. Every day you grew to look more and more like Emile. You made it almost impossible for her to forget what had happened.”

Sophie’s head fell forward. James came to her and put his arm around her. “Was it something everyone noticed?” she asked finally.

“No, it wasn’t like that. But if you knew, you couldn’t help but see it.”

“And that’s why she left.”

“It wasn’t you yourself that sent her away, but the memory you called up. She simply couldn’t function when she thought about it all the time.”

“When did your mother find out? When did the widow know?”

“I wasn’t aware she did. Not until I heard her threatening you.”

“But I can remember her looking at me when I was a child, looking at me and hating me.”

“We thought she was just generally bitter after Emile’s death.”

“She could see the same evidence everyone else did and reach the same conclusion. Emile with Joe and Deer Woman all those years. Joe and Deer Woman with no other children. And I’ll wager she didn’t know you were my father, did she? I’ll wager no one bothered to tell her.”

“No.”

“It’s too bad you kept it from her. That would have justified my resemblance to Emile, you see. And so it was, she had to conclude that my mother was Emile’s child. You forced her to see the part of the secret you most wanted to keep. I’m astounded you didn’t realize she knew, especially after she hid Emile’s picture.”

“I suppose we didn’t want to know that she knew.”

Sophie went to stand by the window. She looked out, trying to slow her whirling thoughts. Joe hadn’t been her grandfather at all. Not at all. Because had and Emile and Deer Woman in winter camp... She shut her eyes, unable to keep from thinking what it had been like. A cabin, or perhaps a tepee, with hard-packed floors and willow-frame beds. Deer Woman had cooked and sewed (had she quilled the buffalo robe then?) and told her stories... stories... just as she, Sophie, had written her stories, only it had been an elegant row house in Capitol Hill instead of a cabin, and Sophie and Albert and Philip instead of Deer Woman and Joe and Emile. She put her hands on the windowsill and leaned her forehead against the cool glass. Was it coincidence? Could it be no more than that? Or somewhere in her, deep within her, had there been a story written long ago which she’d had no choice but to live? Or perhaps there was only one story with variations so slight that if one cared to look, she would always find herself in others. She and her grandmother, from whom she’d thought herself so different; she and her mother; she and her sister—for a moment she felt as though she were sinking into the quicksand of other lives, and the sensation was not unpleasant. To sink was so much easier than facing what lay ahead.

Abruptly she turned from the window. “Did Helen fall in a struggle over the letter from Julia, Paul? Or did you push her?”

“Sophie!” It was James. “What are you saying? We’ve been through this.”

“Paul knows what I’m talking about, don’t you, Paul?”

Paul remained motionless. He was sitting in the overstuffed chair with an elbow on his knee, his forehead resting in his cupped hand.

“Things have never bothered you very much, have they, Paul?” Finding out you’d fathered a child upon your half-sister, her fleeing in despair to who-knows-where—most men would have been destroyed, but you went right on with your life. And it was the same after Helen... was killed, wasn’t it?”

Still he remained silent.

“It had to be the children heard! It must have been!” She was shouting, and she stopped and closed her eyes to calm herself before she continued. “I didn’t force the issue when I first found out you were my father. I let you sidetrack me with your talk of how you loved me. I let you mislead me with truths that were real lies. What was it you said? ‘I couldn’t harm Helen just to keep you from knowing I was your father.’ And I believed you. I could feel you were telling me the truth. What you didn’t say was that there was another, darker secret you’d do anything to hide.”

“I didn’t lie about loving you, Sophie!” Paul burst out. “All I ever wanted is what’s best for you.” He leaned back in his chair and spoke more quietly. “She first called me over to talk about the letter from Julia in June, just a little over a year ago now. She was happy and excited, so certain she was going to find Julia. She only told me, she said, because Julia mentioned me in the letter. She wasn’t going to tell anyone else, not even Amy Travers, not until she had located Julia.

“I tried not to be too concerned. I didn’t want her to find Julia, of course, because I didn’t know what might come of a reunion between the two of them, but I told myself there wasn’t much to worry about, that the chances of her finding Julia weren’t nearly as good as Helen thought they were.

“Over the next month, I sensed she was gradually becoming discouraged. And then she called me over on August 12.”

“The day she died.”

Paul nodded, his eyes down. “She had told me she was convinced that Pinkerton’s wasn’t paying as much attention to the matter as they should. But she didn’t like any other agency, didn’t think any of the others was as good. She wanted to know what I thought she should do.

“Well, I told her just to keep trying and to keep her spirits up. I got up to leave. She was in front of me, showing me out, just about to go down the stairs, when she whirled around all of a sudden.

“ ‘I’ll go to Denver, Paul!’ she announced. ‘If I go down there, Pinkerton’s will have to keep working on it. They can’t just set it aside if I’m checking on their progress every day.’

“ ‘You can’t go,’ I told her. ‘You can’t.’ Because I feared she was right. With her down there pushing the matter, Julia’s trail might be found.

“ ‘I am going, Paul,’ she said.

“ ‘No!’ I shouted, and then... I don’t know for certain how it happened. She was standing with her back to the stairs, and I stepped forward with my hand raised. I didn’t intend to strike her, I never intended that. I was just... overwrought. But she jerked backward and fell. I rushed down the stairs after her, but as soon as I saw the way her head lay, I knew she was dead.”

“And you ran away.”

“I went out the back door.”

“Why didn’t you take the letter from Julia?”

“I didn’t think of it. She’d left it lying on her desk, and I could have easily taken it, but I didn’t think.” He paused. “If I’d meant to kill her, I would have thought of it.” He made the admission so calmly it astounded her. This was the equanimity for which she’d always admired him. And now she hated it!

“You killed her, Paul! You killed her! Doesn’t that bother you in the least?”

“Of course it does. It’s not what I wanted,” he said evenly. “The thing I’ve always wanted most is your happiness. And you’re wrong if you think it’s been easy for me all these years. At the fort, seeing how you loved Joe because you thought he was your grandfather—“

“That wasn’t the only reason—“ she started to protest, but he held up his hand.

“And never trying to make you understand that we were much closer, you and I, the two of us. And I had no say in your life, none at all. I didn’t want them to send you away to school, but I was given no part in the decision. I couldn’t fight for it, couldn’t risk arousing emotions which might bring the truth to light. You think I’m unfeeling, but what choice have I but to keep the grief I’ve felt under control? When Joe and Emile first sat your mother and me down to tell us we were half-brother and sister, I understood that to gnash my teeth and pull my hair wouldn’t change things a whit. Most often in life, we have only one choice—acceptance.”

“You weren’t so very good at controlling yourself when you confronted Helen, though, were you?”

“Because I didn’t want you to know! I didn’t want you to live with this knowledge in the way I’ve had to. All these years I’ve worked to keep that from happening. I never came to see you, not once, because I was afraid that if I did, you might begin to wonder. I saw you only when you came here. I’ve seen you three times in twenty-five years! And you’re my firstborn, Sophie. Do you know how difficult that’s been? I love you.”

He looked at her, his gaze steady and direct, and she had no reply. She turned and left the room, leaving him there. She had to get outside. She wanted to breathe deeply of the pure, clear air.

* * *

She walked up and down in front of the house, and in a few minutes James joined her. “What will you do?” he asked.

“I’ve been thinking what Helen would want.”

“And?”

“Probably to do nothing.”

He nodded, but she couldn’t tell whether he signified agreement or mere understanding.

“She wouldn’t want all this brought out. It would serve no good purpose, merely add to unhappiness. And I don’t think she’d want him punished.”

He nodded again, as noncommittally as before, and she began to feel defensive. “I don’t think he meant to kill her.”

He looked at her, apparently surprised at the feeling with which she spoke. “I don’t think so either, Sophie. But I don’t want to sway your judgment. This has to be your decision.”

“She was your wife.”

“And your sister. You’re the one who understood her.”

“Not in the beginning.” She shook her head ruefully. “I thought I was different, different from all of them.”

“I’ve never known a woman like you. You are different.”

“Not in the way I’m talking about. And I don’t mind being the same. It’s like a corridor behind me, stretching back and back into the past, a corridor with arches repeating again and again. Or the kind of effect you get by lining up mirrors to face each other so you see a reflection in a reflection.” They walked a long way in silence, and then she spoke again. “I don’t want to go back into the house as long as he’s there.”

“He wanted to leave. If we walk on toward town, it’ll give him a chance.” After a few minutes he asked, “Will you ever see him again?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. I’m not sure I can ever... forgive him, but he’s my father.” There was pain in her voice. “Right now, what I want is to get away. I’m going back to New York.”

“When.”

“Tomorrow. I’d like to go tomorrow.”

“Would you like me to make the arrangements?”

“Please.”

And they continued to walk, only now without breaking the silence.

- Chapter 23 -

“Connie, leave us a minute!” James commanded, bursting into the room where Sophie and the maid were packing. He waited until the girl left, then closed the door. “Sophie, I want you to marry me.”

“Why?”

He looked at her in astonishment, then threw back his head and laughed. “A yes or no, I was prepared for one of those, but how many women would ask why? All right, I’ll give you the why of it. I think our lives would be better, fuller, if we were joined together. I don’t need to spend as much time in Cheyenne as I do, particularly if I sell off some of the Cloud Peak ranches.”

“Sell them off? How could you, the way you love this land?”

“I don’t have to own all of it to love it,” he replied good-naturedly.

“That wasn’t the impression you left earlier.”

“You don’t let a man get away with a thing, do you?” He smiled. Then his expression sobered. “Actually, it’s a business decision in part. There are too many cattle on the range, and if it’s a hard winter... well, it could be the end of the Cloud Peak Land and Cattle Company. The best thing for the company might well be to take a little profit now and reduce the potential for disaster.

“And, the point is that I—we—could spend our summers here in Cheyenne, our winters in New York. All I need is to find a capable manager, someone to take over in the slow winter months. And then you could get away from your office in the summer, couldn’t you? And maybe sometime in all this, we can see a way to go to Europe. I want to take you to Scotland, you and the girls, show you Edinburgh—High Street, Holyrood House, and the university. Well, you can see I’ve been thinking about this.”

“James...”

“No, I want you to think about it too. I want you to take two weeks to think about it. Delay your departure fourteen days, travel with me to the XVH, and think about it. I won’t say anything more about it until you bring it up.”

“Go to the XVH? How far is it?”

“I’ve already arranged for fresh teams ahead, so we can travel day and night and get there in just over two days.”

“James, if I go off alone with you, I’ll never be able to raise my head in Cheyenne again, much less marry you.”

“No, no, I’ve planned this excursion with all the proprieties in mind. We’re taking children, servants. Bring Connie if you like. It will all be quite respectable.”

“But I’ve already telegraphed my office I’d be there next week.”

“You can telegraph them again. Write the message for me now, and I’ll take it down and have it sent off instantly.”

Now it was her turn to laugh. You’ve foreseen my ever objection.”

“I’ve tried. I want you to come.”

“All right, James. I will.”

* * *

The second morning out, they breakfasted in a valley looking up a canyon. Sophie was stiff from having slept the night sitting up in a coach, but as she looked up the canyon, which was still lightly hung with morning mist, she was glad she had come on this journey. Atop one of the hills which formed the canyon, she could see a meadow. With the morning sun on it, it was a light green color, a color of spring, and here, near the canyon entrance, were bushes of a darker green, and there, a little in front of the bushes, grass whose green was lightly tinged with blue. She leaned back against a rock and studied the scene leisurely, discovering a multitude of shades. Who had ever thought that this parched land could yield up so many variations on green?

She could smell food being cooked for breakfast, and somewhere near she could hear the sound of running water. She listened to the sound, letting it carry her along until she could almost feel the water moving, sense its kinship with the blood rushing through her veins.

She let her thoughts settle on James' proposal. She liked being with him, wanted to know there would be abundant time with him in the future, but she didn't feel certain that was reason to marry him. If she truly wanted to be with him, and he with her, wouldn't they manage it without being married? If marriage meant they would be together more than their inclinations dictated, then wasn't it a kind of duress? They should seek companionship and love from one another because they wanted it, not because they were obliged by the forms and expectations imposed upon those who married.

She shifted her back on the rock and thought of it another way. Was there definite reason not to marry him? Her career perhaps? But she did have good editors; she could get away as she was doing now, and she'd been focusing on her work for so long, with such intensity, a more balanced life would be welcome. And she didn't have to quit working during summers spent in the West. She could write about it. She might even finally do the article on the homesteaders versus the big cattlemen.

Which brought her to James himself. She remembered how angry she had been with him the day of Joe's funeral. He could be so stubborn, so fiercely stubborn in his opinions, even when it was clear to her he was wrong. He'd defended lynching, rule by vigilante—she knew that was wrong. But still... would she want him if she could sway him on every point? Probably not. It sounded dreadfully dull.

She could think of no other cause to refuse him, but she wasn't sure she had sufficient reason to accept, either. And yet... and yet, she wanted to.

Esther and Sally approached. "You have to come, Aunt Sophie," said Esther. "You really must come see."

She got up and followed them down a gentle slope toward the rushing creek, carefully heeding their signals to walk quietly. Near the bottom of the slope, they stopped and motioned her on ahead, both of them pointing. And there, on the other side of the creek in the midst of birch and willows, she saw a doe with her fawn. They were drinking from the creek, nibbling on the bushes, and then the doe looked up with her huge brown eyes, and in an instant they were gone.

Sophie turned and looked up the slope at Esther and Sally. The morning sun behind them had haloed their heads with gold, and suddenly she knew she had found the reason she had been looking for. The children. Esther and Sally. The mirror images extending infinitely forward as well as back. Yes, that was it, that was the reason. A sacred ceremony, an exchange of vows not just with James, but for the daughters, for the future.

She said nothing while she ate, though she felt buoyant, ebullient, and found it hard to restrain herself. When they were ready to leave, James decided to drive one of the coaches, and she asked to sit up on the box with him.

"You'll have to strap in tight," he warned her. "The road's rough along here."

When they were well under way, she shouted at him—had to shout to make herself heard above the pounding hooves and rushing air: "James, I want to marry you!"

"Oh, you do, do you?" he said, smiling broadly, keeping his eyes on the team.

"Yes, dreadfully."

"There'll be a preacher waiting when we get back to Cheyenne."

"There's one thing I must do before." She saw his disappointment and rushed her words. "It won't take long. I'm sure it won't. But I have to do it. I'm going to Denver to look for Julia. And I'll find her. I know I will. And then I'll be back in Cheyenne, and we'll be married as soon as I step off the train. The very first thing."

It took him a moment to accept it, but then he smiled again. "The very first thing?"

"James, please, it's only proper!" She put her hand on his knee, and then she turned to look ahead. On the distant horizon a thin bolt of lightning flashed through the sky, but it was too far away to hear the thunder.