



SCENES CUT FROM **ROAD TO THE BREAKING SERIES** BOOKS 1 & 2

One of the hazards of writing a novel is word and page count, especially on the first book of a series where you're establishing characters and locales. At some point you realize you need to trim it back to give the reader a faster-paced, more engaging experience. However, now that you've finished reading the book(s), wouldn't you like to know a little more detail about some of your favorite characters? Some of these scenes have been greatly abbreviated in the book and others have been removed entirely. Here's your chance to peek behind the curtain—enjoy!

<WARNING – SPOILER ALERT:>

Don't read this section before finishing *ROAD TO THE BREAKING – BOOK 1*.

FORT DAVIS, TEXAS DESCRIBED

When they'd discovered gold in California in 1849, travelers learned to prefer the southern route through Texas versus the more mountainous and snow-filled routes farther north. Of course, the Kiowa, Comanche, Mescalero Apaches, Mexican bandits, and various roving groups of outlaws quickly took advantage of this new steady flow of "49ers" to plunder. The traditional trails of marauding Indians intersected the east-west road allowing them to ravage the isolated villages and haciendas of northern Mexico. West of the region, Mescalero Indians of New Mexico crossed the road. To the east, the Great Comanche War Trail crossed the road at Comanche Springs.

Because of this, the army decided it needed a strategically located fort to protect travelers, mail coaches, and freight wagons. And so in 1854 Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis sent Brevet Major-General Persifor Smith to establish a fort in the area. Captain Chambers understood Smith picked the location for the clear abundant waters of nearby Limpia Creek, and because of its location within the walls of a box canyon. Smith apparently thought the canyon walls might provide some protection against the howling Texas winter winds. In an obvious case of currying favor, the General had named the fort, and its surrounding mountains, after his boss. Thus, Fort Davis was founded.

They'd built the first "fort" from nothing more than a group of tents, reinforced by whatever rough cut trees and branches they could find close at hand. But this had proven woefully inadequate for weathering the Texas winters, canyon walls or no.

So the army had taken to mining lime for mortar, which they processed in a kiln built some thirty miles away from the fort. They also sent men up into the Davis Mountains to harvest timber. They set up a lumber mill at the fort site, to process the timber.

And so by 1857 most of the buildings of the fort were more solidly built, mostly of stone supported by lumber. But, because the army hadn't decided on how permanent the fort would be, most structures still had a rather temporary look about them. And, the fort having grown over the years, from housing a few dozen soldiers to nearly four hundred now, the buildings were arranged haphazardly.

And, of course, any officer worth his salt would immediately note a serious flaw in the fort's layout; the very canyon walls intended to protect it from the winter winds, also provided ideal cover for anyone who might attack. This necessitated the endless—and unpopular—patrols of the surrounding ridgelines. These took place every day of the year, day and night, regardless of the weather.

The few civilians in the neighboring area around the fort were mostly of Mexican descent, as were the non-military laborers providing service to the fort.

Life at the lonely outpost, like many military postings throughout time, was made up of long days of tedium, interspersed by moments of intense action. For many enlisted men, it was simply another duty to tough one's way through. For most officers, it was a purgatory; a place where one would waste away a once promising military career in the middle of nowhere.

But to Captain Chambers, it had been home these past two years. He enjoyed the outdoors, the challenges of an unforgiving natural environment, one's unrelenting human enemies, and the manly comradery of the men. Unlike other officers, who longed for the limelight of a position back East in the War Department, Captain Chambers could think of no place he would rather be. Leading strong, young men into battle against determined foes, was far preferable to sitting behind a desk back in Washington city. And being an army officer was all he'd ever wanted to be. It was all he knew, the only thing he had done his entire adult life.

NATHAN'S CHILDHOOD – OFF TO BOARDING SCHOOL

They enrolled him in the Eastmount School for Boys, in rural New York state. It had an excellent reputation for education and discipline, but also the advantage of accepting Nathaniel at a very young age—only thirteen. Most of the boarding schools closer to home required boys be at least fifteen years old. Abigail Chambers had no delusions she could keep the peace between her "men" for two more long years, so off Nathan went. It was a choice the parents would live to regret, but at the time seemed a good decision for all concerned.

Although he missed the wild hill country and rolling meadows of his Virginia home, Nathan quickly took to his new school environment. His natural curiosity, intelligence, enthusiasm, and leadership qualities soon won him the friendship and respect of most of his new schoolmates. Tall, strong, and a fast runner, he excelled at athletic endeavors. In an all-boys school, it was the quickest way to ensure the respect of one's fellows.

And at Eastmount he began to learn about the wider world. For the first time he heard men speak against slavery. Although he'd experienced firsthand its cruelties and injustices, he'd never given it

much thought. In his young, innocent mind that was just the way things were: some people were the masters, and others were their slaves. But now he learned he lived in the country that had practically invented the ideas of individual freedom and constitutional rights. It was also, paradoxically, one of the last civilized countries on earth still actively practicing the “peculiar institution” of slavery.

The more he studied the subject, and the more he discussed it with his professors and classmates, the more disturbed he became. He acquired a disgust and shame for his family’s involvement in it. Degrading fellow human beings—buying and selling them like livestock. He could not reconcile it.

It was the spark that ultimately pushed him far away from home: from Eastmount school, to the United States Military Academy at West Point. And then to battlefields in far off Mexico, and finally to a lonely outpost in west Texas, on the outer edge of civilization.

NATHAN’S THOUGHTS ON SLAVERY

He loved being an army officer and wished to be nothing else. And he cringed at the thought of becoming a thing he despised. A man whose economic wellbeing depended on forcing men to labor for him—coerced labor compensated by only crude, minimal room and board. Men who bought and sold other men, women, and children, as if they were so many cattle. What kind of man would keep innocents in never-ending, de-humanizing bondage, demanding obedience through threat of pain, starvation, or death?

During his young adulthood in New York he’d become convinced slavery was an unconscionable evil. But his time in Mexico and out West had perhaps influenced him even more, but in a more subtle way.

Back East he’d found there was a nearly universal view among the white population—even among the most empathetic, abolitionist whites—that black men were naturally inferior, and would never be equals, even when freed. For example, while abolitionists demanded immediate freedom for all slaves, most balked at granting these freed slaves citizenship, or constitutional rights like suffrage. They believed black men were humans, so shouldn’t be enslaved, but inferior, so shouldn’t have the same rights as white men.

But out West Nathan had seen many types of men: Mexicans, different tribes of Indians, half-breeds, Frenchmen, Germans, Irishmen, Chinese, Scotsmen. Even one *gigantic* Russian! And nothing he’d seen had convinced him a single race or nationality had a monopoly on intelligence, honor, or competency. Nor on wickedness, worthlessness, and evil.

Each man was himself. True, he’d likely be painted a certain color by his associations, but ultimately he could be judged on his own merits. He’d met plenty of Indians he respected, hostile and otherwise. And several outlaws that were decent sorts, despite their preferred occupation. He’d even taken pleasure in their company.

And conversely, he’d known any number of “law-abiding” white Americans he despised and found useless, lazy, or corrupt. And that number included army officers, soldiers, and lawmen.

Though he’d been around very few free black men in his adulthood, he couldn’t imagine they’d be any different from other men in that regard. He remembered playing with the black children when he was a boy—running, swimming, wrestling, laughing. The same as he’d done with the other white boys. If he could just spend a little time around free black men, he was confident he’d be proven right.

But the slaves aside, the issue of what to do about the family farm loomed. It was the home where he’d grown up. A place of extraordinary beauty—heavily forested hills giving way to lush, green

meadows where crops flourished in the warm, Southern sun. And just the right amount of rain in the springtime, and snow in the winter to make trees grow enormous, like nowhere else on Earth. His grandfather had built the magnificent Big House and his father had made it larger and more elegant. Miss Abbey had added her touches as well: beautiful furnishings and a flower garden that was the envy of the entire county. For a child it was a dream world of forests, rivers, and caves to explore, hunting, fishing, and no end of boyhood adventures.

It had sustained three generations of his family and had generated a great deal of wealth from the sale of timber, tobacco, and especially cotton.

But other than an elderly, unmarried Aunt in Richmond, Nathan had no living relatives on his father's side. Miss Abbey's family were also back in Richmond, where she'd lived before marrying Jacob. If Nathan ignored her pleas and turned his back on her, she'd be forced to sell the farm and move back to Richmond.

He wondered how she felt about that. Her parents were both gone, years ago, but her brother and a sister still lived there. She'd never spoken of them much. Now he wondered why. He couldn't recall them ever coming to the farm, or her visiting them, although it may have happened during his long absence.

And ... he kept coming back to, what of the slaves? He guessed there must be nearly a hundred by now. If she sold the farm, she'd have to sell them as well. And it seemed unlikely anyone would buy the farm and all the slaves with it—that would require a very large sum of money. So they'd likely sell the slaves off in lots. Fathers, mothers, and their children—families—would be separated one from another. For the first time it occurred to him the Chambers' family farm, Mountain Meadows, was *their* home too. For better or worse, most had spent their entire lives at the farm, and knew no other home.

And if he resigned his commission and returned to Virginia, then what? He'd no longer be an Army captain. And if he didn't sell the farm he'd become a "gentleman farmer." And a slave master. He knew absolutely nothing of farming, beyond a few hazy childhood memories. And his Momma would expect him to just show up and "take charge" of the place. How would he do that?

No, selling the farm and moving Miss Abbey to Richmond seemed the only reasonable course. But ... what about the slaves ... *what on Earth* was he going to do about them?

STAN AND WILLIAM MEET

The second pair of buddies were as different from each other as they were from Georgie and Jamie: Stanislav "Stan" Volkov, and William Jenkins.

William was highly educated, quiet and introverted, often found with his bespectacled nose in a book, or closely examining some strange insect. Of medium height, he had a wiry frame with little meat on his bones. But William was no wimp, and when pressed, could stand up for himself. Among many other things, he'd learned boxing at Yale College—several soldiers had discovered, to their regret, William was a *very good* student.

Stan was in every way the opposite of William. While the Captain was a large man at well over six feet tall, Stan towered over him at six feet, eight inches, with broader shoulders, and thick, powerful arms. "Big Stan" was simply the largest man most people ever came face to face with. And despite the fashion of the day, he kept his light-colored hair cropped short, which accentuated the size of his head. He also had a large mouth, and when he smiled his full, toothsome smile, with his great size, and large, round head, it made for a monstrous, thoroughly intimidating look.

But despite his imposing size and frightful appearance, the other soldiers found Stan typically jolly and pleasurable. He came to America on a boat from Russia when just a young man. He'd worked various odd jobs in many different places along the West coast, always moving on to the next thing sparking his interest. Finally he joined the army after someone told him they'd let him fight whenever he wanted. Only after he arrived in Texas and they handed him a rifle did he realize they'd meant *gun* fights. But he'd never seen Texas before, so why not? To Stan, Virginia was just another place he'd never seen before, so why not go see it next?

Nobody could ignore Stan when he entered a room. And no one could remain somber around him. Stan simply wouldn't accept melancholy. "Come, young fellows!" he'd say boisterously, in his heavy Russian accent, "Why such the long faces?! Life ... is *good!* There is much fun to be having: new things to see, battles to fight! Pretty women for the kissing! Come, some fellow open a bottle and sing us a song!" And they'd generally sing—there was no arguing with "Big Stan." Sullenness couldn't stand up long to Stan's boisterous laughter and song.

Of course, when Stan first arrived on the post, William was the one person most resistant to Stan's infectious jollity. William did not make friends, rarely spoke unless asked a specific question, never indulged in strong drink or loose women, and never sang.

Stan seemed to take this behavior as a personal affront. He made it his mission in life to bring William out of his shell. He'd pester and badger William mercilessly. When William tried to read a book, Stan would sit across from him in the bunkhouse subjecting him to wild tales of adventure, real or imagined—no one knew for sure. Or he'd suddenly burst into a crude drinking song at the top of his lungs, slapping William on the back at each chorus. Or tell off-color jokes, one after the other in an amazing display of memory, and complete lack of decorum. By the end of these merciless sessions, the other men were laughing and joking while William covered his head with a pillow. But Stan never relented, never gave up, and never showed any lack of enthusiasm for the challenge. No matter how much William begged him to stop and to go away, Stan ignored him.

"Come, William Jenkins, you must tell us a joke or sing a song. Or I will never, *ever* go away!" Then he'd laugh and display his large, ferocious smile.

No one knew exactly when it had happened, but at some point, the two were seen walking together and talking. And William even smiled and laughed occasionally. The other soldiers considered it the strangest friendship they'd ever seen or imagined. It seemed there was something in William's resistance Stan enjoyed striving to overcome, and something about Stan that brought William to life. They noticed William seemed a little more open and talkative when he was with Stan, less inclined to retreat into his books and bugs.

SIDEARMS PURCHASED FOR THE JOURNEY

The potential dangers of their journey obliged the Captain to buy sidearms for each of the men. They'd have to turn in their army-issued rifles, and the trip from west Texas back to Virginia would take them through some rough country, places where lawmen were scarce or non-existent. Even after leaving Texas there'd be times when they'd have to leave one train and travel across country for some distance, to connect with the next.

Tom had arranged to meet with a local traveling gun merchant, who had a wide variety of arms. Nathan mistrusted the man, suspecting he was none too scrupulous about how he acquired them or who he sold them to. But Tom pointed out their options out in the wilderness were somewhat limited.

Most of the men had chosen the .36 caliber “Navy Colt” revolver; slightly less heavy and bulky than its bigger cousin, the .44 caliber Colt “Drogon.” The “Navy” moniker was a misnomer—people usually assumed they’d designed the weapon for the navy or it was standard issue for naval officers. In fact, neither was the case; the pistol got its nickname from the decorative engraving of a naval battle from the Mexican-American war on the otherwise smooth, six-shot cylinder.

Stan, had chosen neither of these, explaining they were “too tiny for big hands.” Instead, he chose an older gun, the predecessor to the others: the big revolver referred to as the Colt “Walker.” Named after the Texas Ranger credited with designing it along with Colonel Colt, the big Colt was an intimidating, man-stopping piece of hardware. At nearly sixteen inches long and weighing four and a half pounds, it sent a .44 caliber ball screaming downrange propelled by a sixty-grain load of powder—a load so powerful it would sometimes explode a cylinder. It was said if a man had a steady hand, or a sturdy fence rail, with its heavy nine-inch barrel it could hit a target at 100 yards. Large and cumbersome, they’d intended its owner to carry the weapon in a holster attached to his horse’s saddle. But Stan carried it casually on a holster at his waist, in the cross-draw fashion. He said it fit his large hand better, and the extra weight was of no concern, which they well-believed. Nathan smiled when he thought of the poor devil finding himself staring down the barrel of that large gun wielded by that very large man.

The Captain already owned the slightly smaller Drogon, beautifully engraved with polished walnut grips and brass trim—an officer’s sidearm. They’d purchased Stan’s pistol, by contrast, already used and well-worn. A purely utilitarian model with no adornments at all, but all the more intimidating for its workmanlike appearance. Nathan’s pistol had been a gift from his mother after his promotion to captain. It only held a fifty-grain charge of powder, which modification prevented the inconvenient explosion of the cylinders. It also had a slightly shorter seven-and-a-half-inch barrel. Still, a large, powerful sidearm, by any measure.

The Captain had also chosen a small, .31 caliber Colt revolver with a short, three-inch barrel for himself. The larger Drogon would be an uncomfortable and hefty weight to carry later, on their long train ride. Besides a large revolver in a holster wouldn’t fit his new role as a proper gentleman. So he’d stow the Drogon with the luggage once they reached proper “civilization.” Still, after going about armed almost every day of his life for the past fifteen years, walking around with no weapon made him feel uncomfortable—like he’d forgotten a critical piece of clothing. So the small Colt would ride along, out of sight, in his jacket pocket, problem solved.

Tom also purchased a considerable amount of ammunition, which for these revolvers consisted of gun powder, a supply of round lead balls, and tiny copper-covered percussion caps for setting off the powder. Each soldier would also carry a pouch of grease, typically animal lard, used to plug the end of each cylinder once loaded. This kept humidity from fouling the gunpowder and prevented an undesirable event called chain-firing where the flash from a round being fired would set off the powder in the next cylinder which would ignite the cylinder next to it, and so on. A bullet fired from a cylinder not aligned with the barrel could result in fingers lost, or worse.

Though it fired a spherical ball and had a short barrel, giving it a relatively short effective range, the revolver *was* superior to the rifles of the day in one aspect: it contained six shots to their one. But once he’d fired all six, a soldier dependent on such a weapon would be in serious trouble in battle; quick reloading under combat conditions was nearly impossible.

STAN'S FULL BACKSTORY – THE JOURNEY FROM RUSSIA TO TEXAS

Jamie called out, "C'mere, Stan. Tell us again how a big, dumb Russian like you came to be a fightin' Indians all the way round the world in Texas, America." Jamie could get away with calling Stan a "big, dumb Russian," because Stan in turn usually referred to him as "the thick-headed Irishman."

It was a story most of them had heard at least parts of before, though surprisingly not Captain Chambers. His curiosity piqued, he listened with interest to the tale as they rode along.

"Oh, well ... is not much to tell ..." Stan began in his usual manner, meaning he actually did have much to tell.

"When I was young man ... maybe fourteen years old ... I was living in hard, cold part of Russia—most easternest part of that very great land, a place called *Siberia*. We live in small village, really just lumber camp, with few common buildings—town hall, postal office, general store, and most importantly, *pivnaya*—what you Americans call saloon! At this time I live with my mother, two brothers and three sisters, in tiny, one-room log house. Papa had died few years before when big tree fell on his head.

"Well ... you may not believe it, but I was already very large boy. Not so big as now, of course, but much bigger than brothers who were older. And bigger than most men of town. And, like most ornery young boys, I liked to fight! Oh, how I liked to fight ...

"Of course, I fight my two brothers, and all my schoolmates, but after time they refuse fight more. They say, 'Stanislav ... you too big fight us boys. You go out, fight with men.'

"So I go out and am asking men in town who I should be fighting. But most men are smaller than me and tired from the cutting trees all day, not wanting waste time on ornery boys. But one says to me, 'Stanislav, you want fight, then go to *pivnaya* two hours past dark. By this time men been having much vodka. Someone will be stupid enough to fight you.' And so I did, and true to his word, men were drinking vodka, and were being very stupid. But I am being surprised when I try start fight—not one, but *three* men are thinking to teach young fool lesson and give big beating."

Stan paused here and smiled, looking around at his audience for dramatic effect, before continuing his tale.

"Well, as I said, these men were stupid with too much vodka, while I am young and strong like bull. At end, I am one giving lesson! Now I am *happy*, ornery, young man ... like little child gifted with new toy. So I come back to *pivnaya* night after night, until nobody wanting fight no more, no matter how stupid drunk.

"Finally, the *glava derevni*, uh ... 'master of village' you would say, he comes to Momma and says, 'Tatyana, you must do something about Stanislav. He is scaring men away from saloon with his fighting.' But Momma was not knowing what to do. So she says, 'Stanislav, no more school for you. Time to be working job so you come home tired at night and stop the fighting.'

"Well, I think she meant me to join other men of village cutting big trees. But I was afraid of great tall trees ... they were one thing bigger and stronger than me ... and I was remembering one had fallen on poor Papa. So when some men told me of a harbor town ... oh, twenty, maybe thirty miles away on coast of great ocean, I am thinking that is for me. So I pack clothes in bag, and off I go.

"It was last time I saw Momma, may she rest in peace, though I have written her letters sometimes."

"Oh, so sorry, Stan. Your mother has passed away then?" Georgie asked. He, like the Captain, had never heard Stan's full tale before.

But William, who'd listened to the story several times rolled his eyes and shook his head, recognizing the neat trap Stan had laid.

"My mother passed away? Oh no, Georgie. Last time I received letter from her she was in perfect health. It's just ... once I left her house, she could finally rest in peace! Ha, ha!"

There were a few chuckles, and some smiles, but most had heard it before, and so after a moment, Stan continued.

"Well, when I arrive in small harbor town I am cold, tired, and hungry. For once I am not wanting to fight, so maybe Momma was right after all. I went around town looking for work. But when they ask what I know how to do, I say 'nothing,' so nobody gives me work. Then a man says, 'maybe you know nothing, but you look a big strong young fellow, so you go down to ships and talk to man on big steamboat. He might need strong fellow like you.' So I walk down and find big boat. There lots of men carry heavy loads onto boat, and captain says they are ready to depart next tide. If I want job, then go help men load boat. So I did.

"Next day I am on boat in middle of ocean and no land in sight. Never had I even seen ocean or big boat before."

"Were you very afraid?" Georgie asked.

"No, not afraid. No big trees on ocean!"

They shared a laugh.

"Anyway, I ask one of men where is boat going and why. He says we work for Russian-American Company, and we go to place called *Alyaska* across ocean in land of America. I was ashamed to say I never heard of land called America, so I ask him why we go there. He says to hunt seals. I am also ashamed to admit I am not knowing what kind of animal seal is, so I ask, 'They have good meat on them, do they?' But he just laughs at me and shakes his head. Later I learn seals are for soft fur.

"Of course, in village in Siberia we would hunt. With rifle, or sometimes with spear. Deer, boar, and others for meat, bear, wolves, and such things for fur. So I knew of hunting and am always liking the searching, and the sneaking around forest in snow, and the skill of shot or throw of spear. So I am thinking I will like this job – hunting these seals, whatever they are.

"But ..." he sighed, "hunting seals is not like hunting other things. Better they should just call it killing seals, or slaughtering seals, or maybe just butchering seals. There is no hunting ... men come to shore in small boats, spread out around the sand and rock where seals come out of water for the resting. No rifles, no spears. No need for such manly things as these. Just heavy wooden clubs. You see, seals can only move fast swimming in water. No man can kill seal when he is in ocean. But on land seal cannot run or jump, having only fins like fish—no feet or legs at all. So men surround them, shouting and making noise until they all bunch together in fear. Then men bash them on head until none are moving. After that they take out sharp knives and cut skins off, wanting only precious fur. The meat is left on beach to rot.

"I am not ... how you say it ... *squeamish*? As I have said before, I like to fight, and I like *real* hunting back in Russia. But this? This made me feel sick, and for first time something I see make me *rvotnoye* ... how you say ... *vomit*? Yes, the murder of seals made me vomit. But other men laugh and say, 'you get used to it, Stanislav.'

"But I am not getting used to it. The seal, he looks at you with big eyes like pet dog; and you are supposed to bash on head," he sighed again, "is not for Stan.

"So when finally ship lands in real town in *Alyaska*, I leave. The captain, he say, 'You can't leave. You are part of crew. You must work until return to Russia, or pay for price of passage.'

“But I laugh in his face, and say, ‘Who will stop me? You?’ and then I laugh again and walk away. I know now it was not very big town, but to young boy, coming across ocean from little village in Siberia, it seemed greatest place in world. *Novo Arkhangelsk* it is called in Russian, “New Archangel” you would say in American. The local Indians call it *Sitka*. Anyway, it is biggest town in Russian America, and a whole new world to me.

“But Russian-American Company owns town, and they send men to try drag me back to boat.”

He paused, and smiled a broad grin, “Then they are learning how I like to fight!”

“But man can’t fight always, so I get on fishing boat going south down coast. On new boat I learn catch big fish with great net. I like catch fish more than kill seals. Fish are just ... hmm ... fishy—they are not looking like pet dog!”

“But fishing boat soon full and captain is wanting return to *Novo Arkhangelsk*. So I get off on empty shore of rocks. I walk and walk until I meet Indians. These Indians also fishers and treat me well. I live with them for year, maybe more, catching fish.

“One day Indians dress up in wild clothing, masks of animals or demons, and get in great, carved rowing boats. They go south down coast. I am thinking maybe there is big battle coming. But no, we come to special place with many other Indians from other groups. They are not fighting but having great feast. Dancing, singing, and other special Indian things a poor Russian boy cannot understand.

“And so I ask some of other Indians if they be seeing any other white men like me. I was wanting company of my own kind again. Most said no, thinking I am some strange kind of pale Indian. But some Indians I talk with ... they say yes, they know of village with white men. Sometimes they go there to trade goods. So I ask to come with them, and I say goodbye to those that brought me to feast. After more months of living with new Indians they are going to place where white men live. We travel ... hmm ... a week, maybe more. In great ocean-going wood boats. Each boat is holding dozens men or more. Strange animals, birds, and fishes are painted on sides with many bright colors. They even have small masts and sails to use when wind blows right way.

“We come to place of white men—is neat little village of cabins. I am eager to meet them, it has been two years maybe since I have seen anyone of my own kind.

“Now, you will laugh knowing the world as you do. But remember, I am knowing nothing of great wide world. So you can imagine surprise when I start talking to these white men. They just stare at me. Then they say some things to me, and I cannot understand any word they say. Like with Indians, until I started knowing their words. But these new white men are not surprised like me. They talk with themselves, then one nods, looks at me, points finger and says ‘*Russian*.’ It is first time I am hearing the word, but somehow I know it is their word for *my* people. Man points to himself and says ‘*American*.’ This is first time I know there are white men in America who are not from Russia. I learn later this man’s name is Denny. He is boss of these *Americans*.

“These people very kindly, and take me in. They call little village *Seattle*. They say it is name of local Indian chief, though I never meet him. But ... there is not much for a young man to do in little town like this. Except cut big trees, which ... well, I have already said what I think of *that*.

“They made me to understand there was much bigger town further down coast. A place so big they have special word for it: ‘*city*.’ They call this city *Port Land*, and soon I am able to get ride on trading boat heading down coast.”

Stan paused, and shook his head, making a clucking sound for several moments.

“*City* ... such tiny word for such *big* place. You men have lived your lives in great land of America so have no idea of what this place called *Port Land* meant to me. Never before have I seen anything

like it. People everywhere, moving about like ants in hill. Great ships coming and going always. And whole streets full of saloons. New kinds of alcohol I have never seen nor tasted before. And even some Russians there, and they tell me all about the great city and the even greater land called America.

“And the women! By this time I am not purely innocent, you will be surprised to be hearing!”

He shrugged, and put on his most innocent look, “Some young Russian girls had taught me things about the ... pleasures of the female kind. And Indian maidens had taught me *more* things ...”

This, of course, prompted several minutes of the usual rude, humorous remarks from the audience.

“But women in this city ... it was first time I am learning man can buy womanly favors with money. I have never done it before; women always seem drawn to me, for some reason I am not knowing ...”

This drew more hoots, and crude, size-related comments.

“I’m thinking I am some kind of fool at first, until I am knowing how these things work. And did I tell you of the fighting? I had not lost love for fighting, and here were endless saloons filled with endless stupid drunks to fight. I was having ... how you say it? ‘The time of life?’ Yes, that was it. And I found men would pay me to fight. Other men would bet on winner. Soon I am paid fighter and am fighting for large groups. And other men are not drunks, but paid fighters, like me.”

“I enjoy new challenge, but still ... none of you Americans could beat me.” He grinned his huge, toothy grin, and slowly looked around at the other men. This time there were no sarcastic remarks. They could well believe it was true.

“Soon I am running out of men to fight. So one of men that pays me says he take me to new city—even bigger city where I can fight new men. Ship takes me to city called San Francisco. Port Land was great, large city to me, but this new city was big beyond thinking. More of everything ... ships, buildings, people, saloons, women, and fighting!

“Well, at first things go well. Plenty good fights, plenty good money. I am thinking I like this new city very much. Then in one fight something happens ... I hit man and I hear something like ‘*snap!*’ The man drops to floor like sack of dirt and is not moving. Men come over and say he is dead. I am not thinking much of it at first; you fight enough times ... hmm ... these things happen,” he shrugged his shoulders.

“But people watching, gamblers and men paying fighters all leave quickly, dead man’s body left on floor. I ask where they are going and man says ‘There be trouble from this. Police will come,’ and he says something about ‘going to jail,’ and another says, ‘No, not jail: hanging!’ I do not know what to think, or what to do.

“Then man walks up to me. He is dressed all in blue—bright brass buttons and fancy looking hat with gold braids. At first, I am thinking he is policeman. But he laughs and says no. Later I learn it is Army officer’s uniform, but at this time I am not knowing of such things. He is not afraid, but says ‘Come with me, and I will help you with these troubles.’

“So ... I go. He takes me to building where other men dress like him. Lots of men scurrying about, like they have important things to do, though I never saw them doing any.

“This man takes me to room with big desk, and he sits down behind. I sit in chair. He says, ‘I am going to send you to place where they will pay you to fight every day. And I promise they won’t even care if you kill opponent—in fact they’d prefer it!’ Well, that sounded like the place for me ...”

He laughed, "Next thing I know I am wearing blue uniform, and am on wagon riding to hot, dry place called *Texas*. When wagon stops they give me rifle and say, 'Here, Volkov ... now go fight Comanche Indians!'"

He laughed again, shaking his head. They all joined in.

Jim grinned broadly, the cold cigar still between his teeth, "Well, you have to admit, the army *does* have a great sense of humor!"

NATHAN PREPARING HIS WEAPONS FOR BATTLE

The blade was eighteen inches long, two-and-a-half inches wide, and easily a quarter of an inch thick. More like a short sword than a knife! It was capped off with a stag-horn handle and a small brass cross-guard where the handle met the blade. It had the typical Bowie knife shape; straight spine, with the sharp edge curving up at the end to meet the ground off upper edge at a sharp point. He kept both the blade edge and the last six inches of the upper spine razor sharp; in fact, Nathan had shaved with it occasionally.

He'd neglected it somewhat of late, bouncing it along in the saddle, getting it covered in road dust and grime. He'd just finished cleaning, polishing, and oiling it until it shone like a mirror. Now he was bringing its edge back to razor sharpness. He might go into battle tomorrow, and he believed in making sure he had every possible advantage.

Earlier in the afternoon he had taken apart and thoroughly cleaned his two pistols: the large .44 caliber Dragoon, and the small .31 caliber Pocket Colt. He'd load them first thing in the morning.

NATHAN'S BANK IN NEW ORLEANS (AND ITS UNIQUE BANK NOTES)

Nathan needed to visit his bank, the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company, specifically. It got its odd name when it was founded back in the 1830s to build a canal linking Lake Pontchartrain with downtown New Orleans. After accomplishing its original mission, it went on to become one of the largest banks in New Orleans, and the United States.

Because it was so large, well known, and trusted, he could draw out, and use, paper currency from the bank for the rest of the trip. This was a big relief versus carrying a heavy bag of gold or silver coins.

The face of the intricately printed five-dollar notes had George Washington on the left, and General Lafayette on the right. And in proper New Orleans style, a group of buxom, scantily dressed women lounging around together on top of a large numeral '5', in the middle!

These bank notes bore the inscription "The New Orleans Canal & Banking Company will pay five dollars to the bearer on demand." And because of the bank's reputation, people generally believed it, and accepted the paper as if it were gold.



JIM TELLS STORY OF WHEN STAN FIRST CAME TO FORT DAVIS

"So ... let me ask you this, Billy ... what were *you* doing while our boys were having a fight with these outlaws?" Jim asked.

"Watching."

"Only watching? Not inclined to help?"

"No, Sergeant Jim. Being smaller than you white men I like *watching* this kind of fight better'n being in it. Besides ..."

"Yes?"

"Big Stan was there. They had no need of me."

Jim laughed. "True enough. With Stan there, they'd have no trouble in a bar fight."

"Yes, he is ... a fighter like I have never seen."

"Yep, I agree, Billy. I ain't never seen the like, neither. You'd think a big man like him would be slow and clumsy. But he's as quick on his feet as a cat, and his hands move like a biting snake. In fact, speaking of snakes ... did you ever hear the story of when Big Stan first came to Fort Davis?"

Billy shook his head. Jim pulled on his shirt and pants then started looking around the room for his boots.

"Well, we was out on patrol, on foot, hiking up over a ridge. We was fixin' to drop down behind a Comanche camp that was supposed to be in the area. Trying to catch 'em off their guard and get the jump on 'em, you know. Well ... we's hiking along, when one of the fellas calls out, 'Watch out, there's a damned rattler!'

"So I quickly reminds everyone not to shoot it, for fear o' giving our position away to the enemy. I reached down and grabbed my bayonet, fixing it to my rifle. I figured on giving the thing a poke with it. But Stan walks up, bends over, and looks right at the snake. 'Why you afraid such puny little thing?' he asks."

Jim was getting into his tale, complete with an excellent imitation of Stan's strong Russian accent. He sat down on the bed and started pulling on his boots.

"So the fella that spotted it says, 'cause the damned things bite, and they's poisonous, you damned foreign fool!'

"But Stan just moves closer to the snake, curious-like, and says, 'Don't look so very dangerous to me.' So I says, 'Damn it, Private Volkov! If you go gettin' yourself bit, I ain't carryin' you back, and I doubt anyone else will neither.'

"But he just laughs and takes another step closer. Then, of course, the snake strikes out to bite him. But he jumps his feet back as quick as can be. And at the same time reaches down and grabs the snake by the back of the neck. I'll be damned if he don't stand up, with that big ol' grin of his, and shows us the snake, wriggling in his fist. The thing musta' been as big around as my arm, and near as long as a man is tall.

"But Stan, he says, 'See ... not so scary,' and grins again. Then the guy that first seen it first steps up with a knife and says, 'Hold it still whiles I cut off its head.' But Stan shakes his head and says, 'Nyet! Poor little fellow ... never hurt nobody. Just waiting for rabbit to come down path for dinner. Never expecting big, dumb soldiers to come marching along.'

"Then he ups and tosses it off into the bushes, as casual as you please. Finally, he turns to the soldier and says, 'And ... don't never call me *fool* again, or next time I give you snake for pet!' then he laughs and walks away."

"I have not heard that story before. But it *is* Big Stan, all right," Billy said, nodding.

<WARNING – SPOILER ALERT:>

Don't read this section before finishing *ENIGMA – ROAD TO THE BREAKING – BOOK 2*.

HARRIET HANSON'S BACKSTORY

For Evelyn's mother, Harriet Hanson, the death of her husband Elias was the end of a long nightmare from which she'd finally awakened.

At first, she thought she'd married well. Elias Hanson was young, and handsome enough. But more importantly, he'd recently inherited his family's farm—a respectable spread with a good-sized manor house and a few dozen slaves to work the fields and the household.

But Elias turned out to be a “dreamer.” He had no mind for business, nor the heart for it. He was a kindly man and could not bear to see the slaves mistreated. Beatings and severe discipline came to a halt when he became the master, and several of his experienced foremen quit in protest.

This might have worked in his favor—there *had* been an immediate improvement in morale amongst the slaves that might have translated into an increase in productivity and profitability for the farm. But he proved too slow in replacing incompetent overseers, typically doing so based on his “feelings” about them, rather than their abilities. The planting would be late one year, the harvest incomplete the next. Crops would be sparse or fail altogether.

Elias also liked to ride into town regularly, holding forth with his friends. Or acquaintances, or anyone willing to discuss whatever topic was on his mind. He loved to read, and to philosophize on a wide range of subjects. And if nobody offered to buy a round of drinks, he'd happily do so himself. He didn't typically drink to excess, but believed a few drinks wouldn't harm anyone, and might help “lubricate” the discussion.

Harriet found Elias's actions alarming and potentially disastrous. While the state of the farm continued to deteriorate, so did their relationship. At first, she tried discussing “business” with him, but he would feign disinterest, and retreat to his refuge at the tavern in town. He'd refused to discuss money, finances, or planning with her.

Out of anger, frustration, and fear she began to berate him regularly, resorting to name calling and insults. “Eli, when I married you, I thought you were a man! You've got no backbone! You're a damn fool ... an idiot! All you want to do is sit around the bar and yammer while this house sinks into the mire! You couldn't make a penny to save your soul! I can't imagine what I was thinking marrying the likes of you. If my mother could see this, she would roll over in her grave in disgust,” and on, and on.

But nothing she did or said could get a reaction from him. He'd simply retreat and refuse to talk, responding mildly “Harriet, dear ... I know you're just upset and don't really mean what you're saying ...”

Despite his mismanagement of the farm, his worst offense, in Harriet's mind, was how he raised their young daughter. Born less than a year after they'd wed, Evelyn was smart and pretty—the very picture of a young lady who might one day be the “belle of the ball” when she came of age. But instead of encouraging lady-like activities and manners, what did he do? He taught her how to ride a horse—astraddle, like a man rather than sidesaddle like a proper lady! And shoot a rifle! Unconscionable! Rather than pushing her to learn about fashion, and the proper way to run a household, he'd filled her head with his wild philosophies! As if young ladies had any use for such nonsense! Harriet tried to put a stop to such goings-on whenever she discovered them. But the two of

them were incorrigible and of the same mind, often sneaking off together for their illicit activities. She didn't really expect a six-year-old to know better, but her husband? He certainly should've!

One day, after Elias had ridden off to town, she decided to take matters into her own hands. It was springtime, just before the year's planting, and already they were suffering the pinch from a poor harvest the past fall. Elias had stubbornly refused to switch the majority of his crops from tobacco to cotton, like most of his neighbors had. He kept insisting Mr. Whitney's "Cotton Engine" — commonly shortened to "Cotton Gin" — was "not the seventh wonder everyone made it out to be."

Harriet had the sinking feeling Elias was sacrificing the economic well-being of their farm for no better reason than refusing to admit he was on the losing end of an argument in one of his philosophical debates in town.

She felt a slight tinge of guilt and even a little fear, though she didn't know why. After all, what would Elias, of all people, do to her if he caught her? She took the key to his office from his chest of drawers where he kept it, walked down the hallway to the locked door of his office.

She'd sent the head housekeeper out on an errand and had made sure all the other house servants were busy downstairs preparing the evening meal. She scolded herself for exercising such needless caution, *Fool! It's none of their business what I do, and they wouldn't dare to interfere.* Still, the thought of one of them witnessing her guilty action and possibly telling Elias made her blush. *No; best nobody knows.*

She carefully inserted the key in the lock and turned it. She pulled on the door, and it opened noiselessly. She wondered that it didn't squeak for lack of use — it was, after all, where the business of the farm took place, and that'd been sorely neglected!

At the far side of the room sat a desk, positioned directly under a window overlooking the fields beyond. It didn't surprise her to find it a random, disorganized mess. She walked over and gazed at the contents. Papers piled in stacks nearly covered the surface. She let out an audible sigh. *Well, best get to it.*

Three or four hours later, she heard Elias arriving back home on his horse. It was nearly dark, and the groom made a great fuss about his arrival — asking how his evening had been, how good it was to have him home again, how he'd make sure go give the horse a good brushing before putting him away, and on and on. She found the obsequiousness both appropriate and disgusting at the same time. Appropriate a negro slave should treat the master in this manner. Disgusting because Elias did *not* deserve such respect!

After spending the evening going through his papers, Harriet did not do what she had planned on doing when Elias had left that afternoon. Initially she'd just planned on having a look. But once she started digging through his papers her resolve hardened. The farm was clearly on the brink of disaster — bills accumulating, and money in short supply. So when she heard his footsteps coming up the stairs she didn't retreat and re-hide the key as she'd planned. She sat right where she was and continued to pour over the books.

She heard Elias enter their bedroom at the far end of the hall and then call out in surprise, "Harriet? Where are you?"

"I'm here," she responded matter-of-factly.

He walked down the hall, and stood in the doorway, seeming confused. "Harriet, what are you doing in there?"

"We must sell some of the slaves to have any hope of making it to the next harvest," she said, ignoring his question. "Also, we need to plant cotton instead of tobacco this year," she concluded.

He entered the room as if stunned and sat down hard in a wooden chair opposite the desk. "Do you really think so?" he asked, in a faraway sounding voice.

She turned around in the chair and faced him. "There's no other way to pay our debts and have enough left over to plant the crops," she answered.

"Wheew," he whistled. "I hate to do that. This is their home, their family ... it doesn't seem right, somehow..."

"Don't be an *idiot*, Elias! They are only property. You have to see them that way if you want to run a farm. Just like the horses and the cows—*property*, and no more! And, fortunately for us, thanks to Mr. Whitney's Cotton Gin, they're very *valuable* property right now, and will fetch a good price!"

It was the beginning of a new phase in their life and their relationship. Elias never questioned why she'd "broken in" to the forbidden room. Nor did he ever question her right to make the decisions necessary to run the farm, except to feebly protest against some of her harsher choices. He did, however, exercise his "male prerogative" when it came time to sell several of the slaves. He refused to split up a slave family—a strong healthy man and woman, and their three pre-teenage children—even though it meant sacrificing a great deal of their monetary value. By refusing to sell them as anything but a package deal, he could only sell them for approximately two thirds of their value if sold individually.

"Stupid!" Harriet berated him, "The new owner will immediately turn around, split them up, and make all the money we just gave up!"

"Maybe so," he responded in the dreamy voice she found so infuriating, "... at least I will have a clear conscience."

"A clear conscience won't feed our hungry bellies!"

But nothing Harriet tried could turn around the economic disaster Elias had initiated. They had just too much debt and not enough means of turning it around. Eventually the bank called in the loans, after they'd been unable to make the demanded payments. The bank seized the farm, and auctioned it off, along with all the equipment, furnishings. And, of course, the slaves.

Harriet's cheeks still turned red and burned whenever she recalled it. Oh, the shame and embarrassment! They'd been forced to sell most of their personal effects and use what little cash they had on hand to acquire a small house in downtown Richmond.

The stress of their disgrace had been too much for Elias, who disappeared one night, and never came back. They found him the next morning face down in a ditch, an empty bottle in his hand and the stench of alcohol on his lifeless body. *A shameful end to a shameful life*, Harriet thought as their carriage arrived at their new home in the city.

HARRY THE DOG GOES HUNTING

Slinking along in the tall grass at the side of the road a few paces behind was a now familiar, four-legged shadow. He had never been far from the group the entire day. Always within earshot, but *not* always within eyesight. He was expert at finding any available shade, and despite his great bulk, at keeping out of sight.

He was clearly half-wild to begin with. And Miss Abbey had told Nathan they'd rarely needed to feed the dog, except in the harshest winter weather. He'd proven himself an astute, self-sufficient hunter. Rabbits, squirrels, possums, foxes, raccoons, and even occasionally birds fell prey to his hunting. It was like having a half-tame wolf prowling the farm—if wolves weighed more than a full-grown man!

But despite his obvious ferocity and hunting prowess, he never harmed any of the domesticated farm animals, including the cats patrolling the barns. He ignored the livestock—rabbits, chickens, geese, all wandered about the farm in no fear of the dog who would trot right past without a glance or sniff.

He was a walking contradiction in so many ways. Nathan was fascinated by his strange new ward and often pondered his oddities.

MARGARET MARRIES WALTERS

Walters had seemed pleasant enough when she first met him—polite, and well-mannered. And, more importantly to her parents, he was clearly a man of considerable wealth. At the beginning he lavished her, and her parents, with expensive gifts.

He'd seen her dancing at one of the many formal balls in Richmond. Apparently he'd liked the look of her, though she always thought herself plain looking and too willowy thin for most men's taste. Though intelligent, she was shy and quiet, often feeling awkward in social circumstances. In Richmond high society this left her feeling insecure, and lacking in confidence around other people, especially the young men.

But Walters had never approached her or talked to her. Instead, he called on her parents, and proposed the marriage to them, to which they heartily agreed. That Margaret might have a different opinion on the matter never entered into it. She was informed of the arrangements after the fact. Being the good, polite, obedient daughter, and feeling insecure about anything to do with an actual courtship, it never occurred to her to question it, or to disagree.

She now regretted most bitterly her obedience, and her lack of conscious thought about the man she would marry. Since then, she'd become a virtual prisoner in her own home. Walters had proven himself cold and cruel, with no human warmth or kindness she could discern. On their wedding night he had "taken" her with a force and urgency that was frightening, and not in any way gentle, loving, or romantic. He left the room immediately after he finished, and did not return the rest of the night, leaving her alone in the bed, softly crying—any childhood dreams she may have had about marital love and romance utterly shattered.

For the first several months he repeated this behavior on a regular basis. But, thankfully, he seemed to eventually tire of it, so now it was an infrequent occurrence, for which she was grateful. Through all that she had never managed to conceive, for which she was also grateful. Though a child might prove a comfort and company, she couldn't imagine the anxiety of raising a child in this place, with this man. And it was possible Walters might divorce her if she was unable to give him children. But he never said anything about it, nor had he ever mentioned anything about having children. Perhaps he simply didn't care about that either.

And, by now she had come to fear Walters, in a very real, physical way. From what she'd seen, the same was true for everyone else at the plantation, even the white farm hands. It went well beyond just being cold and stern. He was a very dangerous and unpredictable man. She had personally seen him murder slaves on two occasions, with his own hands. Both times she had witnessed the beatings out her window, on the front drive. It made her wonder if he'd done it where she could see on purpose, for her benefit. It had been the most terrible thing she'd ever seen. After a few moments she had turned away and covered her ears. Walters proceeded to beat the men to death, one with a club, and the other with a whip. It was a shock and horror she still couldn't think about without tearing up and suffering the shakes. And the servants had informed her these had *not* been the only ones.

Even the *household* slaves lived in constant fear of him, making it nearly impossible to turn them to her side. They feared getting close to her, or treating her too kindly, lest it anger the master.

At first, he had just kept her confined to the farm, never letting her accompany him to town, or even to church. Several times she'd tried asking him why he wished her to stay always on the farm. But he'd just given her that cold, hard look, so she'd eventually given it up.

Maybe it was so she wouldn't try to run away. Or it might be some kind of twisted jealousy—she noticed he never sent male slaves or farm hands to wait on her, only women. Maybe he didn't want her to interact with other men. Since her arrival at the farm, she could not recall a single time she'd interacted with a *man* of either race without Walters present. The only exception was the local pastor who was an older man—and of course a man of the cloth—so presumably no threat.

NATHAN'S ANGER ISSUES – FULL BACKSTORY

The starting point of this dark side was an insatiable need to win ... at everything. The result was an extremely competitive boy; he had to win every race, every wrestling match, every game, every argument, every fight. This generally manifested in harmless ways. But if someone crossed him in the wrong way, if he felt cheated or slighted in some way, he'd display a dark, destructive temper. He'd lose control and strike out violently. He'd lost several good childhood friends that way. It was this temper, in later years most often directed toward his father, that had led his mother to send Nathan away to school in the North. He suspected she had become more afraid of what *he* might do to his father, than the other way around.

It was during his second year in boarding school he had learned, finally, how to control the dark anger when it raged. Of course, he'd learned this lesson, like most, the hard way—the result of a near tragedy.

Johnny Miller, the classroom bully, had mistaken Nathan's easy-going, friendly attempts to fit in with his new classmates for softness and decided Nathan would be a good target for abuse. Nathan, keenly aware of his past problems controlling his temper, had tried hard to suppress the growing anger. For weeks he'd tried to ignore the taunting and prodding. But the abuse from Johnny continued unabated, and even worse, his other classmates began to tease him, misinterpreting his lack of reaction for timidity.

But the more Nathan tamped down the anger, the more it built up inside him. Then one fateful day the bully pushed him that one last step too far—over the edge into a dark abyss of rage.

On that day, the boys lined up in the courtyard as usual, preparing for the short walk across to the cafeteria for mid-day meal. Without warning Johnny gave Nathan a hard shove from behind, nearly knocking him over, spilling his books to the ground. Johnny'd laughed out loud, taunting Nathan. "Well, looks like someone's awfully clumsy. Can't even stand still without tripping, eh Nathan?"

He'd laughed. Several of the other boys had laughed with him. It was the last time they laughed at Nathan.

Without a word he turned and punched Johnny hard in the nose. Johnny staggered back. Blood spewed from a broken nose. But one punch wouldn't quench Nathan's raging fire. He launched himself into the bully, both fists swinging, knocking Johnny to the ground. Nathan jumped on top and continued the attack. It was shocking—ferocious and bloody.

Such extreme violence was rare in schoolyard fights, which were typically more about posturing, taunting, and a few poorly aimed punches, before the schoolmaster stepped in to break things up. A few bumps and bruises, a fat lip or a black eye were normally all there was to show for the scuffle.

But this time it took the schoolmaster and several of the stronger schoolboys to pull Nathan off, and to restrain him, still cursing and thrashing, until the dark fit had passed. Johnny laid on the ground, moaning and crying, his broken nose a bloody mess, a wrist broken trying to protect his face.

Nathan still shuddered when he thought of it, even all these years later, knowing he would have killed Johnny if they hadn't pulled him off. He still believed Johnny had deserved it, but it hadn't been his proudest moment!

While Johnny recuperated in the hospital, Nathan's fate was being debated by the schoolmasters. They had to admit Johnny had instigated the confrontation, and Nathan had been extremely patient with him up to the last incident. But Nathan's eventual over-reaction could not be ignored. If no one had intervened, there was a general agreement it would've ended badly.

Nathan believed they were right. He was contrite, and apologetic. He felt frustrated with himself but didn't know what to do. He had tried his best to control the anger and not to react to Johnny's nonsense. But something had snapped, and he could no longer control his own body and actions. It was frightening. Though he was only thirteen, he was tall and strong, and could already beat most grown men in a fight. If he couldn't learn to control his temper, it was only a matter of time before something truly tragic happened.

Then one of the schoolmasters, who taught the older boys, volunteered to work with Nathan. "He's a good boy—smart, likeable, easy to teach, popular with his classmates. He just needs to learn what to do when the anger burns, not to suppress it or try to control it. We all saw what good *that* did! No ... he must learn to use it productively, to burn that fuel in little useful bursts. Not gathering it up inside until it erupts in a great conflagration," Mr. Wilson explained to his associates. In the end, not knowing what else to do, they agreed to let Wilson see what he could do with Nathan.

Nathan was on probation. Any more serious fights, and he'd be immediately, permanently expelled. He transferred to Mr. Wilson's classroom, where he found himself amongst boys two years older. At first, he found it intimidating; the schoolwork was more demanding, and everyone seemed so much older and wiser. But soon he began to appreciate his new classmates who seemed more ... mature, maybe? Yes ... the bullying and taunting seemed to no longer interest them, to his relief.

And Mr. Wilson kept Nathan after class for an hour or more at the end of every day. But not to do schoolwork. Nathan, though having to work extra hard, handled the added academic demands. No, their extra sessions were to work on how to channel his anger to positive effect.

Mr. Wilson taught him it was a mistake to suppress the anger; it would never work for long, as anger had a way of taking control if allowed to build up. Instead, they talked about ways to use the anger productively, to run faster, jump higher, work harder.

Mr. Wilson taught Nathan about the Vikings, who had had among them men they called "berserkers." These men intentionally built up their anger to the explosive boiling point, so when they were in battle they could vent it in one explosive, destructive, irresistible, force. He pointed out that such men, while they killed many enemies, rarely survived the battle. Once they'd spent their anger and drained their energy, they were defenseless. Better to let the anger out in small, productive bursts, than to build it up into a devastating explosion, then suffer the consequences.

Aside from being the wisest man Nathan had ever known, Mr. Wilson was also a great talker. Rhetoric was one of his specialties, and he simply could not be beaten in a debate. His devastatingly clever use of the language was thoroughly daunting to his opponents. He taught Nathan how to use language to help channel the anger. Words, he pointed out, no matter how acerbic, could never kill anyone! And they could be an effective way to vent anger in small bursts preventing it from building

up, while giving one the satisfaction of outwitting one's enemies. Nathan used that strategy to good effect on many occasions in the years to come.

That year spent with Mr. Wilson had saved his life, he now believed. Otherwise the anger would have led him to a tragic end. Now, after all these years, he still used those lessons Mr. Wilson had taught him. Little tricks, to keep him from killing someone when he could feel the anger about to explode. Like chopping up the whip. He smiled. Mr. Wilson would've liked that one!

True, he'd chopped up the whip to make a statement about the end of beatings, to be sure. But mostly he'd used it to dissipate the rage. A thought then occurred to him; Billy alone had recognized the real purpose behind it—the need to release the pent-up anger. Yep, there was a lot of wisdom in the young man. He would have to remember to make more use of that wisdom, strange as it sometimes seemed.

NATHAN'S 33RD BIRTHDAY – JULY 4, 1860

The next day, at noon, Nathan called a stop to all work on the farm. Once again he ordered the workers, both black and white, to gather on the lawn in front of the great house, though it was only Wednesday, not their usual Sabbath gathering.

Nathan stood before the gathering, dressed once more in his finest.

"Good afternoon and God bless y'all. Today we celebrate a special day, though not the Sabbath, as you have already surmised. No, today we observe the birth of our great country, the United States of America. This is July 4th, 1860. It was eighty-four years ago the forefathers of our country declared our independence from England, far across the ocean. They wrote the now famous words, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

"These words seem more appropriate to me now, maybe, than ever before since that first day they were written. And, in honor of our great country, and the men that founded it, I have declared today a holiday. So we will spend the rest of the day celebrating that momentous occasion.

"Our second president, John Adams wrote a letter to his wife, Abigail Adams, on July 3, 1776, the day before the founding of our great nation. In it he said he wished this day to be commemorated 'with pomp and parade; with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other. From this time forward forever more.'

"And to honor his request, him being the husband of Miss Abbey's namesake and all." He looked over at Miss Abbey and grinned, to which she bowed and smiled in acknowledgement. "And also, him being one of our Founding Fathers, of course; we at Mountain Meadows Farm will do our best to grant Mr. Adams' wishes.

"But ... as it turns out we've got very little pomp here, no parade, no games, nor any sports to speak of. And we've got no 'illuminations,' what folks nowadays call 'fireworks.'

"But one thing we do have ... is *guns!* *Gentlemen* ... if you please!"

He gestured off to his left where his men stood in a line out on the lawn. Seven men were shoulder to shoulder in a row: Jim, Tom, William, Stan, Jamie, Georgie, and Billy. Each man stood at attention and held a rifle at his right side, butt on the ground.

"Present arms!" Tom called.

The men lifted their weapons up to chest level, now grasping the gun with both hands in front of them, the butt slightly lower than the barrel.

"Aim ..."

As one, they shouldered their rifles, pointing them straight ahead, and at a forty-five-degree angle up into the sky.

“... Fire!”

There was a loud concussion, as all seven guns fired simultaneously.

“Reload!”

The men lowered their rifles and began reloading.

Nathan spoke again, “It’s traditional in the military to fire a twenty-one-gun salute on important occasions. This is normally done with three volleys of seven rifles, as you see here today. We do this to honor our nation, and the memory of the brave soldiers who gave their lives in battle—fighting for the freedoms we enjoy today. Freedoms many of you will soon enjoy for the first time, as our present plans come to fruition.”

“Attention! Present Arms ... Aim ... Fire!”

The guns spoke again, fire spitting from the barrels and smoke flowing up into the air—a small gray cloud drifting off to the north in the mild breeze, trailing slightly behind the earlier one.

And a moment later, yet again, “Attention! Present Arms ... Aim ... Fire!”

“Thank you all for joining in this celebration. And please enjoy the rest of this beautiful day in honor of our homeland. God bless y’all, and may God continue to bless these United States of America!”

“There is food laid out on tables by the house ... please come and enjoy. And after, there will be a bonfire at the edge of the lawn. And I would very much enjoy hearing music and watching dancing, if it pleases you.” He said this last with a big grin, which was returned by many in the audience—none broader than on the face of Big George, who nodded his head to acknowledge a look from the Captain.

But before he dismissed the gathering, Miss Abbey stepped up in front of him and said, in a loud voice, “Oh wait please! A moment more. He is much too modest to say it, so I will. It’s not only the date of the birth of our country today but also the date of our beloved Captain’s birth. Mr. Nathaniel Chambers is 33 years old today! Please join me in congratulating him on his birthday.”

She began clapping, joined instantly by his men from Texas. The rest of the audience soon followed, rising to rousing, thunderous applause.

Nathan turned red in the face, leaned over and kissed Miss Abbey. Then she handed him a package, wrapped in brown paper, tied off with a red ribbon. He opened it and held out an elegant waistcoat. It was of a dark lavender velvet material in front, heavily embroidered with intricate gold stitching and finely wrought brass buttons. The back was made of a shiny gold satin material—a princely garment. He looked at her and asked, “Did you ... *make* this, Momma?”

She nodded.

He shook his head in amazement as he held it up to admire it. “It is beautiful beyond words, Momma. I always knew you were an artist with flowers, but *this* ... it is extraordinary! Thank you, thank you very sincerely. This is a most beautiful gift, and because it comes from your own hands, it will be a treasure of my house. I am truly honored, my dear lady.”

He bowed to her, and took her hand, kissing it gently. She smiled up at him, tears filling her eyes, but she could find no words.

Those watching began clapping again, not sure what else to do. But somehow it seemed appropriate—both mother and son looked up and waved their appreciation.

Nathan then stepped down from the veranda, leading the procession to where tables had been laid out with various dishes of food. It was a simple fare, slightly better than the slaves were used to, and slightly less than the whites. But today, by Nathan's order, all would share and share alike.

NATHAN TELLS EVELYN HIS BACKSTORY

"I believe by now you know I was a bit of a trouble-maker as a child. But more than that, I had ... a bad temper I had never learned to control. And my father, being cold and stern, always seemed to bring out the worst of it in me. By the time I was a young man it got to the point where we nearly came to blows, on a regular basis. So Miss Abbey bundled me off to a school in New York—mostly just to keep the peace in the family. I suspect she assumed in a few years I would mature and learn to control my temper. I could then return and take up my rightful place in the family."

Evelyn leaned forward and listened intently. Nathan had a far-away look in his eyes and did not meet her gaze as he told his story. She'd heard some of this before, in bits and pieces, but was eager to hear the whole story, in Nathan's own words.

"I'm pretty sure she now regrets that decision, though it succeeded in one way; I did mature, and I did learn to control my temper—I'm sure you'll be happy to hear," he said with a rueful smile, looking down at her for the first time since he had started his narrative. She smiled back and made an appreciative chuckle.

"But while I was living in the North, as you can imagine, I was exposed to all the knowledge, thoughts, and ideas of the wider world. For the first time I began to think about the way things were in the South, and on this farm. How the wealth of my own family was earned on the backs of people who had no say in the matter, who reaped very little of the benefits of their own labor. The arguments in favor of the practice now seemed shallow and self-serving.

So when I had completed my initial education, and it was time to return home, I balked at the idea. I pleaded with Miss Abbey to send me to a school of higher education in the North. She probably would've agreed, but my father would have none of it. He offered to pay for my further schooling only if I attended the University of Virginia. I'm pretty sure by then he'd come to suspect I'd been corrupted by 'Northern influence,' though we had never discussed it.

So I was at an impasse. I had no money to continue my education in the North but was now morally opposed to returning to the farm in the South, or to a Southern university. I could stay in the North by getting a job as a common laborer of some kind. And being bright and reasonably well educated, after a few years could work my way up to a higher position, I had no doubts. I didn't mind hard work, but I was prideful—I believed I was made for better things.

And then, fortunately for me, a solution presented itself. One of my best friends at school, George Brown, told me he was planning on attending the United States Military Academy. It's located in New York, the state where I was already living, at a place on the Hudson River called West Point. He practically begged me to go with him, though he needn't have bothered. I practically jumped at the chance. You see, if you go to the Military Academy, you not only get one of the best educations in the country, but it's entirely free! You just have to agree to serve as an officer for four years after you graduate. My friend had an uncle who was a United States Congressman from New York. I'd met him and spoken with him a few times when I'd been invited to George's family events. This uncle gave me the needed recommendation to the Academy commandant, and the next thing I knew I was being sworn in as a cadet, alongside George.

I can imagine now my mother was heartbroken at the time, and my father furious. But back then I had little thought for anyone but myself. And my time at the Academy was a pure joy and a pleasure. Oh, I know for some young men it was difficult, even torturous—up before sunrise every day, drills and classroom lessons all day, to bed dead-tired every night. Yelled at and berated by officers for every little error or minor infraction—real or imagined—bullied and belittled by the upper-classmen every chance they got. But for some reason none of that bothered me. I think maybe my new-found ability to control—no, I should say ‘to channel’—my temper was a big part of it. And maybe it was just what I needed and wanted at that time in my life: something educational, fulfilling, and all-consuming taking up every waking moment of my life. I had no time to think about or worry about what was going on back home. I entered the Academy as a boy and came out a man ... if you can understand that.”

He turned to her once again, and she nodded encouragingly, and said, “And then you were in the Army?”

“Yes, when you graduate the Academy, they make you a second lieutenant, which is the lowest rank of a commissioned officer, but of course, higher than all the common soldiers. You feel special and important at first. Until you find yourself sitting at a desk in a large building in Washington city with a desk full of papers, a pen, and an ink well. Not exactly the weapons and type of duty a young soldier dreams of!”

“I should imagine not!”

“But as luck would have it, I was soon rescued from my doldrums by the war breaking out with Mexico. That was in 46, and suddenly the army needed every man they could get out in the field with a gun. You can well imagine the excitement for a young officer, brass buttons so new they’d never yet had to be polished!”

He paused in his narrative, staring ahead as if reliving that heady moment.

He breathed a heavy sigh, then continued, “Anyway ... the story of that war can wait for another day. Suffice to say after the war they gave me a choice. To return to my ‘desk’ duty in Washington, or to serve in the only place where there was any kind of ‘action’ going on, out on the frontier in west Texas.

After the excitement of war, being young and ambitious, a dull posting had little appeal. So I signed up to fight Indians and arrest outlaws out West. Again, a lot of young officers suffered it badly. But I seemed to thrive on the action and never minded the boredom. And when it came time to re-enlist I did so without hesitation or second thought. There was nothing else I’d rather be doing. And, of course, I realize now it kept me from having to think about, or face up to, coming home. My only twinge of guilt, if I thought about it at all, was for Miss Abbey, knowing how she must be suffering my long absence.”

WILLIAM’S VIEW OF THE CAPTAIN

“Oh, dear William! Thank you so much for sharing your story with me!” Evelyn said, “But ... if you don’t mind indulging my curiosity, I’ve been wondering; what made you, and the other men, decide to accompany the Captain back to Virginia? Especially since you were finally enjoying the army life.”

William became quiet for a moment.

“I think ... a person might live his whole life and never meet a *truly* great man—someone who’s head and shoulders above other men in practically every way, but doesn’t act the part, if you

understand my meaning. A man who's kind and respectful to those around him, but able to make difficult and dangerous decisions without hesitation, and with reasoned intelligence. A man of great personal courage, charisma, and wisdom. And then ... well, I am reticent to say it ... being a man of science and reason myself, but ..."

"But?"

"Miss Evelyn, I've always been a skeptic about anything of a supernatural nature. You know, God, angels, devils, and that sort of thing. But the Captain ... if ever there was a man watched over by God, it's him.

"We'd be heading into some desperate action, he'd pause—bullets zipping past his head—to quote something heroic from the Bible. About God protecting us like a great suit of armor and helping us slaughter our enemies like a raging inferno—that sort of thing—chapter and verse. And ... next thing you know it's happening, just exactly as he'd said it would!

"And he always seems to be in the right place at the right time to rescue young maidens in distress, prevent disasters, stop robberies, and so on. Even to stare down that great ferocious dog, as if he knew all along it was going to stop and bow down to him, when the rest of us were sure it would kill him."

She smiled, picturing the great dog groveling at Nathan's feet.

"But don't get me wrong, Miss Evelyn, he's not a saint. For one, he has a temper that can turn deadly, if you're on the wrong side of it. I've seen it myself, on occasion. It's quite frightful, believe me. I think even Stan wouldn't want to fight him when he's like *that*, and Stan isn't afraid of anything.

"If he thinks a man needs killing, he'll not hesitate to pull the trigger, and never blink an eye. I've never seen any man more cold-blooded when it comes to killing other men, if he thinks the situation demands it.

"But then he'll sit down next to a dying man, even one he has killed himself, and offer to say a prayer for the man's soul. Or spend hours comforting our wounded after a battle. And he treats the horses and other beasts with kindness and great tenderness, as if they were his own children. But then he'll use them mercilessly when great need arises.

"What kind of a man is that?"

He shook his head slowly, from side to side, as if pondering his own rhetorical question, before continuing.

"I expect Washington was that kind of man. Jackson maybe ... probably a few others. Perhaps even this Lincoln fellow everyone is now talking about—maybe he'll turn out to be the same sort.

"Nothing the Captain does surprises me anymore. That he is now a State Senator for Virginia ... it just seems, somehow ... *normal* for him. If he one day becomes Governor, or even President, it won't surprise me in the least.

"Miss Evelyn, if you have the chance to even *meet* a man like that face to face, you ought to do it. Even if you must travel many miles or undertake many hardships. And if—by some stroke of great good fortune—you have the opportunity to be a regular companion of such a man, why, I think you'd be a fool not to jump at it. Miss Evelyn, Captain Chambers is *that* kind of man, in my opinion.

So to answer your question, when Tom—that is Sergeant Clark as we called him then—asked me to travel with the Captain to his home back in Virginia, I didn't have to consider it for a second. And I would've gone even without Stan, but of course I was delighted he came too. And I think if you were to ask Stan, he'd say much the same, in his own unique way, of course."

NATHAN'S THOUGHTS ABOUT EVELYN AT THE WEDDING

Nathan was greatly pleased with how the wedding had come together, though he could take little credit for that, the women of the household making most of the decisions and carrying out all the preparations.

Still, all in all, a glorious day. Most glorious and auspicious! Auspicious enough to make a life-changing decision? he wondered. *Maybe ... maybe.*

He glanced over at Evelyn again, who was watching the brides approach. Even setting aside her astonishing beauty, she really was a remarkable woman. Intelligent, thoughtful, kind, courageous, and from everything he'd seen, extremely capable at anything she tried.

Her apparent transformation since her arrival still amazed him. It had started right after he'd told her to leave the farm and not come back. Rather than weeping, pouting, and showing anger, she'd calmly taken charge, and somehow made everything work out beautifully. He still couldn't quite grasp how she'd done it. He'd never been around a woman who could've handled such an awkward, uncomfortable situation with such seeming ease and grace.

And he clearly wasn't the only one who loved her. Yes, he *did* love her, he had to admit to himself, though he'd not yet said the words aloud. It was obvious for all to see; nearly everyone she came in contact with loved her, naturally and almost instantly. Her infectious warmth and enthusiasm was impossible to resist—it was really quite extraordinary! From the kitchen maids to the soldiers, wherever she went the reaction was the same: smiles, warmth, happiness. What a wonder she was, truly!

Yes ... yes, why not? Why not ask her today? There can't possibly be another like her ... and ... God help me, but ... I do love her so.

THE MINISTER'S FULL BACKSTORY

Reverend Holing was happy to be once more on familiar footing, figuratively at least. For the first time in over a week he'd donned the traditional dress of his calling. During his journey south from Wheeling, a city in the very northernmost point of western Virginia, he'd been forced to travel incognito. In his younger days he'd traveled freely throughout the South, stopping to enjoy the hospitality of every Methodist Episcopal pastor along the way. He had very fond memories of those days, now long gone. In 1844 the church had split, North and South on the issue of slavery such that the two sides were now at odds.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, ardently opposed slavery. And those that followed generally agreed. The issue came to a head, however, when one of the five bishops of the church, James Andrew from Georgia, inherited several slaves through marriage. And though he claimed no part in the slave trade, he was "affectionately asked to resign" by the General Conference of the church. When he refused, it triggered the split.

Wheeling was, of course, in Virginia, and as such might be considered part of the "South." But geographically it was clearly in the North. It sat on an odd spur of the state squarely on the main road between Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Columbus, Ohio. To people in Wheeling, Richmond was so far distant as to be virtually meaningless in everyday life. They kept very few slaves and were uninterested in the propagating the institution. Most people in Wheeling considered themselves "Northerners," and had little love for their distant, governmentally controlling cousins to the southeast.

When Captain Chambers' telegram arrived, asking for a pastor willing to perform a proper, legal marriage for a group of slaves, the church in Wheeling happily obliged. The Chambers' family had been long-time members and preferred a Methodist minister to perform the ceremony. But none of the ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South would do it.

So Reverend Holing had packed away his robes, dressed as a common laborer, saddled up a horse, and started upon the road to ... *here*—this peculiar place that didn't quite fit with what one expected to find in Virginia. For starters, young Mr. Chambers, who made no secret of his opposition to slavery, owned many slaves. And his family fortune had clearly built upon the "*peculiar institution*." He'd also surrounded himself with a company of like-minded young men from the military service.

The whole place had a different "feel" from any plantation he'd ever visited in the South. Maybe the spectacular natural setting had something to do with it—rather than the humid, flat, featureless landscape of the Southern coastal lowlands, this place had hills, trees, and rivers. A pleasant breeze often blew, and even in the heat of the day the temperature never felt stifling as there was so little humidity.

And the slaves ... was it just the excitement of the wedding ceremony, or did these slaves appear more ... *interested*? More *alive*, maybe? Whatever it was, he liked the feeling. And it made him happy he'd come, to take part in this most memorable event in these people's lives. Jesus Christ would certainly approve—ministering to the most downtrodden people of the earth, making their lives more ... Christian, proper, and righteous. Not to mention happier!

JIM ESCORTS WALTERS BACK TO HIS OWN FARM

The small troop making its way slowly away from Mountain Meadows farm was a study in contrast. On one side a group of men looked very much beaten and downcast. They walked along the dusty road shuffling their feet, staring at the ground in front of them. On the other side, men on horseback followed behind the walkers. These riders appeared in good humor: laughing, joking, and generally enjoying themselves. Of course, being the constant butt of crude jokes doled out by the riders didn't aid the humor of those walking.

Sergeant Jim was chief of the jokers. He kept up a steady banter of off-color jokes, rude remarks, and insults, all the while either chewing on, or smoking a large cigar clenched in his teeth. His behavior had the intended effect: the walkers seethed with anger and frustration. One of the men, a burly looking fellow with a full beard, turned and spat back an obscenity. Jim spurred his horse forward and kicked the man hard in the back. The blow knocked him breathless to the ground.

"You say somethin', sonny?" Jim asked, glaring down at the man rolling on the ground in pain, gasping to regain his breath. After that, none of Walters' men said a word, regardless of the taunting by their captors.

After the Mountain Meadows men had caught them by surprise at the wedding, they'd stripped them of their weapons and forced them to dismount. Then they'd led the trespassers away from the Big House toward the barns. There Jim announced they'd return their horses once back on their own lands—Captain Chambers not wanting to be accused of horse thievery. The weapons, however, would be forfeit, the price for their indiscretion.

At first Walters' men had refused to walk, demanding the immediate return of their horses. But Sergeant Jim just sat his horse, smiling down at them. "Suit yourselves, boys. You can either start walking, or you can stand here all day in the hot sun. Don't make no difference to me. Captain's

gonna pay my wages either way,” and he chuckled, pulling the first of many cigars out of his breast pocket.

Walters, who'd not uttered a word since Nathan's departure, turned away and started walking down the road. With a few groans, and much grumbling, the others followed.

Now after several miles, only the leader looked ahead and strode purposefully. He did *not* act downtrodden and defeated like the others. He walked like a man driven by a burning anger. And no amount of verbal prodding by Jim could provoke a response—neither a look, nor a word of acknowledgment.

Stan did his best to help Sergeant Jim annoy the prisoners. Between the two of them they had a ready storehouse of raunchy humor. And they always worked in one of Walters' men as the butt of the joke, placing him in the standard role of the misused fool.

At one point Jim decided to pick on the fellow he'd kicked earlier. “Hey, Georgie, you hear what old Scaggly-Beard here did last week?”

“Well, no Sarge ... *do* tell what Scaggly-Beard did,” Georgie shot back, grinning.

“Well, I heard-tell he came in from a hard day's riding, got down off'n his horse, and walked around behind. There he lifted the horse's tail and gave him a big old kiss ... right on the bung-hole.”

“Ewww ... what'd he go and do *that* for?” Georgie said with mock disgust and laughed.

“Well, that's just what the head overseer asked him! So he answers, ‘It's on account o' how my lips is all dried out and cracking from ridin' in the wind and hot sun.’ Then the foreman says, ‘Oh ... does it help?’ to which old Scaggly-Beard answers, ‘No, but it sure do keep me from lickin' my lips!’”

This set Stan to laughing so hard he started choking and nearly fell from his horse. Jamie rode up next to him and slapped him on the back, poking fun at him saying, “What's the matter, Stanny-boy? That one burned your ears did it, lad?”

“Scaggly-Beard” scowled, clearly not amused.

A footsore and disgruntled group of men finally arrived, hours later, at the edge of the ford at Howard Creek, where the road to Walters Farm split off from the main road.

Walters turned to Sergeant Jim and finally spoke. “We'll take our horses now,” he said, matter-of-factly, with that strange, bland look of his.

But Sergeant Jim stood up in his saddle and looked up and down the creek. “This *is* Howard Creek, is it not?” he asked, after sitting back down.

“Yes ... what of it?” Walters replied.

“Well, sir ... I'm a military man myself, and when my Captain gives me an order ... well, I damned-sure follow it, or else die in the trying.”

Walters stared at him as if he'd spoken in a foreign tongue.

“Well, my point is ... the Captain, he says to return your horses once y'all are back on your own lands. And it is *my* understanding, those lands start on the *other* side of yonder creek!”

Jim knew the creek being the boundary was at the very center of the property line dispute—the Chambers family claiming their own lands ended at the creek, with the Walters side claiming theirs went well beyond, onto the northern side. Jim was enjoying rubbing Walters' nose in it.

Walters bland expression twisted in anger, “That's a *lie* ... propagated by Chambers' lying, conniving Daddy, may he rot in hell.”

But Jim sat back, assuming a mock-pious pose, “Sir ... I know nothing of such matters. As I said, I am only a simple soldier, following orders. And my orders say to give you back your horses ... *over yonder*.” He pointed toward the other bank.

"But ... these are *new* riding boots ... they'll be ruined wading the creek," Walters said, as if appealing to Jim's common decency.

But Jim just smiled and said, "Well, sir. Then I'd suggest you remove them and walk in your bare feet. Because boots or no, you *will* be wading to the other side."

Walters and Jim stared each other down in silence for a long moment: a contest of wills. But Walters quickly realized this man would not be intimidated, not even should the roles be reversed. Suddenly without a word Walters turned and strode into the creek.

But the others took the drenching less stoically — they grumbled and cursed. Perhaps emboldened by their proximity to freedom, they vocalized their complaints for the first time since Scraggly-Beard had taken Jim's boot to his backside. As they slogged across the creek, water above their knees, one turned toward Jim and glared. "Curse you to hell, you bung-fucked, shit-eating, Goddamned, fatherless son of a poxy whore ..."

But Jim smiled and said, "Won't do you no good, son. You see, I was drill sergeant in the Army. I been cursed by more men than you could count. Hell, I been cursed by privates and generals alike! Not to mention, Indians, outlaws, and Mexicans.

"Why, I've even been cursed in all number of different languages," he said, holding his fingers up to count. "Let's see, there's English of course, Indian ... and Russian, that's three," he said, looking over at Stan, who smiled broadly, nodding his agreement. He'd certainly cursed Sergeant Jim on numerous occasions.

"Oh ... then there's French, from when we was in that lockup in New Orleans. That makes four ... oh, and Mexican, of course: five!"

"You mean *Spanish*, sir," William said.

"What? *Spanish*? No, I'm pretty sure they was Mexicans — ain't no Spanish fellas in Texas I know of. Anyway, the point is, by now I'm entirely immune to curses on account o' having heard so much of 'em over the years. William, what's the scientific principle behind it again?"

"It's called 'immunity through prolonged exposure,'" William answered, a grin touching the corners of his mouth.

"Yes, that's it! I'm immune to all manner of cursing from so much exposure!"

Jim crossed his arms with a smug grin, the cigar clamped between his teeth.

At that moment the man who'd been cursing Jim lost his footing, and fell, giving himself a good dunking. He came up spluttering from the cold water. Stan began laughing uproariously, slapping his thy in amusement.

This didn't sit well with the soaked man, who called out, "Shut up you Goddamned, ignorant, foreign bastard!"

Stan laughed all the louder.

Jim took the cigar from his mouth, and shouted, "You see now, there's your second mistake. It don't do no good to tell Stanny-boy here to shut up. He won't do it, no matter what you say or do. In fact, I believe it simply can't be done — Lord knows *I've* tried. Hell, even the Captain can't make him shut up. So it's a damn sure bet a soaking wet little rat turd like you ain't gonna get him to do it!"

By now Walters men had made it to the far shore, so the Mountain Meadows men started across on their horses, Walters' own animals following behind on long leads.

When they reached dry land, Georgie gave his lead to one of Walters' men, and Jamie gave his to another. Walters men quickly separated the horses and each soon regained his own mount. Walters

climbed into his saddle and slowly walked his horse over to where Jim sat his. He stopped just short, and once again the two men stared at each other wordlessly.

Walters finally said, "If ever I get my hands on you, I shall take great pleasure in peeling the skin from your arrogant hide with a dull knife, cutting out your disrespectful tongue, and feeding it to you. Then we shall see how clever you think you are." Walters face twitched and he had a hard time maintaining his expressionless gaze—the palpable anger fairly bubbling over.

But this time Jim did not laugh or make sport. He was tiring of Walters' arrogance, and felt his own heat rising. "Well, *sir*, I've been a patient man 'til now. But clearly you wish to test my good humor. So here's what I suggest ... turn your horse and ride away *now*, without another word. Or I'm fixin' to reach into my saddle bag and pull out that old bullwhip I keep there. Give you a nice little goodbye *kiss* with it to remember me by!"

He said this last bit in a voice filled with menace, with a face turned deadly serious.

Walters' eyes widened, and for a moment fear touched his features. But he quickly regained his composure, turned his horse, and trotted away.

Jim continued to sit and glare at him, puffing away on his cigar until Walters and his men were well out of sight.

Billy Creek walked his horse up next to him. "Didn't know you kept a bullwhip in your saddle bag," he said.

Jim pulled out his cigar and looked over at Billy. A smile then cracked his serious look, and he laughed. "Hell, Billy! I don't even have a saddlebag! But he was so scared, he never even noticed!"

This set Billy to laughing as well. They turned their horses and headed back across the creek toward home, the other men following.

WALTERS' WRATH

The fear was palpable as the men went about their business—unsaddling the horses, brushing them down, putting away tack. All the time trying not to make any obvious blunders, nor any loud noises that might draw attention to one's self. Bad enough Walters was a notorious perfectionist, but even on a good day his temper could suddenly and unexpectedly turn deadly. And today was definitely *not* a good day. To make matters worse, rather than handing off his horse at the house, as usual, today he chose to walk his horse into the stables. There he stood in the open doorway, hands crossed, a scowl on his face.

That sour look may have been the most disconcerting aspect of it. Mr. Walters had lost control of his emotions to such an extent he could not maintain his normal, stony expression. That did *not* bode well. And they all knew Walters was not averse to dealing out a beating to one of the white hands, same as to the negroes, though they generally assumed he'd stop short of killing a white man.

Once they'd put away the horses, along with their tack, the men gathered in front of Walters. He continued to stand there, glaring at them. The men stood wordlessly, awaiting some word or pronouncement of doom.

To their relief, Walters looked them over, as if examining some unsatisfactory livestock, and then without a word, turned and strode away toward the house. For several moments they stood still, staring after him. Finally, they began looking at each other, some shaking their heads, and others shrugging, a few sheepish grins. But nobody said a word. They all felt like condemned men who'd somehow escaped their appointed date with the gallows.

Then the foreman Bob Hill, Walters right-hand man, broke the silence. "Well ... best be getting to work now," he said.

It felt like it'd already been a very long day, but it was only mid-afternoon. And nobody wanted to tempt fate through dereliction of his duties.

Although there followed plenty of rumors, nobody knew for sure what had finally set it off. One story said one of the house servants had been so foolish as to ask Walters how he'd enjoyed his ride. Another that the servant had not fetched Walters' supper promptly enough. The most popular story had the poor fellow helping Walters pull off his sodden riding boots. In pulling too hard he'd done Walters an injury to his foot.

Whatever the cause, one thing was certain; someone paid a terrible price for a relatively minor transgression. As the hands, both black and white, came in from the fields, they heard the screams, crying, and pleading coming from inside the barn, between the loud, cracks of the whip. But not even Bob had the courage to look. Nobody wanted to be on the business end of that pent-up anger and frustration. The white men weren't surprised, and some even acted nonchalant about it, shrugging it off with a general feeling of "better him than me." But most men, black and white alike, cringed at that sound, and felt relieved when it finally ended, well after dark.

After he made sure Walters had gone inside the house for the night, Bob opened the barn door a crack, and poked his head in. He quickly pulled it back out again and breathed a heavy sigh. In the morning he'd need to assign a grave digging detail before starting his other duties.

THE MINISTER'S DEPARTURE FROM MOUNTAIN MEADOWS

Pastor Steven Holing once again wore the clothes of an ordinary laborer and rode his horse at an easy pace for the long trip back to Wheeling. Overall, it had been a very ... interesting ... experience, he decided. His reception at Mountain Meadows by Mrs. Chambers and her son, the new master Nathaniel Chambers, could not have been warmer or friendlier. And the wedding had gone beautifully, despite the attempted interruption by the curmudgeonly neighbor and his men.

Steven thought Mr. Chambers had handled the whole affair in stellar fashion. Even from the first moment of the neighbor's arrival, Mr. Chambers seemed calm, and in complete control: a very impressive individual performance. Most memorable, certainly! This was clearly a man who knew how to take charge in a desperate situation.

Yes, everything had gone beautifully, including the lovely dancing and music at the reception. Which made what happened after the wedding all the more puzzling. The sudden unexpected collapse and departure of Mr. Chambers' apparent love interest, Miss Evelyn. Steven still couldn't understand what had happened to her. It was a puzzle and a conundrum, such as he rarely experienced in his line of work. To him things were typically black or white, good, or evil. Righteous, or sinful. But this episode with Miss Evelyn, who was clearly an upstanding young lady in every respect was ... utterly baffling. She was clearly in love with Mr. Chambers, who obviously returned the feelings. And then ... for reasons nobody understood she was suddenly ... gone.

As these thoughts rattled around in his head Steven noticed three men spread across the road in front of him. They were sitting their horses, looking in his direction. As he came closer he had a bad feeling. The gray-haired man in the middle—clearly the man in charge—sat upright in his saddle. He looked vaguely familiar to Steven, as if they had perhaps met once long ago.

The other two were young, and tough looking. But without saying a word it was clear they deferred to the older man; their eyes alternated between looking at Steven and at the older man, as if waiting on his instructions.

The older man raised his hand, and said, in a friendly tone, "Excuse me sir, but would you be a man of the cloth, by any chance? You have the look of a pious man—perhaps a pastor out on personal business? We have desperate need of a minister for a poor sinner who requires righteous council ..."

Although the man seemed friendly, something about him felt ... disingenuous. But Steven was a dedicated servant of God; it was not in him to lie to strangers, especially if someone might be in need of his services.

"Yes ... I am a pastor, of the Episcopal Methodist Church. How may I be of service, gentlemen?"

Without reply, the older man turned to the side, and nodded to his companions. They spurred forward, and quickly enclosed Steven, one on each side, close by his own horse.

"My name is Blackburn ... *Reverend* Blackburn, also of the Episcopal Methodist Church, but ... unlike you ... I am of the *Southern* branch ..."

Reverend Holing's eyes widened, "Oh! Yes, now I remember. I stayed in your home once, years ago, when I traveled the South. But then you were ... over to the east as I recall ... Lynchburg, wasn't it? Anyway, well met, Reverend. It is always a pleasure to meet a fellow pastor, and especially a fellow Methodist."

"Yes, you are correct; in those days I was stationed in Lynchburg. But that was long ago ... long before ... the *schism* in our order. And though you say you are pleased to see me ... I am thinking you may soon change your mind about that. You see, these men with me are here to make sure you understand and communicate back to other members of your order that you are *not* welcome here!"

Steven looked over at the young man on his left and felt a sudden shock of recognition. He was one of the men Mr. Chambers' unfriendly neighbor had brought with him to the wedding. The man smiled at him, but not a *friendly* smile. Steven turned to look at the man on his right, but something struck him hard on the head.

Sparks of light filled his eyes. Daylight faded to darkness. In his blurring vision the ground rushed up to meet his face.

MARGARET AND HENRY SUFFER THEIR MUTUAL INCARCERATION

A half hour later, Margaret Walters made her way quietly back to her room, and closed the door softly behind her. She now had an "understanding" with the servants; they'd look the other way as she made her way out of her room, and down the hall to sit at the top of the stairs. There she could eavesdrop on Mr. Walters' conversations, especially when he had visitors. Of course, Margaret had noticed Sickles arriving from her window, and had been curious who he was.

Now she felt uneasy and anxious. She knew by now, of course, about Walters' failed raid on Mountain Meadows Farm, something she secretly celebrated, and reveled in. But Sickles arrival seemed to have stirred Walters to plot anew against their neighbor. She could tell from the tone of Walters' voice, and by the questions he'd asked Sickles, he was planning something new. And he'd asked Sickles to stay on, to which the latter had agreed.

To Margaret, Sickles seemed like another hard, wicked man—much more so than Bob, the current head overseer. Sickles ought to fit right in with Walters! She wondered if Bob would feel threatened

by the arrival of a new man who'd been doing his own job at the rival farm. It occurred to her she might somehow turn that to her own advantage. She'd have to give that some thought later.

But then she suffered a sobering thought. *Oh, what have I become?* she asked herself, for the thousandth time. But she remembered Mr. Chamber's kind words, "You have only done what you *had* to do; what you've been forced to do by an evil man." It was some consolation, but she feared what sort of monster she would become if forced to continue this present life indefinitely.

This new development added to her growing sense of dread over her situation. It had now been a month and a half—plenty of time for her father to have received her letters, and to have mounted a response. It was now clear he was *not* coming. And as much as she pondered the question, she could not think of a way to contact Mr. Chambers, to warn him about Sickles' alliance with Walters. Unless Walters left again on an extended trip, which he'd only done the one time since their wedding, she had no way of repeating her previous little getaway. She would have to keep considering it. And maybe ... just maybe Mr. Chambers would also think on it. Perhaps he would come up with something.

One could only hope. But hope was starting to wear thin, and she was becoming more desperate every day. Recently she'd started contemplating killing Walters ... and was now applying her considerable intellect to the matter. She'd not come up with anything concrete but had decided she could not accomplish it through violence—Walters was likely the strongest man on the farm, so even were she to convince someone to do the deed for her, it was unlikely to succeed.

And from what she understood, Walters kept all the firearms under his own personal lock and key, only dolling out the weapons when needed and collecting them again after. Aside from which, the thought of being hanged for murdering her husband was less than appealing. She rubbed her neck involuntarily whenever she pondered it. No ... if she were to do it, it must seem like an accident ... or an illness. But how? She had no access to any poisons and convincing the slaves to help her get some would be risky and unlikely to bear fruit.

Or, failing that, if the situation became desperate enough, she must also consider taking her own life to end her suffering. She would also have to think on how to do *that*, if it came to it ...

She paced back and forth in her room, pausing on each pass to stare out the window in her usual fashion. Today a crew of a dozen or so slaves worked the field outside her window, apparently chopping weeds with hoes. She watched the strong, steady motion of their labor as they worked down the rows. One slave seemed to pause for a moment and look up at her window. Although he was a fair distance away, she imagined making eye contact with the man. A brief instant of human interaction, maybe. But then it was gone, and he was back at work. She turned away from the window and continued her pacing.

Henry made sure the overseer wasn't looking his way before stopping to wipe his brow; he'd rather not feel the stinging lash if he could avoid it. The motion raised his head up to where his gaze cast upon the big house. He noticed someone staring back from an upstairs window. It was the Missus of the house. He'd seen her in that window before. And he always wondered why she just sat there staring out at the fields, instead of doing ... well, whatever it was white folks did with themselves during the day.

And thinking about wives made him dream of his own wife, back on the other farm. Probably for the hundredth time today. He wondered if she still dreamed of him.

It was a thoroughly depressing thought ... and Walters Farm was a thoroughly depressing place to be. Cold, cruel, and frightening ... with no hope of ever getting better. If he could never leave here

and be with his beautiful wife again, maybe life wasn't worth living. Maybe he'd just have to figure a good way to end it.

Lost in contemplation he slowed just enough to catch the eye of the overseer. *Snap!* He felt the dreaded pain on the back of his legs.

Oh, how it burned! No matter how many times it happened, he could never get used to it—it always stung as hard as the time before. But like the snap of the lash, his mind instantly snapped from thoughts of suicide, to thoughts of murder. If he was going to die anyway, why not take one of his tormentors with him? He found *this* thought less depressing than the other. Maybe tomorrow ...

At that same moment, just a few miles away, Nathan was thinking about Margaret. Perhaps it was mere coincidence, or maybe somehow his intuition had picked up on her urgent thoughts of him.

He and Tom sat on the veranda having their evening cigar. Nathan had declined the offer of whiskey, having not had a drop since he'd sobered up earlier in the week.

"Tom ... I've been worrying about our good friend and neighbor, Margaret. We've heard nothing from her or her father since she came for her clandestine visit and we mailed those letters for her. Even my own, personal follow-up letter to him has gone unanswered these past several weeks."

"Yes, sir. I didn't want to say anything discouraging at the time, but it seemed to me putting much hope or faith in her father was a stretch. From your description, he was only too happy to "sell off" his youngest daughter to the first wealthy man who came along, regardless of his character. A father like that is not likely to turn around and do the right thing by her later."

"Yes, I fear you're right. And I was thinking the same but didn't want to dash Margaret's hopes by saying so. So now what? It galls me to sit here and do nothing, while she wastes away in that gilded cage. But I can't come up with any reasonable way to get her out. Despite his recent trespass, we can't just ride onto his property, guns blazing, and pull her out. It's likely some of his men would be killed ... and that'd be the worst sort of nuisance to deal with."

"But sir, wouldn't it have made sense to go get her when we had Walters and his men at our mercy following his abortive raid on the wedding? We could've ridden in unopposed before we set Walters free."

"Yes, in hindsight that probably would've been the thing to do. But at the time I still held out some hope Margaret's father would get her out with the help of the law, so Walters would've been less likely to come after her later. But now it seems unlikely we'll get any help from the father or the law, especially in light of your news about the sheriff's complete lack of interest in Walters' little escapade."

"Yes, when I went to see him, he acted like he already knew all about it. At least he didn't seem surprised. And he declined to take any action, arguing it was only a misunderstanding between neighbors, and none of his concern."

"Which I take to mean Walters pays him to look the other way, on this and anything else he does ..."

"Yes, that's the way I took it as well, sir. And it probably didn't endear him to our cause when I accused him of being either lazy, incompetent, or corrupt. Or most likely, all three!"

Nathan smiled. "I'd imagine not. All of which means if we strike back, we'll be the ones in trouble with the law."

"That's the most likely outcome, sir, much as I hate to say it. Though you do, presumably, have some standing as a State Senator. You might be able to draw upon that."

"Hmm ... that wouldn't be a very auspicious start to my political career — asking the Governor to intervene on my behalf because I'd gotten myself into legal hot water in my home county."

"No ... I suppose not, sir."

Nathan and Tom sat, smoking their cigars, contemplating the problem.

"You said the Reverend Blackburn goes to see her once a month. Maybe you could convince him to carry a message or assist in some other way ..." Tom suggested.

"Normally I'd say 'yes,' but I don't trust him. In fact, I suspect he was the one who told Walters about the 'big wedding' in the first place. Besides, Margaret said she'd asked him for help on several occasions, but he'd refused to try. I can't see a man like that changing his mind and helping us get her out."

"No ... I see what you mean, sir. Then where does that leave us?"

"With damned few options, I fear. I have half a mind to send Billy in for a look, late one night, but I dread what would happen if they should catch him. Funny ... I never worried about him sneaking around hostile Comanche camps in Texas, but now ... guess I've grown *soft*, Tom!"

"Well, likely it's different when you're not in the army, sir. You no longer expect your men might get killed during the normal course of a workday!"

They shared a chuckle.

"True, true, Tom. Well ... I guess we'll just have to keep thinking on it for now, as there doesn't seem to be any good options. Maybe we can talk with Jim ... see if he can think of something ...

"Ironically, I wish Margaret was here to help us come up with a solution. What a clever mind! She'd no doubt think of some way to pull it off with no weapons, no force, no violence. With sheer trickery."

"Hey ... maybe you're on to something there, sir. Maybe we need to be thinking ... well, more like a woman would, rather than like a man."

"What do you mean?"

"The first thing we think to do is ride in there with guns, shoot up the place, and kick the door in! But no woman would *ever* think like that. And yet, as you say, she pulled it off once, all by herself. So it should be possible to do it again."

Nathan was quiet for a moment, puffing on his cigar.

"Yes ... you may have the right idea. Some kind of trickery, rather than force. Now we just need to think of what."

"Yes, sir. Like you said ... seems we need Margaret here to help us with that ..."

Nathan smiled, and nodded his agreement, *or Evelyn*, he thought, and the smile turned into a frown.