

Manifest Destiny

by Tanaqui

Part One

Jake Green had been riding along quietly minding his own business—or rather, dwelling on the various misfortunes that had been heaped upon him in the past few hours—when someone did him the great discourtesy of trying to kill him.

His attackers' first shot was poorly aimed and Jake felt no more than the whizz and zip as it flew by—but the report of the rifle was close enough to make his horse startle under him. As Jake fought to calm Duke, a second shot struck home and Duke buckled to his knees.

Pulling his feet from the stirrups and trying to jump clear before Duke completed his fall, Jake had time to note that he had, it seemed, been sadly mistaken when deciding only minutes earlier that his situation could not become more desperate than it already was.

Yet things had looked sufficiently grim as they were when, with the afternoon sun hot on his back, he'd ridden slowly away from Jericho. It wasn't so much that he was reluctant to leave the place, more that he no longer knew where he should aim for or what he would do when he got there. And to think he'd ridden in with such high hopes only that morning: he'd get Grandpa's money and then head northeast to make a fresh start, far from all that unpleasantness in Utah. Instead...

The first shock had been seeing how the place had grown in the five years he'd been away. Where Main Street had once been little more than the cluster of Jim Bailey's saloon, Cooper's blacksmith shop and livery, and his own parents' general store, he now marked, among a dozen other new buildings, an hotel, a bank, a church and a fine edifice that proclaimed itself the Town Hall.

Green's General Store wasn't exempt from the change: it was also three times the size he remembered. The old part now housed the feed and farm equipment and suchlike that had once been the mainstay of the business. The center was devoted to dry goods and other provisions. The left-hand end was a haberdashers and drapers with—Jake blinked—a bonnet displayed in the window that he suspected would not be out of place in the fashionable shops he'd seen in the East while at his studies in upstate New York.

Quite a crowd was going in and out of the shop as he hitched his horse at the rail out front and stood looking up at the place. At last, breathing deeply, he made his

way inside, peering around as he stepped across the threshold. Several women were gathered around the bolts of cloth and notions, chattering and comparing patterns. Weatherbeaten men were nodding their heads sagely over ironmongery at the other end of the store. Beyond the bins and barrels that crowded the center portion, a young woman standing behind the provisions counter smiled at him. Jake stepped toward her.

"Excuse me, Miss. Do you know where I might find—?" was all he got out before he heard a cry of "Jake?"

Turning, he almost had the breath knocked out of him as his mother, who must have been somewhere among the linens, flung her arms around him. "Jake!" She hugged him tighter. "Oh, honey, you're back."

"Hey, Ma," he managed to choke out, before he gently pulled her hands from around his neck and held her away from him. He smiled down at her, thinking she looked much as he remembered, her hair still bright under its cap and her face unlined. "You look well."

She smiled back up at him. "All the better for seeing you." She took his face in her hands for a moment, before seizing his hand and leading him toward the back of the shop. "Wait until your father and brother know you're here. Your father's out back, I think, and your brother's at the farm, of course, but we'll send a boy to bring him and April back for dinner. Oh, but—."

"Ma," he interrupted softly, resisting the tug on his hand, "I'm not staying. I just came to visit my grandfather and speak with Father about..." He broke off, aware that they were now the subject of interest of everyone in the store. The would-be fashionable ladies were whispering behind their hands, and the men on his other side were giving him hard-eyed looks. He looked back down at his mother and saw her expression had dimmed.

After a moment, she shook herself and patted his arm. "Well, we'll talk about that later. Now, let me take you to see your father. He'll be so pleased you're here."

Jake let her draw him on, very much doubting that would be the case. He wasn't much looking forward to the encounter himself.

It turned out worse than he'd feared. The two of them had managed to remain civil for the first few minutes, but once Jake had raised the subject of the inheritance his grandfather had left him, his father had started in on him. All the old accusations were dragged up and when Jake had declined to argue or defend himself, his father had fixed him with a stern glare. Then, letting out a derisive sniff, he'd declared, "Your grandfather left that money in my trust until such time as you showed yourself a responsible citizen. I see no sign that's so. Show me proof that you've lived clean and earned an honest wage, even if not with that

fancy piece of paper we paid so much for you to gain, and we'll talk. Till then...." He shook his head and, without another word, stumped back into the stockroom at the rear of the store.

Jake, watching him go, let out a harsh laugh. He suspected there would never be proof enough for his father, even if he settled down just like Farmer Eric. To be truthful, he didn't know why he'd tried, except he'd been passing nearby and he scarcely had the money to buy his next meal, let alone journey all the way to one or other of the big cities in the East. Though the ache of his empty belly had been less, perhaps, at that moment, than the ache in his heart.

As if his mother could read his thoughts, she put her hand on his arm. "Come. Come eat. You look half-starved. And maybe your father will be better minded to help you this evening."

He shook her head at her sadly. "No, Ma. I told you. I have to be away."

Again his mother's smile dimmed; how he hated himself for being the cause of that, more times than he could count. But no: he had to leave and best to do so soon. Maybe he'd left his troubles—or those particular troubles—behind in Utah, but he didn't want to risk bringing them here if he hadn't.

His mother squeezed his arm. "Then wait a moment and I'll put up something for your journey and walk you as far as the cemetery."

"Thanks, Ma." He slid his arm around her and gave her a quick hug, dropping a kiss on her cap. When he stepped away, she lifted a hand to brush back the tears that glistened in her eyes. He turned, not wanting to see, and jerked his head toward the front of the store. "I'll see to my horse while...."

A few minutes later, glancing up from watering Duke at the trough by the pump on Main Street, he felt his father's condemnation—and the rightness of some of what he'd spoken—strike home afresh: he caught sight of a slim, fair-haired figure coming out of Jericho's new bank, raising a parasol against the sun that stood high overhead. The woman saw him at the same moment, her gloved hand flying to her mouth as her gaze met Jake's. Then, visibly steeling herself, she stepped carefully down into the dirt of the street and crossed toward him.

"Jake." She halted a few paces away and inclined her head in greeting.

"Emily." He took in the smart gown, with its wide skirts and fine lace at cuffs and collar, and the way her hair was dressed in careful ringlets under the small hat perched artfully on her head. She seemed very grown up compared with the sunburned girl with whom he'd once fished barefoot in the creek, or who'd come behind him binding sheaves as he'd swung a sickle during harvest, or who'd lain with him in the long grass under the stars, kissing and more than kissing.... "You

look well," he managed to get out at last.

"Thank you." She didn't comment on his own appearance, which was perhaps a good thing. He no doubt looked dusty and travel-stained—and weary not just with travel but with life. The silence stretched out again, until smiling up at him from under her lashes in a way that reminded him all too painfully of past days, she added in a rush, "I teach at the school now. The town has grown so large that we have two teachers and a new schoolhouse. Just imagine! But I shall be giving all that up soon. I... I am to be married in a month."

For a moment, it was as if his ears had refused to hear what she had said. Then he swallowed. "Congratulations," he managed. "Who's the lucky man?"

"His name's Roger. Roger Hammond." She turned and gestured toward the building she'd come out of. "He's a banker. He's in Lawrence at the moment."

"I hope you'll be very happy together." The words sounded all right, though his mouth didn't seem to be working properly or feel like it belonged to him any more. But Heaven knows, he meant it: it was right she should find happiness after the way he'd treated her, playing fast and loose with her affections and her reputation, and then abandoning her. This Hammond fellow must surely be a better man than he was, and he could have hardly expected her to hold true to a childhood sweetheart she hadn't seen or heard from in five years.

"Are you staying?" She sounded anxious. He supposed she didn't want him complicating her life any further, or bringing the wildness of her youth back into the public consciousness.

"No, no, just passing through," he hurried to reassure her. "Just seeing my family and my grandfather, and then I'll be heading east."

"Well," she gave him a tight smile and bobbed her head, "it was nice meeting you again, Jake. I wish you good health and a safe journey."

The rote politeness stung, but Jake knew he deserved no better. He watched her walk away, until a touch on his arm made him start. Turning, he found his mother next to him, her arms laden with packages.

"Was that Emily Sullivan you were speaking to?" she asked, as she held out the provisions.

"Uh-huh."

He began taking the parcels and stowing them in his saddlebags. He didn't say more, but a sideways glance at his mother showed him he didn't need to. The anxious expression on her face was evidence she'd caught his own mood and

understood well enough that the hopes he'd carried all the years since he'd fled Jericho had finally crumbled to dust. But all she said was, "I'll walk with you to see your grandfather."

oOo

Now, a scant two hours later, Jake did his best to judge which way Duke would fall as the fatal bullet took its toll, before leaping clear. Hitting the hard dirt, the air rushing from his lungs, he rolled, but too slowly: Duke heaved on to his side and pinned Jake's foot. Jake gritted his teeth against the sudden pain, but had scarcely begun to think how to extricate himself or examine his other injuries when another bullet whistled over his head, making him curse and duck.

Ignoring the pain from his ankle, he dragged his foot from under Duke and twisted to shelter behind the horse's bulk. The poor beast's flanks were still heaving, but a quick glance as Jake hauled his rifle from his back and readied himself to return fire showed Duke's jaws were coated with blood-flecked spittle. The horse was done for; all Jake could do was save himself and hope to put Duke out of his misery quickly if he lasted longer.

Cautiously raising his head to peer over Duke's belly, Jake raked his rifle along the nearby sparse woodland from where the shots had come. A moment later, he saw two men rising slowly from the underbrush that straggled between the tree trunks. They must have thought him dead or incapacitated, for they took no effort to hide themselves as they peered in his direction. Smiling grimly, Jake aimed and squeezed the trigger. He heard a cry and an oath, and one of the men clamped a hand to his arm. Even as Jake thumbed another cartridge into his rifle, he saw the men turn and flee into the wood.

He kept his rifle aimed at the woodland for a long minute, until the sound of his attackers retreating had faded and he could be almost certain no other assailants lurked among the trees. Then he rolled onto his back, resting his head against the saddle and drawing in a deep breath and then another. Beneath him, Duke was quiet, and he realized the horse's struggles had ceased while Jake had repelled their attackers. At least his suffering had been brief, Jake supposed.

But, he could still hear *something*, close enough and yet far enough that his ears only caught it once his own ragged breathing had steadied: a creaking and clattering and stamping and rattling of chains—and, mixed in with it, the sound of a woman's voice. It took him a moment longer to place the sound: somewhere over the ridge that sloped up from the track opposite the woods, but a little to his right, further on in the direction he'd been heading when his journey had been so rudely interrupted.

Gritting his teeth against the pain from his bruised ankle, he levered himself to his feet, shouldered his rifle and limped toward the noise as fast as he could

manage. As he climbed the slope, he began to make out words: the woman was telling something—an animal, he guessed—to “Woah!” and “Steady!”, but with an edge of panic in her voice that he suspected was not in the least calming for whatever distressed creature she was trying to aid. He did his best to quicken his pace.

oOo

Cresting the ridge, he took in the sight of a cart on the track below, tilted half on its side and with the horse still trapped between the shafts. The cart rocked with each swing of the horse’s rump and kick of its legs as it tried to break free, yet the wooden frame seemed firmly wedged in place and the horse’s efforts to escape had apparently only tangled it further.

On the near side of the cart, the woman whose voice he’d heard appeared to be attempting to unbuckle the harness while trying not to get too close to the flailing animal. She was also still trying to soothe the horse, but Jake could hear her exhaustion and fear in the way her voice cracked. As he slithered down the slope toward her, his knife already out and in his hand, he saw she had, to her credit, already managed to free the traces on the other side.

Reaching past her, ignoring her slight gasp as she became aware of his presence, he caught the horse’s bridle with one hand and brought the knife up in the other to cut the trace that still held the horse captive. The leather bucked and swung as the struggling horse pulled it this way and that, making it hard to saw—until suddenly the strip tightened and he realized the woman had caught it and pulled it taut.

He turned his head to catch her gaze and acknowledge her help, and had a moment to take in blue eyes filled with anxiety and think them pretty, before the strap parted and the horse shot forward, dragging him away from her.

He let the horse pull him with it, ignoring the renewed pain in his ankle as he was jolted sideways. The animal shot forward, clear of the cart, kicking out a few more times before realizing it was finally free and then, to Jake’s relief, slithering to a stop. He would have hated to let it go and have the trouble of catching it again—assuming it didn’t just tear off into the distance. It was still trembling, though, ears twitching and eyes wide and rolled back toward him. Sheathing his knife, he slowly reached up his free hand and cautiously stroked its shoulder. “Hey there,” he murmured softly, as he went on smoothing his hand over the coarse hair, while the animal shifted its feet and tossed its head, mouthing restlessly at its bit.

Sliding his other hand down the bridle until it rested under the horse’s chin, Jake lightly tugged downward. After a moment, the horse lowered its head a little. He let the pressure ease for a few a seconds, while he went on quietly running his

other hand down the animal's shoulder. Then he gently tugged again, still murmuring soothing nonsense. Slowly the horse lowered its head, its fear and tension ebbing away.

At last, after a few minutes, Jake felt secure enough to turn his head and glance over his shoulder at the woman. She was leaning against the cart shaft, watching him. Her right hand cradled her left wrist and, though she gave him a tremulous smile when she saw he was looking at her, her face had an unhealthy pallor. He realized that not only had she been as terrified as the horse but was perhaps more badly injured.

Still moving carefully and talking quietly to the horse, he gathered up the dangling trace on the far side and, turning the animal, led it back toward the cart. Glancing back, he saw the horse looked to be moving freely, but he made a note to check its legs before subjecting it to more work.

Loosely hitching the horse to the wagon, making sure he could free the knot with a single tug if it spooked again, he turned back to the woman, "You're hurt?"

She nodded. "I think there were some gunshots. Belle startled. And then when the cart went over...." She gave a soft, rueful chuckle and lifted her arm slightly to indicate her wrist.

"May I look?" Even as Jake asked the question, he twisted his head, scanning the land around them. Her words had reminded him sharply that they were both in this predicament because someone had attacked him. This side of the ridge, the fields stretched out flat and featureless and seemingly empty. Besides, if someone did try to take a potshot at them, there wasn't much they could do. Turning back, he saw she was nodding at him and holding out her arm to him. "Why don't we sit you down," he suggested, gesturing toward the slope.

She nodded again, but when she pushed away from the cart and tried to take a step, she let out a sharp gasp and froze.

He caught her under the elbow. "You've hurt your leg, too?"

She nodded mutely, biting her lip. Unshed tears of pain glistened in her eyes.

"Come on. I'll help you." He slid his arm around her waist and supported her as she hopped a few paces until she could settle on the ground. He knelt in front of her, slipping his rifle off his shoulder so it wouldn't get in his way, but laying it down close at hand. "Your arm first."

She held her arm out to him again and he carefully unbuttoned her cuff and pushed up the sleeve. A bruise was already blooming on her white skin, but he could detect no break as he ran his fingers up over her wrist. "I think it's just

sprained," he offered, smiling up at her.

Glancing around, he caught sight of a paisley shawl caught on the seat of the cart. He supposed she'd been wearing it when the accident had happened. "Don't move." Getting to his feet, he fetched the shawl, noticing he had thankfully worked off his own sprain somewhat.

By the time he returned to her, she had already rolled down her sleeve again and was offering her arm to him so he could fashion a sling with the shawl. Leaning close to tie the ends around her neck, he breathed in the tang of soap and, underneath it, her own scent that made him want to move closer still. Resisting the unexpected urge, he sat back on his heels—and promptly noticed that she had intelligent eyes set in a pleasant face and was, without being a beauty like Emily Sullivan, altogether pretty enough that he couldn't help but smile at her. And feel remarkably pleased when she smiled back at him.

He held her gaze for a moment longer and then, recollecting himself, cleared his throat. "Now, your leg?"

"It's just my ankle," she reassured him, a blush spreading over her cheeks. But, without further protestations, she hitched up her skirt enough to reveal button boots, an inch of stocking and the lace edging of her pantalettes.

The ankle looked sound enough. Jake contemplated removing the boot, but decided it might be too difficult to get it back on. And the thought of touching her again, running his hands over her limbs, even through the soft cotton of her stocking, made heat spread through him, so that he knew his own color must have risen. Perhaps there was no need—. "You were able to stand on it? Before?" Not daring to meet her eyes now, he gestured toward the cart.

"Yes. It hurt, but I could manage. I don't suppose it's broken." Her voice trembled slightly.

"No, I would think not." Sliding his hand under the heel of her boot, Jake carefully turned her foot a little, one way and then the other. He heard her catch her breath, but she didn't cry out, and there was no sound of bone scraping over bone. "It seems whole enough. I think it best we should get you home as soon as we can and put you into the hands of someone more competent."

She chuckled quietly. "I find your hands seem to be quite competent, Mr, uh—."

Jake laughed, glad to break the tension, though her words had only made him grow hotter and more aware in every fiber of his being of her warm presence in front of him. Carefully setting down her foot, he cleared his throat. "I dare say we really should introduce ourselves properly before it becomes altogether too late?" Looking up her—and noticing she had a pretty smile, too, her cheeks dimpling as

her mouth curved in amusement—he held out his hand. “Mr Jake Green.”

She took her hand, her ungloved fingers warm and soft in his. His skin tingled where they touched. “Miss Heather Lisinski.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Lisinski.” His voice sounded hoarse in his own ears.

“And yours, Mr Green.” She withdrew her hand, the gesture a little awkward, and he wondered if he had held on to it too long. Because he wanted to go on holding it. “And thank you.” She dipped her head in the direction of the cart. “I don’t know what I would have done if—.”

Jake remembered that she had already unhitched one half of the traces before he arrived on the scene of the catastrophe, despite her wrist and ankle. “I think you would have managed very well, Miss Lisinski. Now,—” Giving himself a little shake, he climbed to his feet. “—to get you back home.”

oOo

Half an hour later, Jake had the horse re-harnessed, having managed a temporary repair to the traces which he trusted would hold at least until they reached town. The animal seemed a little skittish still—hardly to be wondered at—but a careful examination of her legs revealed no sign of lasting damage. The cart also appeared to have come through remarkably unscathed; with sweat beading on his brow, he had pulled it back upright and maneuvered it away from the bank against which it had run itself. The chief casualty looked to have been Miss Lisinski.

She waited patiently, still seated, while he worked, accepting with a rueful smile his refusal of her offer of one-handed help. He left her in charge of his rifle and ammunition pouch, after confirming that she knew how to fire the weapon. When he glanced at her from time to time as he worked, he saw she was scanning the horizon, her good hand resting on the rifle’s stock, ready to snatch it up.

Finally, with everything restored to some semblance of order, he helped her climb onto the cart’s passenger seat, breathing in her sweet scent again as he stepped close to provide a steadying arm. Then he got up himself, gathered up the reins and, checking the rifle was safely stowed close at hand, set them slowly in motion along the track that led back toward the main trail.

“Where do you live?” He threw a brief look in her direction.

“I have a place in Mrs Leigh’s rooming house on Adams Street, for the present.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her lift a hand and tuck an errant lock of hair that had escaped her rather severe bun back behind her ear. A blush colored her

cheek as she caught him watching her. Bending her head, she added hurriedly, "They are to build a house for the schoolmistresses to share, but I fear it will be next spring before it is made ready."

"Oh, you're the other schoolmistress?" Jake remembered what Emily had told him earlier.

"You know Miss Sullivan?" She looked back up at him, a surprised expression on her face.

"I do." They had reached the main trail. Drawing the cart to a halt, Jake squinted past her to where Duke still lay sprawled in the dirt. He supposed he should rescue his possessions before someone else took advantage of his absence. Perhaps he could find a buyer for the saddle and bridle in Jericho and use the funds to feed himself on the slow trudge eastward on foot that was now surely his fate—because, God knows, he lacked the wherewithal to replace poor Duke. He added, absently, still answering Miss Lisinski, "We grew up together."

"Oh." She sounded surprised at the news. Then, following his gaze, she said, "Oh!" again in a quite different tone.

Jake waved a hand in Duke's direction. "I need to—. If you have no objection?"

"No, of course not." There was compassion in her face as she turned back to look at him.

Clicking his tongue, he encouraged Miss Lisinski's horse—Belle, she'd called it, hadn't she?—forward until, still some fifty yards short of Duke's body, he ran the cart in a semicircle, facing them back toward town, and drew them to a halt. Hopping down, grimacing again as his bruised ankle reminded him it had recently been trapped under a thousand pounds of horseflesh, he reached for the rifle and offered it back to his companion. "If you could...? They were in the woods before." He gestured toward the trees that straggled along on one side of the road, now looking perfectly innocuous.

She murmured her assent, her gaze already searching the brushwood as he limped off down the road. Ten minutes of hard struggle later—it was no easy task to strip a dead horse—he was stowing the saddle and his bags in the back of the cart. He'd kept his mind firmly on the job as he'd worked, but it had been a hard thing to leave Duke at the last. He and the old fellow had been through a lot together, these past five years, and it wasn't the end Duke had deserved.

Miss Lisinski gave him a look filled with pity as he climbed back into the cart and as she handed the rifle back to him. "It was you they were shooting at? When...."

"Uh-huh." Jake, not much inclined to talk about it, gave the reins a shake and

clicked his tongue, setting the cart in motion again.

"I'm sorry." She'd shifted a little, twisting in her seat, so she could better observe him as they spoke.

"You've nothing to be sorry about." He knew he sounded brusquer than she deserved, but the lump in his throat was making it hard to get the words out. "It wasn't your fault. There's lawlessness throughout the Territory, though I'd not thought to meet it so boldly till I was nearer Lawrence."

"I'm still sorry for your troubles." To his surprise, she put her hand on his arm for a moment, before she withdrew it quickly, as if embarrassed. He wished that she'd left it there, liking the feel of it. Liking the feel of her sitting next to him. Despite her evident discomfort at the forwardness of the gesture, she added, softly but with a tone that suggested she was determined to speak what was on her mind, "You're a good man, Mr Green, to help someone you didn't know when you had misfortunes enough of your own."

Jake turned his head away, feeling he scarcely deserved her praise. He'd only done what any man would have done, hadn't he? "I thank you for the compliment, Miss Lisinski, but I think you don't know me well enough to say such things."

"Maybe not." Another quick glance showed her cheeks were pink again, but she went on with the same resolute air, "But I saw how you handled poor Belle when she was afeared. And I know now that you grew up in Jericho. Though I've not lived there above a few a months myself, I've seen they're good people there. The folks who were there before, I mean."

Jake gave a wry laugh. "I think my father would sooner tell you I'm the town black sheep."

"Your father's Mr Green who owns the General Store?" It was only half a question.

Jake nodded glumly, suddenly aware that his father would likely be less than glad to see him back again so soon. Reluctant to continue the conversation further, he cast around for a change of subject. "So you are newly come to Jericho? With the settlers? Were you in Lawrence or Lecompton before?"

She nodded. "Lawrence. But only for a month or so while we discovered where we might find a place that would suit. Before that, we were in Massachusetts."

Jake had already guessed as much from her accent; it reminded him of the time he'd spent in the East and the friends he'd made there. Friends who might be able to help him if he ever managed to return to them. "You must find all this

very different from your former home." He gestured at the grasslands around them and the cluster of sturdy but unpolished wooden buildings that had appeared not far off as they crested a small rise. "A little less civilized?"

"A little." He felt her shrug slightly. "But here, at least, the only troubles I face are what come with the weather and the soil." She sounded a little bitter, and Jake wondered at her words, but had no chance to pursue them before she turned the conversation back on him again. "But you speak as if you know Massachusetts, Mr Green."

Still pondering her previous remark, he conceded to himself that it would have been rather impolite to ask her to explain herself on so short an acquaintance. Yet he was sorry to discover she apparently hid secret griefs behind the cheerful countenance she'd shown him even during the trials of the past hour.

Laying aside the matter for another time—for he found himself very much hoping he would have the chance to know her well enough to ask—he applied himself to answering the unspoken question in her last words. "I studied two years in New York State," he explained. "One of my classmates hailed from Concord, and he and his family were kind enough on occasion to give hospitality to an unfortunate companion from the West who could not return home when we were not at our studies."

"Oh, Concord!" Her face had lit up. "I, too, have spent a little time there. It is a handsome place, is it not? Perhaps we have acquaintances in..." Her voice trailed away as they reached the end of Main Street and saw a crowd had gathered in front of the General Store. "Oh, my!"

An uneasy feeling settled in Jake's stomach as he drove them slowly toward the throng. He could see his father on the steps of the store, his mother a pace behind. A tall man, of about his father's age and dressed smartly, if showing signs of a good many excellent dinners in his girth, was haranguing his father from the front of the crowd below. Over the chink of harness and rumble of wheels, Jake caught the occasional raised word. "Danger" was one, and something about his father not doing enough to protect the place.

His father began to make his reply. As Jake drew the cart to a halt at the rear of the crowd, he heard him saying, "...don't know what these reports mean, Gray. And until we do, I see no sense in running around half-cocked. That's—" He broke off, apparently having caught sight of Jake over the heads of the men below. Ignoring the crowd, and the men who here and there were calling out, he stepped down from the stoop and pushed his way through the group until he reached the cart. "What in Tarnation's name happened to you?" he demanded. "I thought you'd left." There was a hint of accusation in his tone and expression as he raked his gaze up and down Jake, who became abruptly conscious that he was a sorry sight, coated as he was in dust and sweat. Then, seemingly noticing the

cart's other occupant, his father added hastily, "Begging your pardon for the language, Mizz Lisinski."

Trying to keep his temper in check, because he really didn't need to get into another pointless argument with his father after all that had happened, Jake carefully looped the reins over the rail. "I was set on, about five miles outside town. Couple of desperadoes shooting from the woods out toward the Tacoma River. They ran off when I returned fire. In all the commotion, Miss Lisinski's cart got turned over." He swung himself down from the seat, discovering he'd stiffened up during the drive back to town, and began to limp around toward the other side of the cart so he could help his passenger down.

"See, Johnston. I told you. They're marching on the Wakarusa and now they're coming here." The man who'd been arguing with his father earlier had followed him through the crowd.

"We don't know that, Gray." His father turned and glared at the other man. "Coulda been some local yahoos. Some of Prowse's men, stirring up trouble."

"Are we under attack?" That was a younger man, around Jake's age, with dark hair and an anxious face, who also seemed to be one of the settlers who'd arrived recently—or, at least, Jake didn't remember his face. "We're under attack from Border Ruffians, aren't we?"

Reaching the other side of the cart, Jake caught the frustrated expression on his father's face. "Now, Bill, there's no reason...."

The rest of his father's attempts to soothe the crowd were drowned out by his mother arriving at his side. "Oh, honey, you're hurt." She reached up to smooth his bangs back from his forehead.

"I'm fine, Ma." He pulled her into a swift one-armed hug, before he pushed her gently away. "But Miss Lisinski has hurt her arm and her ankle."

Turning back to the cart, he held out his hands to help the younger woman down. She took his left hand with her good right one—and then exchanged a look with him as they both understood at the same moment that she was in need of more assistance. Letting go of her hand, Jake caught her around the waist and lifted her down bodily, setting her on her feet. "Can you make it to the store?"

"I—." She looked like she wanted to say yes, but her hesitation told him she knew it would be a lie.

His hands still on her waist, he glanced over his shoulder at his mother. "Will you take care of her, Ma?"

"Of course. Of course. Bring her in." His mother bobbed her head and hurried back across the street, no doubt to seek out her medicine chest.

Ignoring Miss Lisinski's quiet protestation that she could manage very well by herself, Jake picked her up and carried her through the still-arguing crowd to the relative peace inside the store.

oOo

A few minutes later, having seen Miss Lisinski safely bestowed in his parents' private quarters at the back of the store, with his mother clucking around her, Jake had ducked back outside.

It had been only right to leave them alone, so that his mother could examine Miss Lisinski properly. Still, Jake had knelt by her chair perhaps a moment longer than necessary after placing her in it, his hand resting on her arm while he sought confirmation that she was comfortable. Her cheeks had been flushed as she'd silently nodded her reply and he'd wondered if he had discomfited her with his forwardness in carrying her inside: she had tensed for a moment as he'd picked her up, before apparently deciding to make the best of it, letting herself settle against his chest and placing her hand on his shoulder to help steady herself. Yet, as he'd gotten to his feet, sure he'd overstayed his welcome, she'd caught his hand to stay him, thanking him again with a smile that dimpled her cheeks most becomingly. Making a slightly awkward half-bow, Jake had fled.

Outside, he'd drawn in a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart, and surveyed the scene. The crowd had mostly dispersed, though his father was still talking to Jimmy Taylor. From the badge on Jimmy's lapel, Jake gathered he'd been made Sheriff in the years Jake had been away.

With a wave of the hand, Jimmy headed off across the street, leaving his father to turn toward Jake. "You look like you could do with cleaning yourself up a bit, son. And like you could use a drink." His expression softened a little as he spoke the last words. Jerking his head for Jake to follow, he led him round the side of the building to the well in the back yard. He drew up a pail of water, while Jake stripped off his jacket and neckerchief and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

By the time Jake had splashed water on his face and scrubbed off the worst of the dirt, his father was back with two tankards of ale. Setting them down on the chopping block near to the well, he pulled a flask from his pocket, unscrewed the cap and offered the contents to Jake.

Jake's throat burned as he swallowed a gulp of the rough whiskey, but the strong liquor made him feel better. He handed the flask back to his father.

"You're sure you're not hurt?" His father gave him an appraising look as he took a

swig himself, before capping the flask.

Jake shook his head. He began rolling his sleeves back down. "They got my horse, but I guess I got lucky."

"How many?" His father picked up Jake's jacket and started beating the dust from it. Something about the gesture told Jake he was more agitated than his expression alone would have suggested.

"Two." Jake finished with his sleeves and reached for his ale.

"Local men?" His father was turning the jacket this way and that as he dealt with the dust.

"Maybe." Jake shrugged and took a drink. "I didn't recognize them, but there's so many new folks..."

His father grunted in agreement. His attention seemingly still focused on the jacket, he added, "William Garrity was over in Lawrence on business. Rode back this afternoon and told us how there's men from Missouri been riding through the Territory, stirring up trouble in Lecompton and Atchison and other places. Heading west, maybe."

Jake remembered the conversation out on the street earlier that he and Miss Lisinski had interrupted. "You think they're coming here?"

His father shrugged. "We had some folks from Missouri settle a place the other side of the river a few months back. New Bern, they call it. Brought some slaves with them to work their farms."

"Ah." That would be a cause of trouble, sure enough. Especially as Jake had detected more Massachusetts accents out on the street, so it didn't take much thinking to figure that many of Jericho's newer residents were of the Free State party. Not that he would have expected his father to welcome any other kind into Jericho. *Folks is folks, no matter where they come from, and a man has no right to own anything but his soul and what his own hands can build him*, Jake remembered him saying. There'd been something else about *no right to expect others to keep him in idleness and drink, either*, though Jake had tried to forget that part. Not that idleness and drunkenness had been the worst of Jake's sins in his father's eyes by the time he'd ridden out of Jericho in a hurry a few weeks later.

"Times like these, we could do with some good men around here. Steady types. Those Easterners are apt to get excitable pretty darn quick. We could do with some cooler heads." His father gave Jake a brief, uncertain look as he held his jacket out to him.

Finishing the rest of his ale, Jake set down his tankard and took the jacket. Shrugging it back on, he weighed his options. Getting stuck in Jericho hadn't been in his plans, but now he had no way out except shanks's mare. On top of that, heading east didn't sound any better for his health than heading back west: it appeared Fate was in every way conspiring to hold him here. Besides, Jericho was home, even if it was a home that didn't want him much, and he couldn't turn his back on his family and friends if they were in danger. "Reckon I might stay a few days," he muttered. "If you and Ma—."

"I'm sure your mother'll pleased to have you around a while longer." His father's voice was gruff but, glancing up, Jake caught a relieved look on the old man's face. "You can tell her yourself." He jerked his head toward the store and Jake saw his mother had appeared at the back door. He supposed she must have finished treating Miss Lisinski and had come to report on the fact—or to check the menfolk in her life hadn't fallen to blows already.

Making his way toward her, Jake realized that staying would also allow him to further his acquaintance with Miss Lisinski. Suddenly, the prospect of being stranded in Jericho didn't seem so terrible after all.

oOo

Part Two

Robert Hawkins stood to one side of the meeting room in Jericho's new town hall and watched the residents argue among themselves about how best to defend their town and their farms. To add to the attack on Jake Green the previous day, news had come in that morning of three strangers seen at the edge of the Richmond farm, getting water from the creek and taking food from the fields. When Richmond had confronted them, they'd claimed they were settlers just passing by on their way to claims further west, but he hadn't believed them: they had scarcely any gear with them and looked uneasily at each other as they answered.

At the front of the room, Jake was arguing with his father. Hawkins had only been in town two days but had already listened in on enough gossip between the old-timers and the new settlers to know that the two Greens butting heads was hardly an unusual occurrence. That it hadn't happened recently was only because Jake had skipped town five years previously, over some "bad business with Prowse's son" that nobody would elaborate on much but which everyone shook their heads about. Hawkins' lips twitched as he reflected wryly that it was remarkably easy to spy on people when you were as good as invisible to them.

Not completely invisible, though. He'd made sure to position himself toward the back of the room, in an unobtrusive corner. For all they were Free Staters here in Jericho, many of them still considered that men like him—blacks, when they were being especially careful and polite, and other names when they're weren't, which was most of the time—didn't have a right to speak up. Sometimes that irritated Hawkins beyond measure, so he had to bite his tongue, and sometimes he gave thanks for the general stupidity of white fellows, since it made his job easier.

Half-tuning out the debate, which was going in circles at present, he let his gaze drift around the room. It was a fine building, a suitable meeting place for a town of the size and importance Jericho had become in the last few years. Beneath his feet, on the first floor, were the sheriff's office and the jail, the post office, and sundry other rooms for public purposes. Somewhere beneath his feet, too, the reason he'd come to Jericho.

He wondered if he should make his move now, while everyone was distracted? No, he decided: there was too much chance of him being discovered, and everyone was so on edge that the consequences of being caught breaking and entering might be swift and severe. It wouldn't do him any good if they discovered his papers—his real papers, authorizing his mission from Congress—only after he was dead.

He focused again on the group at the front. Johnston Green still had the bearing of a former military man, together with a thickening about the girth that suggested civilian life had treated him well, even here on the frontier. His son, by

contrast, was lean and wore clothes that, though made of good material and well-cut, were shabby with long use. Whatever Jake Green had been doing outside Jericho, it didn't seem to have been earning his fortune. And though he didn't hold himself like a soldier, he had the same alertness as his father in the way he took in the room—always looking for possible threats and potential allies—that spoke of long weeks in hostile territory.

"But a single family can't defend itself against ten or twenty men," Jake was saying now. He'd been arguing for pulling everyone back to town, corralling the women in safety behind a circle of rifles. "They'll pick the farms off one by one."

Johnston had huffed, apparently unimpressed with his son's arguments. "And if folks leave their homes undefended, these gangs'll burn 'em and take their livestock. Son, you can't expect people to up sticks and leave places they've sweated over and froze in this past year. Places they've put down roots."

If Hawkins hadn't been listening carefully, he might have missed the barb planted in the older man's softly spoken rebuke. Jake's grimace confirmed, though, that the value of hard work and settling down were an old source of contention between father and son. But Jake smoothed his expression, if with evident effort, and answered calmly enough, apparently determined to carry his point about bringing everyone to town. "Houses can be rebuilt. New livestock can be bought. You can't—."

He stopped abruptly, throwing a sideways glance into the assembled throng. A few women and children were gathered among the men, and even some of the men looked frightened. Hawkins guessed Jake was smart enough to know not create a general panic by speaking more clearly of the fate he saw for them if they stayed on their farms.

Johnston either didn't care about frightening the crowd or didn't sense, as Jake appeared to and Hawkins certainly could, that the room was a whisker away from hysteria. Raising his eyebrows, he demanded, "Can't what?"

Jake brought his attention back to his father's face. Hawkins saw him swallow before he answered quietly, "Can't bring people back." The very quietness with which he spoke told Hawkins that the younger Green had seen more than one burned out farmstead. Indians or Mormons or white men who wanted to take what wasn't theirs to claim, it made no matter: there was trouble enough of various kinds in the far west without bringing the question of free or slave into it.

An anxious stir ran through the room, people shuffling and muttering to each other. Johnston took another look around, clearly reevaluating the situation. "Look, folks. We don't know that's gonna happen. Could be it's no more than a couple of no-good varmints, just takin' an opportunity. And I say we don't give 'em that opportunity." He turned back to Jake. "Those men who shot at you

yesterday ran off quick enough when you showed you weren't gonna scare easily. I reckon a man or two extra at each farm with guns should see off any trouble of that kind, sure enough. Folks in town can help with that."

Surveying the room, Hawkins saw the expressions on the faces around him were now split between relief and continued frowns. He guessed the latter were townfolk who weren't particularly pleased at having been volunteered to lay their lives down for their neighbors. Possibly some also weren't as convinced by Johnston's assessment of the danger.

It seemed Jake was among them. "If that's what we're facing," he reminded his father. Hawkins saw Johnston bristle, drawing himself up and pulling his shoulders back as if he were on the parade ground. Jake must have seen it too, maybe even expected it, because he said quickly, "You're right. We don't know what we're facing. We should send out scouts. Find out if the trouble further east is coming our way."

"I vote for putting a man extra on each farm." That was a thickset younger man with a shock of fair hair. From his rough workclothes and boots, Hawkins guessed he was one of the farmers.

"Stanley—" Jake was shaking his head, but the other man didn't let him finish.

"There's always talk of trouble that way'," Stanley flapped a hand in a roughly easterly direction. "And at least one report a week that half of Missouri's marching west. I'm sorry, Jake," he gave the other man an apologetic shrug, "but you haven't been around for five years. You don't know what things are like in Jericho these days."

"Actually...."

Fifty or more pairs of eyes swiveled Hawkins' direction. He hadn't meant to speak up and draw attention to himself, but it looked like Johnston's side was going to prevail, and he couldn't afford the risk of the town being left mostly defenseless in the event there was a sizable band of pro-slavery men on their way. Couldn't take the risk they'd burn down the town hall before he had a chance to retrieve—or at least set eyes on—what he'd come here to find.

He tried to strike the proper balance between looking and sounding convincing, while still appearing as submissive as these people would expect. With his head slightly bent, not making eye contact, not openly challenging anyone, he said firmly and clearly, "There's a thousand men out of Missouri camped along the Wakarusa already and more coming every day. Even if the trouble you've had so far isn't but an outlaw or two, that doesn't mean trouble isn't coming."

It was an older man who answered. Hawkins had identified him the previous day,

during the confrontation outside the general store, as Gray Anderson. The information Hawkins had been given back in the Capitol said he'd started a salt mine to the northwest of town and was the self-appointed leader of the group of settlers who'd arrived the previous year. Hawkins had already figured out for himself that Anderson thought he should be the leader in Jericho as well; that Johnston Green was having none of it; and that Anderson wasn't happy about that. Now he said, "You seem mightily well informed about the Border Ruffians and their plans, *boy*."

The last word reminded Hawkins that Anderson might be here to vote Kansas a Free State, but he was also a leading light in the Free Soil Party. The two of them were on the same side merely because Anderson hated plantation owners and the way they squeezed out poor white men a little more than he hated men like Hawkins.

Hawkins tilted his head up a little, catching Anderson's gaze for long enough that the other man looked away in discomfort. "The name is Robert Hawkins, sir. From Ohio. I was in Tecumseh less than a week ago and the place was full of talk from men who said they'd seen in it with their own eyes."

There were more uneasy murmurs in the crowd, though no one appeared willing to speak up either to contradict or confirm what Hawkins had said. Peering back up at Anderson, Hawkins saw the other man had turned back to speak to Johnston Green—and that Jake, still standing next to his father, was giving Hawkins a sharp-eyed, thoughtful look that Hawkins didn't much care for at all. Jake must have realized Hawkins was observing him in return, for his mouth shaped itself into a wry, lopsided grin for a second, before he stepped forward and raised his voice above the hubbub.

"I heard the same in Fort Kearny," he declared. He nodded in his father's direction. "And you told me William Garrity reported there's trouble brewing. But talk's all well and good. What we need is to see for ourselves. To—."

A commotion by the door made him pause. The crowd parted to reveal a curly-headed lad of about sixteen or seventeen. He was wide-eyed and panting hard as he stumbled into the center of the room and gasped, "Oh, Mr Green...."

"What is it, Dale?" Johnston came down the room to meet him.

"Mr Eric sent me, Mr Green. He says to come quick. There's twenty men on the road and they want him to come out and he says they mean him no good for sure."

Jake had also stepped forward, catching Dale under the arm to support him before he dropped where he stood. He glanced up at his father. "Well, I guess now we have our answer. Let's go."

oOo

A few minutes later, Hawkins was leading his horse out of the livery stable toward where Johnston was trying to organize an impromptu posse.

"Could you use another gun, Mr Green?" He half lifted the rifle he carried.

Johnston raised his eyebrows when he saw the rifle, but Hawkins knew the Territorial Legislature had yet to pass a law that prevented him carrying the weapon. The people of Jericho would, in any case, likely ignore any law coming out of that body, tarnished as it was by the manner of its election. As he had expected, Johnston finally shrugged. "We surely could, Mr Hawkins. Though what business you have helping us, I don't rightly know."

"Merely protecting my employer's possible future interests, Mr Green. After all, I believe you said your son might be interested in striking a deal for the sale of his crops?" When Hawkins had introduced himself to Johnston two days earlier—before all this trouble had blown into town—he'd been posing as a factor for a mill owner in Columbus, Ohio, who was looking to secure a supply of the grains being grown on the Great Plains. Of course, that had been a lie, and so was the reason he'd just given for offering to help defend the town. The truth was that he didn't trust the men of Jericho, on the evidence he'd seen so far, not to get themselves all killed in an ambush before they got within a mile of Eric Green's farm. The Greens seemed to be the only ones with half a notion of what they might be facing and what to do about it.

Johnston appeared distracted as he grunted a reply, his glance straying over Hawkins' shoulder. Turning, Hawkins saw he was looking toward where his son was in earnest conversation with a fair-haired woman of about the same age.

"Emily, please...." The younger Green put his hand familiarly on her arm.

She tilted her chin up, an annoyed expression settling on her fine features. "I can shoot as well as you!"

Hawkins realized with a start that, like much of the crowd around them, she was carrying a rifle in her gloved hands. The weapon sat oddly with the fine silk of her wide-skirted dress and the spray of flowers decorating the straw bonnet that framed her curls.

"I know that." Jake gave an exasperated sigh. "And if they were outside our house, I'd gladly have you at my side. But that's not the same as riding out into who knows what trouble."

"*Our* house?"

Hawkins couldn't quite place the emotion in the woman's voice as she repeated the phrase. Somewhere between scorn and longing, maybe. That Jake knew well enough what she meant was clear, though, by the way he took a half step back and let his hand drop, a flush darkening his face. "You know what I mean." Hawkins saw him draw in a deep breath before he spoke again. "You should stay here. If, God forbid, the gang makes it this far, they'll need you."

"And you'll be dead and Roger'll be dead...." The woman's face crumpled and she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth.

Hawkins was half-aware that Johnston, after letting out a derisive sniff, had turned away a minute earlier and was now talking to some of the other men who were gathering in the street. But Hawkins went on watching the couple. He wasn't entirely sure why— except that something about Jake bothered him. Maybe it was just the other man's scrutiny earlier, or maybe it was a sense of unease about the way Jake had pitched up in town a day after Hawkins had arrived himself, since it didn't seem like Jake had much reason to return: to add to the bad blood with his father and some trouble with the law he'd skipped out on, it was sounding an awful lot like Jake had also ditched a wife when he'd left.

He was frowning at her now. "Roger? I thought he was in Lawrence?"

Emily shook her head, smearing her hand across her cheek as if brushing away tears. "He was supposed to be returning today." She gave a hiccuping sob. "Today or tomorrow. I don't know." Her voice had dropped lower, while the bustle behind Hawkins had increased, so he had to strain to hear her next words. "And now there's this gang and he'll meet them on the road and... and you're here and he's not, and you were the one who was supposed to be dead.... You were the one—."

"Hey, hey." Jake stepped closer and reached out to rub a hand comfortingly up and down her arm. "I'm sure Roger's fine." Lifting his head, Jake peered around until he found the person he was seeking. He gave a wave and a moment later, the tow-headed young farmer who'd spoken up at the meeting ambled toward them, leading a horse. Jake turned back to Emily as the other man approached. "Look, Stanley's heading back to his farm to make sure Bonnie's all right. Why don't you go with him? I'm sure they'll appreciate the extra gun."

He glanced at Stanley, who was making a face at the idea, but who nodded his agreement when Jake raised his eyebrows pleadingly. The unspoken communication, and the way Stanley agreed to the request, made Hawkins think they were old friends. Had maybe even grown up together: they looked about the same age.

Jake smiled his thanks, before turning back to Emily. "And if anyone's wounded,

Stanley's place is closest, so we'll bring them there and you can take care of them. All right?" He gave her an encouraging nod of the head.

Emily sniffed. "I guess."

Before Jake could reply, a hail from his father made both him and Hawkins turn.

"Jake!" Johnston, leading two horses, was gesturing to where several of the other men were already mounted and milling around. "Time to go. You too, Mr Hawkins."

Hawkins nodded to show he'd heard and swung himself into the saddle. Soon, the main group was heading out, Jake next to his father at the front. Hawkins rode at the rear, keeping to one side and well away from Anderson and the distrustful looks he'd had sent Hawkins' way as they'd set off.

Glancing back, Hawkins saw Stanley and Emily following, Emily cutting an elegant figure in her sidesaddle. They peeled off down a side turning just past the edge of town. Facing forward again, Hawkins dismissed them from his mind and instead tried to settle the nerves in his stomach as he wondered what they'd find once they reached the Green farm.

oOo

The posse quickly settled into a brisk but steady pace. The two Greens rode at the front, holding a debate about the route or tactics they should take, to judge by the way hands were being waved and the occasional word that drifted back to Hawkins over the clatter of hooves and jingle of harness. Hawkins supposed Johnston at least would be no fool when it came to a firefight. As for Jake—.

"Hawkins, right?"

Pulled from his musings, Hawkins realized the Sheriff—Taylor—had edged alongside him and was looking at him with curiosity.

Hawkins nodded at him. "That's right."

"You ever use that thing to shoot more'n jackrabbits?" Taylor jerked his head at the rifle now slung across Hawkins' back.

Hawkins pressed his lips together, trying to suppress a mixture of annoyance and amusement at the question. He supposed it was fair enough: men like him weren't permitted in the Army, after all. But he merely said, trying not to sound too terse, but also wanting to avoid being forced into providing a long, elaborate story he'd have to remember later, "I have. Not my first time doing business in the Territories." When Taylor looked like he was going to pursue the matter

further, Hawkins asked quickly, with a nod toward the front of the group, "Mr Green there, he was in the Army?"

"That he was." Taylor's face broke into a broad smile. "Sergeant at Fort Leavenworth, afore he retired. Then he came out west and set up a trading post and—that's Jericho. Backbone of the town, Mr Green is. And Mrs Green, too, of course. Folks would've had a harder time last winter without all they did for 'em."

Taylor's words mostly confirmed what Hawkins already knew—though that was never a bad thing. If there was one thing he'd learned in all his years as an agent, it was that the briefings he got back in Washington were never quite accurate, and there was always something vital his superiors had neglected to mention. Like the 'coincidental' arrival of long-lost sons.

Trying not to sound like he cared too much about getting an answer, Hawkins tipped his head in Jake's direction. "And the younger Mr Green, there? He Army too?"

"Jake?" Taylor let out a snort. "Not likely. Though—" His face sobered a little. "Who knows? I guess he might've been. Not as we've seen him for five years and he's not telling where he's been. Afore that, he went off to one of them fancy colleges back East and got himself all educated. Came home for a few months and then," Taylor shrugged, "there was some bad business happened at a place just outside town. Came out afterward there was no fault lay with Jake, but...."

A younger man on Taylor's other side, whose name Hawkins hadn't caught, guffawed. "I wouldn't have been too hasty to be comin' back if old man Prowse was baying for my blood, whether I was innocent or no."

Taylor's face darkened. "Well, I reckon Prowse was as much to blame as anyone for what happened. Still, Jake was likely best out of it."

Hawkins took another look at Jake. The two Greens were riding along in silence now and something about the tilt of Jake's head made Hawkins wonder if he'd caught part of the conversation. But with Taylor and the other men apparently inclined to gossip, Hawkins thought he'd better seize the chance to find out more. Keeping his voice low, he probed further. "Must've been rough on his wife, Jake skipping out like that."

"Jake's—?" Taylor shot him a surprised look, before his expression cleared and he barked a laugh. "Oh, you mean Emily? She ain't Jake's wife."

Glancing forward, Hawkins saw Jake had turned his head and was giving them a suspicious stare; looked like he'd definitely caught his own and Emily's name. Hawkins wished Taylor would speak more quietly, but he guessed it wasn't in the man's nature.

Taylor was still talking, chuckling to himself. "Guess you caught that little set-to they had back on Main Street, heh?" Not really waiting for Hawkins to nod, he went on. "Well, I guess folks did think they'd get married. Being childhood sweethearts and all. I think they were maybe even promised, though it was never announced, formal-like. But Jake skipped out afore she could get him to put a ring on her finger. And—."

Taylor broke off as, up ahead, Johnston held up his hand for the group to halt. Reining in his horse, Hawkins peered past the two Greens and saw four horsemen gathered together in the distance, where it looked like two tracks crossed.

Hawkins heard Jake quietly ask his father, "You know them?"

Johnston shook his head, reaching a hand up ready to pull his rifle from his shoulders. "Reckon not."

The distant riders milled around for a moment longer, before one of them broke off and headed away down the main road. The other three turned their horses and slowly began to advance.

"Should we shoot?" On the far side of the group, Gray already had his rifle leveled at the distant figures, his horse shifting restlessly underneath him as he took aim.

"Best see what their intentions are first instead of going off half-cock, don't you think, Mr Anderson?" Johnston turned and glared at the other man for a moment before facing forward again.

"Not good." Jake had also slipped his rifle from his back, though he held it low, out of sight of the approaching band. A moment later, his assessment was confirmed by the crack and zip of a bullet smacking into the dust a few yards in front of them.

"Dammit." Johnston pushed his horse sideways as another bullet followed, still falling short but closer. "Get off the road!"

The group scattered toward the shrubs and long grass to either side, the men slithering from their horses. All except Hawkins. Even as he steered his horse sideways with his knees toward the cover of a stand of trees, he raised the Sharps he carried and fired at the approaching men. One of the horses faltered a little as its rider, dropping the reins, clasped a hand to his arm. His howl of pain was just audible across the grassland.

Another bullet, the aim wilder than Hawkins', whizzed past him. Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, now the distant group was in range, Hawkins dropped from his horse. Letting the reins fall to the ground and trusting

the animal wouldn't stray, he crouched next to Jake at the edge of the trees. The other man didn't seem to notice him: he was sighting carefully along his rifle at the distant figures. He squeezed the trigger and one of the men riding toward them ducked and twisted abruptly. Jake muttered a curse and Hawkins guessed the younger Green's shot had only just missed.

Hawkins thumbed another cartridge into his rifle. On Jake's other side, Taylor was loosing off shots in quick succession, though without much accuracy. Still, the rapid fire had made the two riders in the lead check their pace, allowing the third man to catch them up; a dark stain on his sleeve showed where he'd been hit, though it appeared the wound was light.

Preparing to raise his own rifle again, Hawkins took a second to scan the other side of the road. A couple of men were crouched in similar fashion and, like Taylor, were firing quickly but without seeking out particular targets. Behind them, Johnston was gesturing furiously at Anderson and several others, still marshaling them into position: it looked as if the former soldier was discovering a civilian militia didn't have quite the discipline he was used to.

"You know, you could have just *asked*." The bitter words spoken next to him drew his attention back to his own side of the road and he found he was the subject of scrutiny himself: Jake was watching him, brows drawn into a frown, even as his hands were busy reloading.

Hawkins blinked at him. "What?"

"If you wanted your curiosity satisfied." Jake's lips curled up into a grimace as he swung his rifle up and once more squinted along it. "I'm perfectly capable of speaking for myself."

So Jake *had* overheard. Raising his own rifle, Hawkins wondered what kind of answers he'd have gotten if he had asked directly, and what response he should make now. His unease at Jake—who he was and why he was here—had only grown stronger now he'd seen the calm way Jake responded under fire. His distrust increased again as, glancing across, he saw that Jake had turned his head a little, no longer peering down his sights, and was clearly waiting for a reply, while the same suspicion Hawkins felt himself was evident in his expression.

Hawkins kept his face carefully blank as he took aim. "I'm sure you are, Mr Green. But I hardly think this is the time." Focusing on the shot, only half aware of Jake's snort in response, Hawkins fired again, this time catching another of their attackers in the thigh. A second later, the final rider jerked and then slumped forward—dead or maybe just unconscious—as Jake's next bullet went home.

Curses floated toward the group hunkered in the trees while Hawkins dipped his hand back into his ammo pouch for another cartridge. By the time he'd reloaded, the man with the bullet in his thigh had grabbed the reins of the unconscious rider, now drooped awkwardly over the neck of his horse, and all three horsemen had turned to make off.

Taylor sent a couple more bullets after them, in case they changed their minds, while Hawkins and Jake got to their feet.

"Not bad, Mr Green. Not bad at all." Hawkins gave Jake a half-smile and a dip of the head to show his appreciation of his last shot. Whatever Jake's reasons were for being in Jericho, Hawkins was glad to be on the same side just then.

"You're not so rusty yourself, Mr Hawkins." There was an edge of amusement in Jake's voice as, shading his eyes with his hand, he watched the departing riders. Apparently he, too, was prepared to accept a temporary truce in the present circumstances.

Following Jake's gaze, Hawkins wondered when the fourth man, the one who'd gone to alert his fellows, would be back with reinforcements, and how many.

Next to him, Jake puffed out a breath and made it clear his own thoughts ran the same way, and that Hawkins was right to think him no fool. "They'll be back. And there'll be more of them."

Hawkins nodded. "We should try to bottle them up. Lead them on to our guns."

Johnston had joined them from the other side of the track. He gave Hawkins a respectful dip of the head. "Where do you suggest, Mr Hawkins?"

Hawkins shrugged. "How should I know? I'm new here. This is your town." He grinned mirthlessly at Johnston. "Where do *you* suggest?"

The corner of Johnston's mouth briefly lifted in a wry smile before his expression sobered. He turned to peer down the track. "There's a place 'bout half a mile on, just the other side of that bit of wood." He gestured toward a thicket in the distance. "Track passes between a couple of hills. We can get some height and there's rocks for cover."

On Hawkins' other side, Jake huffed scornfully. "We don't have time to wait for them to come to us." He turned away and began to head toward where his horse was tethered. "Eric needs us to get there now. God knows what's happening at his place."

Hawkins could hear the frustration and worry in his voice. Could understand it, even. But now was a time for cooler heads to prevail. "You're not going to be

much use to your brother if you run your head into a noose, Jake," he called after him.

Jake halted, his back stiff, his knuckles turning white where he gripped his rifle, while his free hand curled into a fist. He stood stock still for a moment, before swinging round. "So what do you suggest we do? Eric's in trouble—."

"Mr Hawkins is right." Johnston spoke with a heavy patience that signaled past arguments. "You're no good to Eric if you get yourself killed. We'll secure the road, and then we'll send a few men round by Richmond land to come at Eric's place from the side. Likely they won't be expecting that, especially if our friends from earlier have reported back."

Jake looked for a moment like he wanted to carry on arguing. Then he gave a curt nod of the head. "Fine. We'd better make a start, then."

oOo

Twenty minutes later, Hawkins was riding away from where Johnston had established his ambush. Jake was on one side of him and Sheriff Taylor on the other, while another two men followed behind. Judging from their weatherbeaten faces, they were likely long-term residents, or come from Ohio or Indiana or some such place, rather than from the ordered towns and cities of New England. Johnston had no doubt chosen them for the party because they were among the more experienced men.

That was surely the reason he'd suggested Jake also take Hawkins, though Hawkins hadn't missed the moment of doubt that crossed Jake's face at the idea. Then Jake's gaze had fallen to the rifle Hawkins carried and his lips had briefly formed a wry smile before he'd nodded. Hawkins supposed Jake had been remembering the earlier skirmish and that Hawkins had his uses, for all Jake might not trust him.

For the first mile, the small band skirted the edge of the low hill, keeping it between them and any attackers who might be making for the group they'd left behind. Then, as they neared the end of the hill and the flat grassland opened out before them, Hawkins broke the silence that had fallen on the group. "How far before we turn?"

"When we've crossed the creek." Jake jerked his head forward and Hawkins saw a ragged line of low bushes and small trees interrupting the waving stalks of grass about half a mile ahead. Beyond the creek, the land gradually sloped up again for a mile or so, forming another low ridge. "Stanley's land runs from the creek to the other side of those hills," Jake continued. "Eric's claim runs next to it to the north. Stanley's place is just over that hill, but Eric's is down in the valley, near the creek."

Shading his eyes, Hawkins swept his gaze over the shallow valley, grimacing at how open the place was. There was little chance of making it to Eric's farm unnoticed, unless they could find cover in the creek. "We should—" He stopped abruptly, the suggestion dying on his lips as something caught his attention: some disturbance a short way up the further slope that was not just the endless restlessness of the plains in the wind.

Reining his horse to a walk, he let his gaze slide back over the ground he had already scanned, trying to find again whatever it was that had drawn his eye.

"What is it?" Jake had circled around to come alongside Hawkins and match his pace. His voice was low and wary, and it was evident he'd picked up on Hawkins' increased unease.

Hawkins had found the movement again. He squinted, trying to be sure, until—. "Someone's coming. On foot. Just to the left of that large tree." He swung his rifle from his shoulder as he spoke.

Jake peered in the direction Hawkins had indicated, where the distant figure appeared to be taking a slightly erratic course as it descended the slope. A moment later, Hawkins heard Jake draw in a sharp breath, before he let out a soft curse. "Goddammit! That's Stanley!"

Before Hawkins could reply, Jake had spurred his horse forward, passing the other three men, now in front, without a word. Hawkins set his heels to his own horse. "Stanley," he flung at the Sheriff and the two others as he rode by, knowing Jake hadn't given them even that much explanation.

A few minutes later, Hawkins was across the creek and slithering from his horse to join Jake, now hunkered down in front of Stanley. The young farmer was sitting on the ground, his hands dangling loosely between his knees. Hawkins wasn't surprised to see a trickle of blood oozing from a cut on his temple, or to find his eyes were only half focused as he blinked up at the new arrival: even from a distance, Hawkins had seen how he'd been slow to lift his head at Jake's approach and had cringed back at first, looking from side to side as if seeking a place to hide, until Jake, dismounting, had caught him under the arm with soothing words.

"Stanley, what happened?" Jake grasped Stanley by his shoulders and shook him gently until the other man brought his eyes back to Jake's face.

"I was...." Stanley sounded hoarse, his words uncertain. He swallowed and tried again. "I was on my way to join you at Eric's." He took another deep breath, clearly struggling to marshal his thoughts. "I left Emily with Bonnie. They had a shotgun and a rifle and... and I thought they'd be fine, and you and Eric needed

me more. I thought...." His voice trailed off as he apparently forgot what he was saying.

Hawkins nudged Jake's shoulder with the canteen he'd fetched from his horse.

Jake took the canteen with a nod of thanks and turned back to Stanley. "Here." He uncorked the cap and held the canteen out to him. Hawkins was aware, as Stanley took it, that the other three men had joined them, forming a silent semicircle around the two on the ground.

Stanley took a swig of water, closing his eyes as he swallowed. Then, apparently too weak to hold the canteen for long, he let his hand drop. Jake caught the canteen before it spilled.

"Stanley?" Jake shoved the canteen back in Hawkins' direction as he spoke. "Stanley, what happened?"

Stanley opened his eyes, his gaze uncertainly seeking out Jake's. A frown creased his forehead, but when he spoke, his voice was a little stronger, even if his wits didn't sound much clearer; he paused now and then as if searching for the right word or the rest of what he was going to say. "Was maybe a mile from home. Met three guys on horseback. Wanted to know who I was and where I was going. Told 'em I was visiting a neighbor. They asked where I came from, and I said back over the hill. Then they asked if I was one of them damned free-soilers and I said, what if I was? Next thing I know, one of them clubbed me with his rifle butt and the other two pulled me off my horse. By the time I got my wits back, they'd made off with her."

Jake's face had set into hard lines as Stanley spoke, his jaw clenched, but he didn't interrupt his friend, though Hawkins was close enough to feel him quivering with impatience. Not until Stanley seemed to be done, letting his head drop and closing his eyes again with a sigh, did Jake speak.

"Which way did they go?" When there was no response from Stanley, not even an acknowledgment he'd heard the question, Jake gave him another gentle shake. "Stanley? Which way did they go?"

Stanley raised his head. An appalled look slowly settled on his face. "The farm," he whispered hoarsely. "They went toward the farm."

Jake jerked his head sideways, squeezing his eyes shut, while his mouth twisted into a grimace. After a moment, he took a deep breath and Hawkins saw him mouth something silently: Emily's name, Hawkins reckoned. Then he apparently became aware that Stanley was trying to get up.

"Hey, no." Jake pressed Stanley back down with a hand on his shoulder. "Stay

here. You're in no condition... Just keep out of sight, you hear? We'll go."

He began to rise to his feet, but Stanley caught at his hand, stopping him from turning away. "Bonnie—?" he pleaded, apparently either not understanding Jake's intentions or not having much faith in them.

Jake halted, looked back down at him. "She'll be all right. I promise." He gave Stanley's arm a squeeze. "I'll take care of her. I promise. It'll be all right." He mustered a smile that must have looked heartening enough to Stanley, for it provoked an uncertain smile in return, though Hawkins could hear doubt in Jake's voice underlying the reassuring words.

With a final nod of the head, Jake turned away at last, pushing his way through the small group to head back to his horse. He sought out Taylor as he passed. "You go on to Eric's. He still needs help. I'll go to Stanley's place."

"On your own?" Taylor squinted up at Jake as the other man swung himself back into the saddle.

"There's only three of them," Jake gathered up the reins. "And Bonnie and Emily both know how to use a gun."

"I'll go with him." Hawkins had started moving at the same time as Jake, anticipating the other man's plan. He was already back on his horse and wheeling her around by the time he spoke. Jake looked across at him, eyebrows raised in surprise. Then he gave a curt nod of thanks, before he dug his heels into his horse's flanks and the two of them thundered away.

oOo

They left the horses near the top of the hill, Jake indicating with a flap of his hand that they should head for a small stand of trees a few yards below the crest.

"Why are you here?"

Jake's question as they tethered the animals and readied their guns caught Hawkins off guard. For a moment, he thought he'd betrayed himself in some way and that Jake had only agreed to his help so he could get him alone and have it out. Then he saw that Jake wasn't looking at him but up the slope, his face anxious, and he guessed Jake was simply worried about whether he could trust Hawkins to back him up in the coming confrontation.

Hawkins settled his ammunition pouch more comfortably. "Making sure you don't get yourself killed."

Jake's head snapped round. "And what's that to you? Why do *I* matter to you?"

Hawkins snorted. "You don't. But I reckon you matter to Jericho. Folks back there need men like you to keep them safe. This thing's going to get worse before it gets better. If Jericho burns, I can't do the business I came for." Not that he was going to tell Jake what his real business was. He looked back up at Jake and caught his gaze for a moment. "You ready to do this?"

Jake huffed, but nodded wordlessly, letting the other matter go. He jerked his head to indicate they should climb the hill, gesturing for Hawkins to approach from one side of the farm while he crept up from the other.

Cresting the rise, crouched low, Hawkins was surprised to discover the Richmond farmstead comprised not only a cabin of a goodly size but also a barn and other outbuildings, with a few trees nearby providing shade. It looked a fine, well-established place, altogether much grander than the crude shelters and dugouts he'd encountered elsewhere in the Territory. The set up confirmed Hawkins' earlier guess that Stanley and Jake had grown up together, back when the Territory had still been the remnants of the Louisiana Purchase.

He didn't have much time to ponder Jake's past, though: even as he scurried to find cover behind the trees, he heard a woman's strangled cry from the far side of the farmhouse. Glancing across, he saw Jake was pressed against the side wall of the barn. He half expected the other man to fling himself forward at the sound but, to his surprise, Jake slowly backed up instead. Then, once he reached the corner, he turned and ran full tilt along the rear of the barn and vanished out of sight round the other side. From which Hawkins deduced that Jake had had a better view of whatever was happening and was trying to sneak up undetected to get a better shot.

Taking another quick look around and still seeing no sign of anyone else—though he thought he could now hear a woman pleading—Hawkins scurried across the open ground until he reached the side of the house. Moving cautiously, ducking under the window as he passed it, he reached the corner and carefully peered around it.

Emily—Hawkins realized he didn't know her surname—had the rifle she'd been carrying on Main Street raised and was sighting along it. It was pointed at a rough-looking man who had his arm wrapped around the waist of a second woman. Hawkins supposed she was Bonnie Richmond. A second man stood several yards away, with his back to Hawkins. He had a pistol in his hand but it was only half raised in Emily's direction, as if he was uncertain what to do.

Hawkins was just wondering where he'd find the third man Stanley had mentioned when the one holding Bonnie Richmond growled, "Is this what you want?" Hawkins saw him draw a revolver from a holster and lift it to point the

muzzle at Bonnie's head. She whimpered in terror.

"No." The word was wrung from Emily with a gasp. She was shaking her head and the barrel of her rifle wavered as she trembled. Beyond her, Hawkins could see Jake at the corner of the barn, his own rifle raised—though he wasn't aiming at either of the men in full view. Then he fired, the report loud, and from the far side of the house came a cry and the sound of a body falling.

Hawkins had a brief moment to comprehend that the third man must have been sneaking up on Emily from the other side of the house, hidden from view and apparently with less compunction about shooting her than the man with the revolver. Then it was suddenly all action, with no time for thought, as the man holding Bonnie shoved her away with a curse and aimed the revolver in Jake's direction. A bullet smacked into the side of the barn as Jake broke away and headed for the protection of a nearby outcrop of rocks and trees.

The second man seemed to have been shaken out of his stupor, his gun coming up—but oblivious to the danger to his rear: Hawkins dropped him before he'd raised the gun more than halfway.

Hawkins frantically broke his rifle and grabbed another cartridge, desperate to reload and take out the first man, who was continuing to fire at Jake. As he turned, his aim following Jake's dive for the trees, his gun swung back round toward Emily, still standing frozen in the middle of the yard.

Yet not frozen beyond fear: an instant before the barrel of the ruffian's rifle reached her, she pulled the trigger.

It had been no idle boast she'd made back in town: she *could* shoot as well as Jake. The bullet caught the man in the center of his chest, flinging him backward, arms wide, dead before he hit the ground.

Silence rushed in as the echoes of the shots died away, leaving only the sound of the unceasing movement of the grass at the cusp of hearing. Then Jake straightened from his hiding place. He cautiously approached the man he'd shot, taking the gun from his lifeless hand. Hawkins did likewise with the man who lay nearest, keeping a careful eye on Emily: she was standing motionless, except she'd let the rifle barrel drop a little. Though Hawkins knew the gun was empty, he reckoned she was wound tightly enough that he needed to keep an eye that it stayed that way.

As he disarmed the man Emily had killed and placed the weapons he'd taken near the corner of the house, well out of anyone's reach, he saw Jake approach her and take the gun from her unresisting hands. He spoke quietly to her, the words too low for Hawkins to catch, but she didn't seem to hear him. Hawkins guessed she'd never taken a life before.

The other woman, Bonnie, was still crouched near the house, huddled against the stoop. Her gaze was fixed on the man who'd had hold of her and she was whimpering quietly. Slung his own rifle on his back, Hawkins approached her slowly, stepping between her and the man's body, his hands spread to show he wasn't a threat. "It's all right, ma'am. You're safe now."

She looked up at him as his shadow fell across her and shrank back further. Hawkins supposed he probably didn't cut a very reassuring figure: a stranger and a black one at that.

"Ma'am." He hesitated, reluctant to approach more closely and scare her further, not sure what kind of reaction he'd get if he touched her to help her up. She looked barely more than a girl and it was possible she'd never seen a black man this close. Not to mention the fact these people hadn't exactly shown themselves to be as enlightened as his friends in the North: they might hate slavery, but they had no love for the slaves themselves.

"She'd deaf." Jake's words pulled Hawkins' attention away. When he raised his eyebrows, Jake elaborated, "Bonnie's deaf. She probably doesn't understand you." With a final glance at Emily, who still appeared lost in herself, and a squeeze of her arm, Jake crossed to where Hawkins stood and squatted down in front of Bonnie. He made some gestures with his hands, while he spoke slowly and clearly, making sure she could see his lips. "Bonnie. It's Jake Green. You're safe."

She blinked up at him, still tense with fear. Then a frown creased her forehead. "Jake?" she said, the word a little distorted.

He nodded enthusiastically. "Friend." He made another sign before gesturing toward Hawkins. "Safe," he repeated, using his hands as well.

Bonnie still looked unconvinced. She peered past Jake at the dead men, before bringing her attention back to him. She said something, her hands moving. After a moment, Hawkins figured out she'd asked "Where's Stanley?" Her hands went on moving, but Jake shook his head.

"I don't—." He shrugged his shoulders helplessly and Hawkins supposed he didn't know enough signs or maybe couldn't remember them after five years' absence. He grimaced briefly, before his expression cleared and he glanced back over his shoulder to where Emily still stood motionless. The grimace came back again as he looked at her. Getting to his feet, he crossed back to her.

"Emily?"

He had to say her name again before she looked up at him. "They're—." She

turned her head to look at the bodies lying around the yard.

"I know." Jake took her hands, speaking more softly now. "I know. But I need your help. I need you to help me talk with Bonnie. I need you to tell her it's over. That you're safe now."

After a moment, Emily drew in a deep breath and nodded. As she began to move toward Bonnie, Hawkins could only think that the troubles they faced were almost certainly far from over and none of them was safe yet.

oOo

Part Three

"There you go, Mrs Olsen." Heather ladled soup into the bowl the settler's wife held out to her. Together with Emily, Heather was helping Mrs Green take care of the families who'd sought refuge in town after the attacks of the day before. Women and children, along with the old and sickly, were huddled in groups upstairs in the Town Hall meeting room, while more had gathered in the church further along Main Street.

The men menacing Eric Green's farm the previous day had been driven off before dusk. A dozen ruffians who had ridden into the ambush laid by Mr Green had quickly turned tail when they came under fire, while the three or four men left at the farm had blustered for a while once Sheriff Taylor and his companions arrived. Then, seeing their fellow borderers flying back down the road in disarray, they too had broken and scattered. They left behind five dead: three at the Richmond farm and two on the road.

The men of Jericho had fared better: flesh wounds and scrapes for the most part, and few of those, though Stanley Richmond was still a little mazed in his wits from the blows he had received. Yet there was one fatality from the events of the day, at another farm that the borderers had passed: a stray bullet, fired by some over-eager hand as the man of the house argued through a barricaded door with those outside, had pierced a shutter and caught his wife. "Plumb in the heart," Bill Kohler had said that evening, with rather too much glee for Heather's taste, when he'd described the scene that had met them as he and some others had reached the farm. Heather herself had seen the shocked husband, silent and trembling, pacing beside the cart that brought his wife's body to town for laying out. Yet if that were to be the only death in this sad affair, Jericho would have escaped lightly, by God's grace.

That the outcome would be so was still uncertain. The town had seethed all morning with comings and goings as the men mustered into militias. Some were drilling together under the Mr Green's tutelage, while others mounted patrols and scouted the enemy's movements. Rumors flew around town that the ruffians had made for New Bern to recruit reinforcements; it was said two hundred men would be back the following day. More men were throwing up rough earthworks at either end of Main Street from which they could repel another attack. Behind the defenses, women made what preparations they could for the coming siege.

Setting the ladle back into the pan of soup, Heather realized Mrs Olsen was still holding her hand out to Emily, who was standing next to Heather dispensing water and bread. There was an impatient look on Mrs Olsen's face. When Heather turned to look at her friend, she saw she was staring absently into the distance.

"Emily," Heather whispered, giving her a gentle nudge with her shoulder.

"What?" Emily swung her head round to face Heather, her expression startled. Heather dipped her head a fraction in the direction of Mrs Olsen and Emily turned her attention that way. "Oh," she said after a moment. She handed over some bread and a cup of water. Mrs Olsen stood there a moment longer, perhaps waiting for some kind of apology from Emily. When none came—Emily had gone back to staring distractedly at the main entrance—she gave a sniff and waddled off back to her family.

No one else seemed to want feeding just then, so Heather took the opportunity to sink down onto a chair to rest her ankle. She slipped her sore arm back into the sling she still wore. Though neither limb was more than badly sprained and bruised, and Mrs Green had bound them up tightly so they would mend more quickly, Heather still found her injuries an encumbrance and herself easily tired. She suspected, though, that she was less wounded than her friend: Emily had been quiet and distant ever since she'd arrived back in town the previous afternoon, with a still terrified Miss Richmond, a bleeding and confused Mr Richmond, and a rather hair-raising report from Mr Jake Green as to what had transpired. Heather wasn't sure if she should encourage Emily to speak of what had happened or let her friend recover her spirits by herself.

She decided that she should at least try to make Emily talk a little. Whether the topic of conversation was to be recent events she would leave to Emily to determine, although her opening gambit would provide ample opportunity for her to speak of it if she wished. It would also, Heather acknowledged to herself, with a small amount of guilt, perhaps allow her to satisfy her own curiosity about certain topics. Or, if she were to be truly honest, about a certain person.

She cleared her throat. "I daresay you were very glad when Mr Green arrived to help you yesterday," she ventured.

"Hmm." Emily turned and looked down at her. "Yes. I suppose I was."

"I know I was." Heather let her gaze drop to her hands, twisting together in her lap. She didn't think she'd ever forget the sense of relief when he—*Jake*, she thought shyly, sounding his name out in her own mind and liking the sound of it—had reached past her and cut Belle's harness. Nor the warm rush of admiration that had overcome her as she had watched him calm poor Belle, impressing her with his gentleness: a gentleman in deed as well as by the cut of his clothes. And after that, when he had tended to her own injuries... She slid her hand over her wrist, remembering his touch and the confusion of her own feelings. She had been rather glad when he had left her in the Greens' kitchen after carrying her inside—and yet a little disappointed that she hadn't seen him close enough to speak to again since then.

"Oh yes. That's Jake. Always the hero." The sharp edge to Emily's words made

Heather look up in surprise. The other woman was leaning back against the table, her arms crossed and a wry expression on her face.

"You know him well?"

"Jake?" Emily snorted a laugh. "Since we were children. We used to go fishing in Bass Lake and hunting jackrabbits and turkeys out in the East Woods." Her expression turned rueful and her voice soft as she added quietly, "Had our first kiss under the walnut tree out at the Richmonds' when we were thirteen."

"Oh." Heather felt a wave of embarrassment: she hadn't realized that Emily and Jake might have been... close. Emily had never mentioned any particular ties to the Greens and she'd been affianced to Mr Hammond from the bank almost as long as Heather had been in Jericho. Heather swallowed down the feeling of disappointment that rose inside her. Perhaps she was just reading too much into what Emily had said. "You never talked about him before," she probed gently.

"Yes, well," Emily gave herself a little shake and said more briskly, "it was a long time ago and Jake never really made me any promises. Not official ones."

So they *had* been close. Very close. Enough for unofficial promises. Heather blushed. "I'm sorry. It's inappropriate of me to be asking you questions about him, isn't it?"

Emily gave her a surprised look, before a slightly amused smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "Do you like Jake?"

Heather grew hotter and knew she must have gone a deeper red. "A little," she admitted.

Emily gave her a thoughtful look. "Jake's a good man. But be careful. He's not the kind for settling down and... trouble always finds him."

Before either of them could say more, a blast of cold air as the outer doors opened, accompanied by the babble of childish voices and a mother's despairing imprecations, announced the arrival of Mrs Ragbey and her brood: more refugees from the coming storm in need of their assistance. For a while, at least, there would be no more time for talk.

oOo

Heather was still turning over Emily's warning as, an hour later, she did her best to entertain some of the younger children and give their harried mothers some respite. She had noticed, when she had gone upstairs, that tempers were fraying between one family and the next as they jostled for space, so she had gathered together the younger children and brought them down to the hall. Now they sat in

a circle around her, listening to her read from *Peter Parley's Short Stories for Long Nights*—punctuated by the occasional reprimand that had to be directed at one or two of the boys for scuffling.

As she reached the end of the story of *The Little Wanderers*, she noticed there was be some commotion developing in the Sheriff's office opposite where she sat. The door stood open and she could see Mr Green and Mr Anderson wore angry expressions as they confronted another man. His face was unfamiliar to her, but he appeared well-known to the other two, to judge by the lack of deference with which the three of them were addressing each other.

"Miss Lisinski?"

Heather looked down at the girl who'd spoken, who was looking back at her with a puzzled frown on her face. "Yes, Julie?"

"Are you going to read us another story?"

"I—." Heather glanced up and saw that Mr Anderson had taken a step closer to the stranger, clearly trying to use his height to intimidate him. Though she hadn't been able to hear clearly what they were saying, it seemed as if the trouble might be about to become much worse. Hastily closing the book she held, she said, "I think that's enough for now. Maybe later. Why don't we go outside and play leapfrog or hopscotch?"

There was a clattering and babbling of voices as the children scrambled to their feet and made for the door. Heather, reaching for the cane Mrs Green had kindly found her, followed more slowly: both mindful of her ankle and so she could unashamedly eavesdrop on the developing argument.

The stranger had taken a step back and spread his arms. "Look, I just came to bail my man out. I got the same troubles as all of you and I need all my men."

"Maybe you should've thought of that before you sent Cafferty a-thieving for you," Mr Anderson sneered.

From where Heather now stood near the base of the stairs leading to the upper floor, she could see the stranger's face had darkened, but his response was peaceable enough. "What Mitchell was or wasn't up to ain't been settled yet, but whatever it was, I had no knowledge of it."

"I'm not sure I believe that, Prowse." Mr Green, standing closest to the door to the Sheriff's office, had his back to Heather and she couldn't see his face. But it was clear from his words and his tone that he was no less distrustful than Mr Anderson, if softer spoken. "Mitchell Cafferty doesn't get out of bed without your say so. And I'm not sure your word is good enough in this town to stand bail for

him.”

“Then maybe I shouldn’t be *asking* for bail.” Prowse twitched back his coat and rested his hand on the gun holstered on his hip.

Footsteps drew Heather’s attention and she saw Jake appear from the other side of the stairs, apparently having come from the direction of the offices to the rear of the building.

“Hey Pa.” Jake nodded at his father as Mr Green turned toward him. “What’s—.” His footsteps faltered and his face turned pale as he caught sight of Prowse. The two men looked at each other for a long moment and then Jake said carefully, “Hello, Jonah.”

Prowse inclined his head. “Jake.” He sounded amused.

Jake turned his head briefly to glance at his father before resuming his scrutiny of Prowse. “What’s going on?”

“Mr Prowse here is looking to bail out Mitchell Cafferty. He was caught yesterday evening trying to steal some cattle from the Fredericksons.” Mr Green looked from Jake to Prowse and back again as he spoke, his expression betraying that he didn’t think Jake’s arrival was going to do much to improve the situation.

“Allegedly trying to steal,” Prowse interjected, his gaze still locked with Jake’s. Heather saw that he had kept his hand on his gun, his fingers sliding down to grip the handle, ready to draw.

Mr Green snorted. “We were just saying we didn’t think bail would be possible. We don’t feel Mr Prowse could offer a bond of sufficient value to us to make it worth the risk of losing Cafferty altogether.”

Jake went on looking at Prowse in silence, his expression calculating. Then his mouth twisted into a wry smile. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” he said quietly, with another quick glance at his father. Turning back to Prowse, he gave him a slight nod. “We need caps, powder and cartridge paper. We can cast shot ourselves, but we’ll take that too, if you can provide.”

Prowse had narrowed his eyes slightly, clearly trying to decide how to respond. “I’m not sure I can help with that, Jake.”

Jake huffed a laugh. “Come on, Jonah. I’ve seen the kind of stock you keep. You can give the town what we need and to spare and still have plenty to defend your own place.”

Prowse looked like he might deny it again, but then he gave a shrug and took his

hand away from his gun.

Mr Green shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other. "Jake, I'm not sure—."

Jake turned to look at him again. "Pa, we need this. I've got men out trying to scrounge up what they can, but it's hard going. There's not much to be had and people don't want to give it up. Jonah's got what we need and we've got what he wants."

Mr Green still looked uncertain, but after a moment he gave a nod.

"All right." Jake turned back to Jonah. "You bring the ammunition—the caps, the powder, the paper—to the edge of town this afternoon. We'll bring you Mitch. And then you and your men stay away from town."

"Wait, you're going to let them—." Mr Anderson's face had gone red as he followed the exchange.

"We need to do this, Gray." Mr Green shrugged as he cut his objection short. "We'll deal with the consequences later. Right now, it sounds like a good trade for a worthless lump like Cafferty." He turned back to Prowse. "Is it a deal?"

Prowse held out his hand for Mr Green to shake. "It's a deal." Mr Green hesitated for a moment, apparently still not entirely convinced, before he accepted it.

The handshake done, Prowse made to move, but Jake stopped him with a gesture. "I'll walk you to your horse. Folks in this town have long memories." Heather thought he sounded a little bitter about it. "I'd hate for Mitch to be stuck in jail because you weren't around to see this through."

Prowse sniffed derisively but let Jake fall into step beside him as he made for the door.

The brief burst of childish voices as the door opened for a few seconds reminded Heather that she was supposed to be supervising the children as they played. She quickly hobbled the rest of the way to the door, following the two men outside. A few steps sideways and a quick glance over the rail that edged the stoop at the front of the building showed her some of the older children were playing hopscotch, intent looks on their faces as they tossed the pebble they were using as a marker. The rest were engaged in a noisy game of tag around the lone tree that grew in the open space between Town Hall and the livery stables.

Turning her attention back to Jake and Prowse, Heather saw the older man had already mounted his horse and was making his way out of town. Jake stood by the hitching post in front of the livery, arms crossed, watching him leave. Other

people were watching Prowse, too, pausing in going about their business as he passed them, their faces unfriendly. Heather wondered what he'd done to turn the town against him, though she couldn't remember hearing his name before. Wondered, too, what the history was between Jake and a man like Prowse. She guessed Emily was right about trouble always finding Jake and needing to be careful. Yet, reluctantly withdrawing her gaze from Jake and directing it back toward the children she was supposed to be minding, she realized she didn't feel like being careful at all.

oOo

With the children finally tired out and returned to their mothers, Heather spent the following three hours over at the hotel with Emily and several other women, helping turn worn sheets into bandages and prepare other medical supplies. The talk flowed freely around Heather, a mixture of wild rumors the women had heard from their menfolk—Mrs Leigh, in particular, seemed to have an endless store of alarming snippets she claimed she'd been told here and there—and old gossip. Perhaps out of deference to Emily's presence, or to Mrs Green, who kept popping in and out of the parlor as she supervised a dozen other tasks, almost none of the talk pertained to the chief subject of Heather's curiosity, Mr Jake Green, though she kept her ears open for his name.

At last, the medical supplies were as ready as could be hoped and the women gathered up their bonnets and departed. Heather remained seated until they were gone, preferring not to be caught in the crowd while her ankle made her slow. When, cane in hand, she did step out into the now empty hall, she found herself presented with a sight that made her heart flutter. Framed by the open door of the dining room opposite, lit by the late afternoon sun slanting through the windows, Jake was seated at one end of the table bent on some task.

Making cartridges, Heather noted absently, her gaze falling briefly to the paraphernalia spread in front of him, before she returned her attention to his face. A handsome man, she decided, though not so handsome or in love with his own looks, like some young men she'd known back East, that he made her feel plain and dowdy in comparison.

She rested her hand against the door jamb, compelled to go on watching him and not caring that he might look up and see her there—or that anyone passing might observe her spying on him. His hands were moving quickly and neatly as they selected from among the supplies laid out before him and assembled each cartridge. She remembered with a shiver how his fingers had moved over her wrist and ankle with the same competence and delicacy when she'd been hurt, and the way he'd soothed Belle, and how he'd briskly righted the cart and mended the harness. There was a strange mixture of action and gentleness in him that drew her to him, like a moth to a flame. As likely, perhaps, drew her to the same kind of fate, if Emily's warning was to be believed: singed wings would

be a light escape. And yet—.

Taking her courage in her hands, she crossed the hall and, pausing in the other doorway, cleared her throat. "Do you need any help, Mr Green?"

He looked up, a startled expression on his face, apparently having been concentrating too much to catch the quiet tapping of her cane as she approached. "Miss Lisinski." His surprised look quickly changed to a warm smile. "Please excuse me." He gestured with the half-completed cartridge in his hand at the materials spread before him to explain his lack of manners in not getting to his feet. "Do you know how to make cartridges?"

"Mm-hmm." Heather blushed slightly under his scrutiny and added hastily, "My father taught me when I was a girl."

Jake's smile widened and he gestured to her to approach. "Then, please. I'd value your assistance."

She hobbled forward, feeling as if the room had grown a little hotter. By the time she reached him, he'd hurriedly finished the cartridge he was working on and stood up so he could pull out the chair for her.

"How does your ankle today?" he asked, as he slid the chair into place underneath her.

"A little better, thank you." She propped her cane next to her, thinking that it must be the sunlight streaming in that made the room feel so close.

"I'm glad to hear it." Jake gave her another smile as he sat back down.

Heather hastily turned her attention to the contents of the table and the rows of already completed cartridges sitting in a loading block. She frowned. "What kind of guns are these for?"

"We've got quite a few Sharps and a fair number of muskets—rifles, you know—but there are a few smooth bores as well, I believe." Jake had already started on the next cartridge.

"Hmm." Heather reached for a pellet and some of the cartridge paper, along with a dowel around which she could wrap and fix the paper. "Those will do well enough for the muskets but there's a trick for the breech-loaders...." She fell silent as she concentrated on twisting and crimping the papers, filling them with a measure of powder and closing the end. She held up the completed cartridge for Jake to see, eyebrows raised, seeking his approval.

She caught the strangest expression on his face as he looked at her and, for an

instant, thought she'd miscalculated and offended him. Goodness knows, there were plenty of men who wouldn't take kindly to being lectured about ammunition by a woman. Then one corner of his mouth lifted up in a wry grin. "You take over." He held out the canister of powder to her. "You're clearly the expert here."

Feeling unaccountably pleased, she accepted the powder with an embarrassed shrug, her gaze sliding away from his. "My father was a gunsmith," she explained.

They sat there in silence for a moment, Heather not daring to look at Jake but feeling as if he was watching her. Then she gave herself a little shake and reached for another bullet.

"Look." Jake cleared his throat. "I've got a dozen other things to do. Would you mind very much if I left you on your own to get on with this for a while?"

"No, of course not." Heather glanced up from the part-completed cartridge with a half-smile, not quite meeting his gaze. "I can manage." She didn't mind very much; of course she didn't. But she did, she realized, mind a little bit: she'd been rather looking forward to talking more with him while they worked.

"Good." Jake pushed back his chair and stood. Heather felt him hesitate; assuming he had more to say to her, she looked up at him. He met her gaze and she saw the admiration in his expression, before he gave her a small, formal bow. "Thank you, Miss Lisinski." A flush colored his cheeks as he straightened and again caught her eye. Then, without another word, he turned and hurried from the room.

Heather twisted in her chair to look after him, wondering if his heart was beating as fast as her own now was.

He'd only gone a few steps into the hall, and she could still see him, when she heard the hotel front door open and his father's voice booming around the hall. "Jake, there you are."

"Pa." Jake stopped, his expression—what Heather could see of it—turning wary and his back and shoulders stiffening.

"Sheriff Taylor told me you made the trade with Prowse." Although Heather couldn't see Mr Green, he sounded a little grudging, like he hadn't believed Prowse would return or like he didn't approve of the fact he had.

Jake nodded, still looking as if he was braced for a beating. "Yes, he came through. Should have enough ammunition now to handle whatever's coming our way the next few days."

Heather heard Mr Green snort. There was a moment's silence before he spoke again, sounding only slightly mollified. "Guess we just have to see if he honors the rest of the deal."

"You mean staying out of town?" Jake gave a bitter laugh. "If he's not going to do that, odds are he wouldn't have done it without the deal, either."

"True enough." This time, there was a hint of amusement in Mr Green's voice.

Another silence developed. Heather saw Jake lift his hand to scrub it through his hair while he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. She guessed his father was giving him one of those slow, penetrating looks with which, at one time or another, she'd seen him evaluate each of the newcomers who'd made up the party with which she'd traveled from the East—including herself.

"You know," Mr Green cleared his throat, "a lot of folks are saying how lucky Jericho is to have *you* back in town."

Heather thought a lot of folks were right about that. She remembered, though, what Jake had said two days earlier, as if it didn't matter and yet as if it mattered a great deal: that his father considered him the town's black sheep. And Mr Green sounded considerably less convinced than Heather was that his son's return was a good thing.

Something about the way Mr Green spoke also told her that, just as she couldn't see him, he couldn't see her and that he had no idea she was eavesdropping on the conversation. Which wasn't at all right and proper, and she really should turn away and stop listening, except the look on Jake's face—it was evident he could hear his father's doubt as well—made her heart wrench.

"And what are you telling them?" Jake asked, his voice a little hoarse. Heather rather thought, from the way he spoke, as if the words were forced out, that he'd forgotten she was there as well.

Mr Green gave a laugh, but not an unkind one. "Well, I've tried to correct them, but nobody listens to me." He sounded like he was as amused at his own shortcomings as at Jake's, his voice surprisingly warm. Heather suddenly understood that, for all they'd had their ups and downs, and likely exchanged harsh words in former times, there was a bond of love there. That Mr Green was glad to see Jake, despite everything.

Perhaps Jake understood it too. Now it was his turn to be silent, his expression uncertain. At last: "Pa, when I was away—"

"Don't."

Heather saw Jake almost physically recoil from the abruptness of the word.
“What?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Mr Green spoke more gently. “I don’t care where you’ve been or what you’ve done. Maybe when all this trouble is over, you’ll tell me, but it doesn’t matter. Whatever you did and wherever you’ve been, it’s changed you. An irresponsible little hellion may have left town, but I reckon a pretty decent fellow came back.”

Heather saw Jake draw in a deep breath and then let it out, his shoulders dropping as he relaxed. He gave a curt nod of the head. “Thank you. That... means a lot. And,” he gave a wry laugh, “for all it means a damn, I don’t disagree with what you thought of me back then. I just hope you’re not wrong about me now.” He stood there for a moment longer, the two men apparently looking at each other, before he gave himself a little shake and began to move again. “Well, I need to check on those earthworks they’re supposed to be putting up. Make sure they’re not building them the wrong way round.”

Heather heard Johnston chuckle. “And I need to find your mother. There’s some ruckus going on upstairs at Town Hall. Some argument over—” His words were cut off by the door closing behind them as they stepped outside.

With a smile, Heather turned back to the task spread before, feeling very pleased for Jake’s sake that his father had recognized the good in him at last.

oOo

Dusk was falling and Heather’s fingers and back were aching by the time Sheriff Taylor came to collect the ammunition she’d prepared. He did a bit of a double-take when he saw her: Jake must not have told him who he’d set to the task. But he gave her a kindly enough smile that grew only broader as he examined her handiwork.

“Very nice work, ma’am.” He dipped his head appreciatively, before he began to load the cartridges into the ammunition cases he’d brought with him.

Heather packed away the remainder of the materials and cleaned her hands as he completed the task. Then she accompanied him as he carried the boxes across to Town Hall. They stood chatting on the stoop while he kept an eye on the men coming up to replenish their supplies, ensuring they didn’t take more than their allotted share. He was curious about her father’s gunsmithing business and what she made of the Sharps and whether she thought the new pellet feed superior to Maynard tape.

After a while, Mr Anderson required his attention on some matter or other and the two of them moved to the other end of the stoop for their conference. Peering

over the opened lids of the ammunition cases, Heather saw that more than three parts of the cartridges were already gone, though thankfully the steady flow of men requiring them had diminished. Shifting her cane from one hand to the other, she surreptitiously flexed her fingers; she suspected the following day would find her working through the rest of the materials.

Mr Olsen, with whom she'd traveled the long miles from Massachusetts the year before, stopped to talk with her for a moment as he collected his ration. Then no one came for a while. It had grown dark and the storm lanterns that had been lit and hung at either end of the stoop cast an uncertain glow over the scene. Heather took another glance at Sheriff Taylor, thinking she was more than ready for her dinner and that there might not even be cold pickings left at Mrs Leigh's if she tarried much longer, but he and Mr Anderson were still deep in talk.

Another man approached the ammunition cases: one of the settlers come from Iowa, she thought, though she couldn't recollect his name just then. She noted absently that he had a Sharps slung over his shoulder which looked fresh out of the crate and barely fired and—. "Excuse me, sir, but you want the other case."

"What?" He glared up at her, his hand still curled around a fistful of musket cartridges.

"You have a Sharps." She dipped her head in the direction of the rifle. "Those are for muskets. You want—."

"Listen, girl, I know what I want." He shoved the handful of cartridges into his ammunition pouch and reached back into the box for more.

"Sir, please." Heather cast a despairing glance at Sheriff Taylor, but he still seemed engrossed in his conversation with Mr Anderson. "You should put those back and take the others. They're the right—."

"Look, girl." The man straightened, holding up a single cartridge and waving it at her. "I was shooting goddamn Indians since afore you were born and no goddamn chit from New England's gonna tell me how to use my own goddamn gun." As he spoke, he swung the Sharps from his shoulder and shoved the cartridge into the breach.

"Sir—," Heather tried a final time, but the man simply snapped the block closed and lifted the rifle to his shoulder, aiming at the tree the children had been playing around earlier. Giving up the fight, she let her cane fall and, hastily dropping to her knees, flung shut the lids on the ammunition boxes.

She thought she heard someone call out "No!" from further down the street in the instant before a loud, messy bang rang out above her head. Then the sharp smell of sheared metal, mixed with the tang of black powder, was everywhere. The

man let out another curse, this time filled with pain.

“What the heck is wrong with you?”

To Heather’s surprise, it was Jake who spoke. She realized it must have been his voice calling out a moment earlier. Straightening and settling back on her heels, she tipped her head back and saw he had his hand on the barrel of the gun, forcing it down toward the ground. The stock looked a mess and the owner’s face was smudged with black, while a scatter of blood on his cheek marked where some fragments had caught him.

“She *told* you it was the wrong ammunition.” Jake stepped around the man so he could give him the full benefit of his furious glare as he added, “Are you deaf as well as stupid?”

The man opened his mouth as if to protest, but Jake shoved him away with a disgusted sound, pushing him toward Sheriff Taylor and Mr Anderson, who had hurried along the stoop toward them. “Get someone to clean him up,” he ordered. “And see if you can save the rifle.” Turning away, he dropped to his knees in front of Heather. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, her already racing heart beating still faster and her breath catching as Jake’s concerned gaze met and held hers. “Just a little shaken,” she managed.

He went on looking at her and she blushed under his scrutiny, but went on looking back, finding she liked him looking at her, liked it very much....

“I’m real sorry, Miss Lisinski.” Sheriff Taylor’s voice above them made her jump. Jake also started, letting out an embarrassed cough as the two of them dragged their gazes away and turned to peer up at the solid figure looming over them. Only for Heather to catch Jake’s eye again momentarily as they each sneaked another brief look at the other. They shared an embarrassed smile, before Heather turned her attention back to the sheriff, who was still apologizing. “I should never have left you alone.”

“It’s not your fault, Sheriff.” Heather hastily offered up the reassurance, sensing Jake bristling where he knelt on the other side of the ammunition cases and fearing he might turn his anger on the hapless sheriff. “Luckily, there doesn’t seem to have been much real harm done.”

“No thanks to that idiot,” Jake murmured, so low she wasn’t sure he’d meant to be overheard. He lifted the lids on the cases and peered doubtfully inside them. “This is all that’s left?”

The question was directed at the sheriff, but Heather answered. “There’s as much again still to be made up.”

"Hmm." Jake sounded a little worried as he lowered the lids gently.

"Miss Lisinski did ever so good." Sheriff Taylor spoke quickly, apparently deciding it was his turn to defend Heather against Jake. "We handed out a great deal already."

Jake nodded as he locked the cases. "I'm sure that's so." He lifted his gaze to hers again and gave her a slow, crooked smile that made her stomach flutter. "Still, best to keep what's left as reserve, I think."

Heather was dimly aware of Sheriff Taylor saying, "Sure thing, Jake" as, still keeping his gaze fixed on her face, Jake got to his feet and held out his hands to her. She accepted them, conscious of his quiet strength as he helped her back to her feet.

Still holding her hands, he took a step sideways, drawing her with him so that the sheriff had space to collect the ammunition cases and carry them inside. And even when Sheriff Taylor had disappeared from view, still Jake held her hands, peering down at her with renewed concern. "You really are all right?"

She nodded, not wanting him to let go but wanting to alleviate his concern. "I'm fine. Just a little startled. Although," she gave an embarrassed chuckle, "I suspect I may be somewhat faint for the want of food, as they say."

"You haven't eaten?" He looked mildly shocked at the notion.

She shook her head. "And I fear Mrs Leigh will not wish to serve me supper so late."

He smiled at her, giving her hands a squeeze. "Well, that can be remedied. I know Ma won't mind another at table." Letting go of her hands, he offered her his arm in a most gentleman-like fashion.

She shrank back. "Oh, I wouldn't want to be any trouble." Mrs Green surely had enough to do without feeding unexpected guests.

"No trouble at all." Jake dipped his head encouragingly. "I promise. Ma will be delighted. And I'll see you safe home afterward."

She hesitated a moment longer, but hunger and the pleasure of spending an hour in Jake's company won out over her desire not to be a bother to Mrs Green—or to seem too "forward" to Jake. With a smile, she accepted his arm and let him lead her down the street.

Part Four

Someone pounding on the door woke Jake from the uneasy doze in which he'd passed the night and he started up from the settle in his parents' kitchen, his hand automatically tightening around the rifle propped next to him. The first light of dawn was making its way through the cracks between the shutters, but the room was still mostly lit by the glow from the fire. From the other end of the settle, Eric blinked owlshly at him, apparently even less sure than Jake where he was. On the far side of the fireplace, their father pushed himself up from the chair where he'd whiled away the hours of darkness. Like his sons, he was dressed and armed, ready to respond as soon as news of the next attack came.

Whoever was outside beat on the door again. By the time Jake had also gotten up and lit the lamp, his father had opened up and a half dozen men had swarmed into the room. Fred Drummond was at their head, gabbling breathlessly.

"—more than a hundred men. A hundred. From New Bern and roundabouts. Them ruffians that attacked before, they've been and riled 'em up and now they're marching on us. They've got a cannon and rifles and they're mad as hell and—."

"Now, Fred," his father pushed the farmer into the high-backed chair he'd just vacated. "Slow down. Which way did you say they were coming?"

As Jake listened to his father carefully and patiently drawing the facts from Drummond, he noted that Hawkins was among the group that had accompanied Drummond inside. Jake had seen him around the day before, helping out here and there, but their paths hadn't crossed close enough to speak to. True, the man had proved himself a good enough ally at Stanley's farm— but Jake's suspicions that he was not what he seemed hadn't been entirely laid to rest. Now, watching, Jake saw Hawkins was keeping to one side and was paying as much attention to the group as a whole as he was to Drummond.

Perhaps sensing he was being observed himself, Hawkins' turned his gaze in Jake's direction. Their eyes met across the crowd and Hawkins' face grew tense for a second, before he gave Jake a brief nod of acknowledgment. His gaze passed on, back to Drummond, as if he was unconcerned by Jake's scrutiny, but Jake went on watching him, only half following what Drummond was saying. He supposed Hawkins could be trusted if his interests aligned with those of Jericho. The question that still lingered in Jake's mind was where Hawkins' real interests lay.

"Jake?" His mother's whisper behind him made him turn. She'd appeared at the bottom of the stairs, her cap a little awry, showing she'd been woken by the noise from below.

"There's men coming from New Bern," Jake told her quietly, knowing there was

no need to protect her from the news. Knowing he'd get no thanks if he did.

She nodded and, as he'd expected, murmured calmly, "I'll set the coffee brewing," and slipped past him and toward the well to draw water.

By the time she returned, to busy herself around the range, the men had regrouped around the kitchen table, where his father was unrolling a crudely drawn map.

"We'll make our stand here." His father tapped a spot between two areas of rough hatching. "Where we ambushed them before. Sheriff," he nodded at Jimmy, who'd arrived just as they were unrolling the map, "you get the First and Second Militia roused and ready to leave. Simmonds, you and the Third Militia are to hold the town. Put a third of your men on each of those barricades either end of Main Street and keep the other third by Town Hall to reinforce where necessary. Mr Anderson—."

"They'll be expecting an ambush." Hawkins' quiet words made the room still. "After what happened the other day. You need to send men to the end of the hills either side, make sure they can't outflank you."

Jake saw his father give Hawkins a hard stare. "That was my intention. Also to send a scout or two up the hill. Signal what they can see to the men below."

Hawkins dipped his head and wordlessly took a half-pace backward, apparently acknowledging he'd overstepped the mark. Jake noted, however, that he continued to follow the conversation closely and didn't appear much chastened. Nor had the way he'd spoken up in the first place, as if used to offering his opinion on military matters and having it heard, done anything to lessen Jake's unease about who Hawkins was and what he he was doing in Jericho.

"Mr Anderson?" His father turned back to the leader of the New Englanders. "Mr Drummond says they have a cannon. I'd like your help seeing if we can make something of an old hand mortar I have hereabouts...."

oOo

By the time Jake had been out to the stables to saddle the horses, returned to the house to wolf down some breakfast and suck down a cup of his mother's coffee, and made it out onto Main Street, the place was buzzing. Jimmy was bellowing orders, trying to create some kind of order out of the melée, while men called to each other and women stood silently on either side of the street, crying children clinging to their skirts. Outside the bank, Emily was bidding a tearful goodbye to a tall, square-set man with a rather stolid face whom Jake supposed must be her fiancé returned from Lawrence.

As Jake led the horses along the front of the store, he saw his father was saying farewell to his mother on the stoop, drawing her close and dropping a kiss on her forehead. She reached up and grasped his shoulder for a moment, as if to keep him close. It suddenly occurred to Jake how many times his mother must have watched his father ride away like this when he was in the Army, not knowing if he would return, and what strength there was in her to bear it silently and without complaint. That he would be lucky if he could one day find himself a wife who was her equal.

"Mr Green? Jake?"

The sound of his name made Jake turn from handing the reins of his father's and brother's horses to Eric, who had been waiting at the bottom of the steps. He saw Miss Lisinski weaving her way through the crowd toward him. She was a little breathless by the time she reached him.

"Miss Lisinski." He smiled down at her, his somber mood lifting at the sight of her, though he was troubled to see she looked scarcely more rested than when they'd parted last night, after he'd walked her back to lodgings at Mrs Leigh's. She'd been a lively enough companion over dinner, though and he'd been rather pleased when, on his return, his mother had remarked that she was glad to have had the chance to know Miss Lisinski better and she seemed a very sweet girl. Apparently his parents liked her as much as he did. Which was, he'd acknowledged to himself as he'd settled down for the night, very much indeed.

She returned his smile, a blush coloring her cheeks. "So I gave the rest to the Sheriff, but I didn't know if you'd taken any for yourself last night and I couldn't catch sleep, so I thought it was better to be busy and I, umm, I thought...."

As her rapid babble trailed off, he realized she was holding out a small package wrapped in white cloth. He took it, finding it heavier than expected, though the reason became clear when he unwrapped one end peered inside at the contents: an array of tightly packed cartridges, each one neatly glued and twisted.

He carefully folded the linen closed again, noticing as he did so that the edge was trimmed with a little fine lace: she'd wrapped her gift in one of her handkerchiefs.

"Thank you." His voice sounded hoarse in his own ears. She must have surely known he would not ride out any less well-provisioned than the other men, but the hour or more of labor to be sure he would not lack for the means to defend himself, the gift brought to him directly—. He looked up and met her anxious expression. "Thank you," he repeatedly softly.

She blushed more deeply. Impulsively he caught her hand and bent over it. He felt her trembling as he pressed his lips to her glove for a moment, wordlessly

impressing his gratitude on her. Yet as he let her hand fall, she slipped her fingers from his grasp and cupped his cheek, meeting his gaze as he raised his head.

“Come back in one piece?” she whispered, her voice catching.

He let out a half-laugh. “I will,” he promised, his own voice raw, reveling in her caress, wanting to cover her hand with his and hold it there.

“Jake! Time to go!”

His father’s call drew him back to the hubbub and bustle around him. He turned his head to see his father and brother were already mounted. His father jerked his head impatiently, though an amused smile was playing around his lips.

By the time he turned back to Miss Lisinski, she’d dropped her hand and taken a pace back. Unsure what to say to her, he nodded and swung away to mount his horse. Yet he was unable to resist a glance backward as they clattered off. He saw she was still standing there, her hands clasped in front of her, watching them depart: the same posture and the same anxious expression on her face as his mother standing on the stoop nearby. Facing forward again, Jake could only marvel at how different his feelings were from three days before, when he’d ridden from Jericho thinking he had nothing worth coming back for.

oOo

An hour later, Jake was lying flat on the top of the hill near Stanley’s farm—the highest point in the area—and squinting into the distance, looking for any signs of the army that was supposed to be advancing from New Bern.

Hawkins was stretched out next to him. When his father had given Jake the commission to scout the enemy and send back news, Jake had jerked his head in Hawkins’ direction. “You’re with me.” Hawkins had raised his eyebrows in surprise, but had fallen in next to Jake without a word. They’d remained silent the whole time it had taken them to ride to the Richmond place, tether their horses and make their way along the ridge beneath the crest, keeping out of sight of any enemy below. Jake wondered if Hawkins knew why he’d brought him along—and what he’d do when he found out. Which was why Jake was determined to send back his first report before confronting him.

There was no sign of the enemy in any direction. Jake glanced across at Hawkins. “You see anything?” When the other man shook his head, Jake shrugged. “We should signal back anyway.”

He wriggled back on his stomach until he was out of sight of anyone on the New

Bern side of the ridge and pulled the signal flag from the case slung over his back. "You still know how to use one of these?" his father had asked gruffly as he'd handed over the case. When Jake had nodded—Grandpa had made sure of that, dinned it into him—his father had given a curt nod. "Good. Eric'll be with the flanking party to watch for your signal and relay it on."

Jake squinted down at where he could see a group of Jericho men were now hunkered down at the end of the low ridge on the far side of the valley. He waved the flag to show he was ready. After a minute, he saw a familiar figure, made small by distance, detach itself a little from the group and begin waving a flag that was the companion to his own: *I am ready*.

Jake signaled a Q for *Quiet*, casting a glance at his companion as he did so. Hawkins had his hand up to shade his eyes as he peered down toward Eric, apparently intent on seeing what reply he made. Still looking at Hawkins, Jake signaled *End of Message*, even as he drew the revolver at his hip with his spare hand and pointed it at Hawkins.

As Jake had expected, Hawkins hadn't been quite so oblivious to Jake as he'd made out. His head snapped round, his gaze focusing on the gun now leveled at his head. One of his hands shifted a little in the direction of his own revolver, before he realized he'd likely be dead before he touched it. Instead, he held up both hands and turned to face Jake. "What do you want, Jake?"

For a second, Jake was taken aback by the coolness with which Hawkins asked the question. Then he gathered his own wits. "Who are you?"

Hawkins huffed a laugh. "Robert Hawkins. But you know that."

"That your real name?" Holding Hawkins' gaze, Jake let his aim drop a little, down from Hawkins' head to his chest, hoping to rattle the other man. No such luck. Hawkins merely nodded, meeting Jake's gaze with no sign of fear. Jake swallowed, wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself into here, but needing to know. "Why are you in Jericho?"

"To trade." Hawkins snorted. "Come on, Jake. I've told you this already."

He began to turn away, but Jake cocked the gun, the sound loud in the near silence of the hilltop. "Don't move."

Hawkins froze for an instant and then swung back to face Jake again. "Or what? You're going to shoot me?"

Jake ignored the question. "You an agent for those borderers stirring up trouble in New Bern?"

Hawkins laughed again, shaking his head. "Those pro-slavery ruffians? You think I'm working for them? Just look at me." He wagged his hands, emphasizing their color.

Jake pressed his lips together for a moment. Every one of his senses was telling him Hawkins was too calm, too unruffled. He *had* to be lying. "There's plenty of slaves in Missouri turn down their chance to be free, from what I've heard. And you fetch up in Jericho out of nowhere the day before we're attacked...."

Hawkins' gaze had narrowed and he'd gone very still. "Could say much the same thing about you, Jake."

Now it was Jake's turn to snort. "I just came home to see my family. What's your excuse?"

Hawkins was silent, his gaze still fixed on Jake, calculating. The seconds dragged on, and then Hawkins' face relaxed slightly and he opened his mouth. *Here it comes*, Jake thought.

Before Hawkins could speak, a horse squealed somewhere down in the valley. Jake instinctively looked sideways, toward the sound—and found himself a moment later flat on his back, his gun wrestled out of his hand and pointing at him. He looked up past the barrel to Hawkins' face, cold and hard and calculating, and cursed silently. He should be grateful, he supposed, that at least the gun hadn't gone off in the struggle.

Hawkins went on looking at him as he knelt over him, keeping him pinned. Then, to Jake's surprise, he shifted the gun a little until it was pointing to the ground to one side of Jake's head and carefully lowered the hammer. Jake lay still, aware that any movement on his part could easily get both their heads blown off. Given it seemed Hawkins didn't want him dead, it would be something of a waste if that happened now.

With the gun made safe, Hawkins levered himself to his feet and slowly backed away, the gun again trained on Jake as he did so.

Jake sat up, breathing heavily and feeling his shirt clinging to his back with sweat. Hawkins took another step back, jerking the gun to indicate Jake should also get up. Watching him carefully, still unsure what he wanted, Jake stood, his hands spread to show he wasn't a threat.

There was another long moment of silence, Hawkins still scrutinizing Jake closely. Then, to Jake's surprise, he let the gun twist in his hand, showing he'd taken his finger off the trigger, and held it out sideways. "We don't need this, all right?"

He bent and put the gun on the ground, his gaze not leaving Jake. Of course,

Jake huffed to himself, Hawkins was still carrying *his* pistol.

"You really want to know who I work for?" Hawkins cocked his head, eyebrows raised.

Jake blinked in surprise. This wasn't at all where he'd expected the conversation to go once Hawkins had disarmed him. He nodded. Hawkins' answer, when it came, made him gape.

"I'm a government agent." Hawkins' lips twitched. "Of a kind. I've been employed by a group of senators and congressmen who are... concerned about the voting irregularities for the Territorial Elections last spring."

"Hopping mad, you mean?" Jake gave a wry laugh, not just at Hawkins' understatement but at his own situation. Seemed he'd run all the way from Utah to escape one set of Federal agents only to find himself tangled up with another. Daring to lower his hands a little, he added, "And that's why you came to Jericho?"

Hawkins nodded. "Somewhere in your Town Hall are the ballots, poll lists and censuses for a half dozen districts. If I can get sight of them and compare the names, I'll be able to give an account to my paymasters that will convince them, and others, there's sufficient evidence to launch a full congressional investigation."

Jake shook his head wonderingly, comprehension dawning at last. "That's why you're so keen to help protect Jericho?"

"That's part of it, yes." Hawkins chuckled, a surprising sound. "I also rather like your town, Jake. They're good people, for the most part. They don't deserve what's coming."

There were still some things Jake didn't understand, though. "So why are you telling me all this? Why didn't you just kill me when you had your chance?"

Again, Hawkins' lips twitched. "Because I rather like you, too, Jake." His face sobered. "And I think you're a man who cares about justice and about what kind of state Kansas will become."

"And if I go down there and tell them what you just told me?" Jake jerked his head toward the valley.

"Then I just might have to kill you."

Although Jake had been half-expecting it, he was still surprised at the speed with which Hawkins pulled his gun and leveled it at him. For a moment, he was

stunned into silence. Then he shook his head. "I won't tell."

"Good." Hawkins holstered his gun and bent to pick up Jake's. He took a step closer and held out the gun, but when Jake went to take it, he pulled his hand back. "And I'm telling you this because I need your help."

"What?" Jake gaped at him.

"All this to-do going on, men standing guard on Main Street: it's going to be a lot harder now to sneak into Town Hall and look at those records." Hawkins gave a slight shrug. "You've got connections, Jake. People know you. They trust you. If you're in Town Hall, they're not going to question you. Or anyone with you."

"No." Jake shook his head. He couldn't do this again. Not after last time. Not after what had happened to Freddy. He'd pushed those memories deep inside once he'd found himself back in Jericho, knowing it would do no good to dwell on them longer. But Hawkins' revelations had brought all that back to the surface.

"You won't help?" Hawkins' expression was somewhere between disappointed and curious.

Jake shook his head again. "Find someone else."

Hawkins raised his eyebrows. "You don't care what happens to Kansas?"

Jake huffed. "I care. But I care about what happens to my family and friends as well."

Hawkins went on looking at him, his expression a little disappointed. It was so very different to the way Marshal Hicks had threatened and blustered that Jake found the story tumbling out. "When I was in Utah, a few weeks back, some fellow turned up looking to get together a group of filibusters for an expedition down Mexico way. Promised easy money and lots of it. Friend of mine was too young and too stupid to know better. Got himself mixed up in it."

Jake pressed his lips together, remembering how pleased Freddy had been when he'd told him. *Real money, Jake. Enough for me to go home and ask Anna to marry me.* He swallowed down the memory of Freddy's excited face. "While he was trying to convince me to sign up, I was trying to figure out how to get him out of it without any more trouble." He'd been close to managing it, too: a plan, an explanation, scraping together enough money to pay back what Freddy had already spent of his advance. And then—. "And then this US Marshal turned up, looking for someone to go along with the expedition long enough to snitch on them and get a conviction for the backers who were putting up the money. Freddy finally got the message he was in over his head, panicked and tried to run. Ended up dead." He grimaced. "Would've been me next."

Hawkins' expression had softened. "I'm sorry about your friend." He sounded like he meant it. Then his expression hardened again. "But I still need your help, Jake. What happens in Kansas could shape this country for years to come. Maybe the next hundred years. We have to expose the truth of what happened here."

Jake hesitated. He'd seen enough on his travels to know that while slaves in Missouri might be treated pretty well, masters elsewhere weren't so kindly. That once one election had been stolen, the next one would be easier to take, corruption spreading like a canker. And that no matter the color of a man's skin, he was still a man, with hopes and dreams, and a mind as quick or slow as any other. Wasn't Hawkins himself living proof of that?

Before he could give his answer—still not sure what his answer would be—he heard a rattle of gunfire from somewhere in the distance on the far side of the hill: the New Bern side.

"Dammit!" Forgetting Hawkins and his demand, Jake dropped to a crouch and scurried back up to the brow of the hill. Peering over, he saw groups of men swarming toward them, some on horseback, some on foot. They were still mercifully far off.

"They're dividing." Hawkins had joined him. He pointed one way and then another. "See? They're sending groups round to flank us. And they're bringing up the cannon in the middle to blast a way through."

Jake nodded. He could see a gun carriage being drawn along by a pair of horses in the middle of a mass of men on foot. He turned his attention back to the groups of men who'd broken away from the main force, figuring out just where they were heading. "You know how to use the flag?" He jerked his head back toward where he'd dropped it during his struggle with Hawkins.

"Yes." Hawkins' tone was curt as he continued to peer out at the advancing militia.

"Good," Jake was already scrambling back down the slope and pushing to his feet. "You stay here, start signaling Eric. Keep watching and signaling. I'll head back to let my father know exactly what we're facing. It'll be faster than trying to signal."

Hawkins nodded. "You'd better have this back." He held out Jake's revolver.

Jake took it with a nod of thanks. "Oh, and Hawkins?" He was busy slipping the gun back into its holster, not looking at the other man. "If we somehow manage to live through all this... I'll give you what help I can." As soon as the words were out, he knew it was the right choice.

If they survived....

oOo

The ranks of their attackers were already visible from the site of the planned ambush, if still distant, by the time Jake slid off his lathered horse twenty minutes later. His father had hurried across at his approach and Jake was making his report even as he swung himself out of the saddle. "...sent a party across Mill Creek. Maybe twenty men. Should take another hour to get there."

His father nodded at one of the men who'd gathered round them, a newcomer that Jake didn't recognize. "Let Sheriff Taylor know." The man scurried away to the horse lines.

Jake took the chance to grab his canteen and take a swig of water. For so late in the year, the day was surprisingly warm. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "There's another group headed Eric's way. The rest of them are coming straight on—and Drummond was right about the cannon. Looks like a howitzer. Maybe one of those twelve pounders. My guess is they'll try to soften us up with a few shells."

"Mr Green?" Both Jake and his father turned at the hail. It came from one of the men crouched half-hidden among the shrubs that straggled up the slopes on either side of the shallow gap in the ridge. Indicating Jake should follow, his father headed toward where the man knelt.

The fellow pointed into the distance. "They've halted. Seem to be getting themselves in some kind of formation."

Jake could see horses being led away and much coming and going around a shape that must be the gun carriage. "Even the Sharps won't carry that far," he pointed out quietly.

His father nodded, still squinting at the far-off activity. "They must reckon that twelve pounder'll reach this far, though." He, too, kept his voice low. Both of them knew there were enough excitable heads among them that they didn't need to start a panic.

"What about the hand mortar?" Jake pressed down on the sense of frustration that welled up in him as he watched the small figures make their preparations unhindered.

His father let out a sharp breath that showed he was just as frustrated. "We'd need to get closer than we would with the Sharps. Maybe two hundred, three hundred yards. And the danged thing's not exactly light. Nor the ammunition."

Jake bit his lip, thinking. "Maybe that's close enough."

"What do you mean?" His father gave him a surprised look.

"Our rifles can't reach them, but theirs can't reach us, either." Jake scanned the ground ahead. "If we use the hand mortar, we can set up a smoke screen a couple of hundred yards out. That'd give a man or two cover enough to make a dash for those trees." He pointed to where he meant. "They'd be plenty close enough from there to pick off the men around the gun."

His father huffed. "Plenty close enough to find themselves in a world of trouble."

"You got a better—?" Jake's words were cut short by a loud boom in the distance.

"Down!" his father roared. "Everyone down!"

Even as Jake hit the ground, throwing his hands over his head, he could hear the smack of dozens of small shot thumping into the ground. And, judging by a couple of pained cries, into some of Jericho's defenders.

After a minute, he raised his head cautiously. There seemed to be no major damage to the defenses, though he could hear someone moaning in pain on the opposite hillside, where the brunt of the fusillade had fallen. He cautiously climbed to his feet, reckoning it would take the other side a while to reload the howitzer.

A few feet away, his father had gotten to his feet as well and was snapping out orders. "Get those men back behind the lines and get them some attention. The rest of you, fill in the gaps." He turned back toward Jake and met his gaze.

"We need to take out that howitzer," Jake said quietly. "Otherwise...."

There was a moment's hesitation and then his father nodded, silently accepting both Jake's plan and his unspoken offer to be the one to put it into action. "You got enough ammunition?"

"Uh-huh." Jake had swung his rifle from his shoulder and was checking it over. Something about his father's stance, the way he stood unmoving in the midst of the comings and goings around him, made Jake look up again.

"Take care, son." His father gave him another nod that was more of a salute.

Jake licked his lips. "I will, Pa," he promised.

Then his father was swinging away, striding toward the rear, bellowing, "Mr

Anderson! It's time!"

oOo

Ten minutes later, Jake was crouched among the small clump of scrub and trees. His heart was pounding from the dash across the two hundred yards of almost bare ground between where he now squatted and where the rest of Jericho's men waited. His father had aimed the hand mortar a little to the left of the trees and when the grenade had landed, it had thrown up a surprisingly effective mess of soil and smoke that had seemingly screened Jake from view. At least, all he'd heard from the opposing lines was some faint jeering that he guessed was mocking the hand mortar's lack of reach. He'd certainly drawn no fire in his direction, though he'd heard another boom from the howitzer and the whistle of the shot overhead when he was halfway to his destination.

Drawing in a deep breath to steady himself, he carefully worked his way forward to the far side of the trees and found a spot in which to settle himself, well sheltered by a sturdy trunk. The howitzer was clearly visible now, men busy around it, and comfortably within range of his Sharps, though he doubted many other rifles could reach so far. He would have to hope the New Bern men, being armed by Missouri money, carried lesser weapons.

Keeping half an eye on the distant activity, wary of being spotted before he was ready, Jake reached into his ammunition pouch and drew out the cloth-covered bundle Miss Lisinski had handed him. He carefully unwrapped it, spreading the fine linen out and separating the cartridges so they would come easy to his hand. His heart beat a little faster at the memory of her touch on his face and the catch in her voice as she told him to come back in one piece.

Satisfied with his arrangements, he lifted his head to once more survey the howitzer and the men surrounding it. Then, taking another deep breath, he raised his rifle and sighted along it, choosing the figure who appeared to be directing operations around the cannon. Sending up a silent prayer, he squeezed the trigger.

The first bullet passed close enough to the man that he jerked back. A cry from somewhere behind him suggested the bullet had still found a target. Jake was too busy loading another cartridge into the breech and sighting again to care overmuch. His second shot took the leader even as he and his men were still looking around in confusion. By the third round, some of them were pointing in his general direction, and they had scuttled into a crouch around the gun. Three or four of them returned fire but, as Jake had hoped, their bullets fell short, splattering up dirt a dozen yards away.

He kept up a steady rate of fire after that, speedy but not reckless. He concentrated most of his aim, now he'd dispatched the leader, on the gun itself,

and on the boxes and crates heaped around it, using only every fourth shot to target a man. He was looking for a powder store—and hoping he'd find it before Miss Lisinski's cartridges ran out. At least he was keeping the New Bern men from firing the howitzer, and perhaps his father could find a way to get more of their men closer.

Seemed the other side had the same idea: a bullet from somewhere to his right smacked into a nearby tree. He was running out of time—.

And then, on the nineteenth or maybe twentieth shot, he hit gold. Or, rather, black: there was a deafening bang and the earth shook; amid splintering wood and earth, he saw the howitzer carriage lift into the air and twist over. From behind him, he could hear a ragged cheer.

Mindful of the bullet that had passed close, Jake didn't take the time to savor his victory. Instead, he hastily gathered up the remaining cartridges in their wrapping and stuffed them in his coat pocket. With a final shot aimed in the general direction of whoever had fired at him, he scrambled into a low crouch and zigzagged his way back to his own lines, trying to keep the clump of trees between him and the enemy's weapons as long as possible. Though he heard a few more bullets peppering the trunks, he was quickly out of range.

Scurrying into the shelter of the scrub that grew around the gap in the ridge, he was a little surprised to receive a slap on the shoulder from Fred Drummond that also steered him on, sending him further toward the lee of the hill. The reason for the anxious look on Drummond's face became clear as Jake caught sight of the scene on the other side of the ridge.

"No!" Jake flung himself forward, dropping his rifle to the ground as he knelt next to his father, who lay propped against Mr Anderson's shoulder. An ominous dark patch was spreading from underneath the cloth Mr Anderson held pressed against his father's stomach. "How—?"

"That last shell." Mr Anderson sounded a little stunned. "Didn't realize for a minute or so—."

Even as Mr Anderson answered, his father's eyes fluttered open. "Jake?" he murmured weakly.

"I'm here, Pa." Jake caught his hand and squeezed it. He glanced over his shoulder for a moment, not really looking for anyone in particular or even picking out faces among the crowd gathered around. "Get Eric. Now."

"Will do, Jake," someone answered. Jake sensed movement in the crowd as they left and, a moment later, heard departing hoofbeats, but his attention was focused back on his father.

"Pa?" Jake squeezed his father's hand again, willing him to stay conscious. He knew from the speed the blood was flowing that the cause was probably hopeless. All he could ask for now, he knew, was for his father to stay conscious until Eric arrived.

His father tried to return the pressure of Jake's hand. "Guess I didn't keep *my* head low enough," he whispered hoarsely. He gave a choked laugh.

"Shhhh." Jake's throat was tight. He swallowed, trying to blink away the tears that threatened to fall.

Someone else joined them, a man in a dark coat with a doctor's bag. Jake shot him a grateful glance as he lifted the bloodstained cloth for a moment to examine the wound, before turning to his bag and pulling out various packages and bandages.

"You keep 'em safe, Jake." His father coughed, a trickle of blood appearing at the corner of his mouth. "We talked—."

"I know, Pa." Jake nodded, strengthening his grip on his father's hand. "I will. I know what to do."

His father was silent for a moment, only wincing slightly as the doctor pulled away the reddened cloth and began to cut away at his vest and shirt. "Is Eric...?"

"He's coming." Jake nodded fiercely, willing his brother's arrival, though he knew it wouldn't be for many more minutes.

"Tell him.... Tell him he's a fine man. A good son. And your mother." His father gave a little dip of his head. "Tell your mother I love her."

Jake nodded, beyond words. They sat in silence while the doctor worked, pressing clean gauze on the wound and nodding at Mr Anderson to shift so that he could wrap a bandage in place to secure it.

At last Jake pulled in a deep breath, remembering where they were and what his father had asked him to do. He turned his head a little. "New Bern? Are they coming?"

"Not yet." He thought it was Mr Frederickson who answered. "They're still regrouping."

"Let me know—." Jake broke off what he was saying. His father had opened his eyes again after the doctor had laid him back down.

"Jake? Son?" His father's voice was so faint that Jake had to lean forward to hear.

"I'm here, Pa." He was gripping his father's hand so tightly—urging him to hold on, hold *on*—that his knuckles had gone white. He wondered how close Eric was and tried not to think that it probably wasn't close enough.

"I was hard on you." His father's breathing was becoming more labored. "I pushed you away." He took in another deep, rattling breath, his gaze slipping away from Jake as he fought for air. After a moment, his gaze found Jake again. "I'm glad you came home." His hand tightened on Jake's briefly, with the old strength Jake remembered from childhood: his small hand secure in his father's large one, feeling safe and protected. "I'm glad I got to see.... Always knew.... Always. One day. You'd become the man you were born to be." He sucked in another breath and added in a surprisingly strong voice, "I'm proud of you, son." Then he closed his eyes, as if weariness had overcome him at last, his grip going slack and a final rasping breath escaping him.

Jake went on holding his hand, kneeling next to him, feeling his face wet with tears, not knowing what to do now, next....

"Jake." The doctor put his hand on his shoulder.

Jake nodded, scrubbing away the tears with the back of his wrist. Gently, he laid his father's hand down on his chest and pushed himself to his feet, while Mr Anderson lowered his father to the ground. The sound of hoofbeats made him turn and he saw Eric and another man—Hawkins, he realized, as they drew closer—galloping toward them.

He strode forward to meet them, not wanting Eric to see before he knew. His brother pulled his horse to a halt and slithered to the ground. "Pa?" He peered past Jake.

"He's gone." Jake's voice was rough in his ears. "We tried, but—."

Eric nodded, his face tightening with misery as he accepted the news.

Abruptly, Jake reached forward and pulled his brother into an embrace. He felt Eric's frame begin to shake with silent sobs as his brother returned the hug. "Said you were a fine man," he managed to choke out. "A good son."

They held each other close, closer than they'd been in years, united in grief. Then Eric heaved a deep breath and began to pull away. Jake caught his face between his hands as he stepped back. "We'll be all right." He found and held Eric's gaze until his brother managed a weak smile and a nod. "We'll be all right."

"Jake?"

He was suddenly aware of Hawkins at his shoulder. Letting go of Eric, he turned. Beyond Hawkins, he saw most of the rest of the men were standing around where his father's body lay, turned to watch the three of them, uncertainty in their expressions. Someone had covered his father's face with a cloth.

Jake brought his attention back to Hawkins.

"They're getting ready." Hawkins jerked his head toward the gap in the ridge and the enemy lines. "Everyone's going to be looking to you now, Jake."

Jake drew in a deep breath. "I know." He looked again at the men waiting for him. Waiting for him to step into his father's shoes. Waiting for him to become the man he was born to be.

Straightening his shoulders, he marched toward the men who trusted him to lead them to victory, ready to make his father, who was no doubt already looking down from Heaven, proud of him again. "Mr Frederickson, I need a report from Sheriff Taylor on the situation with the left flank. Mr Hawkins, I'd like your report on the situation on the right when you left. The rest of you, I need you back in position." He gave a brisk nod of the head to confirm his orders. "Let's give these ruffians the reception they deserve!"

oOo

End notes

The story is set around the same time as the relatively bloodless Wakarusa War of 1855, when pro-slavery men from Missouri marched on the free-state town of Lawrence.

Jericho has been placed much further East than in canon and given a size and history that at that time would have applied to only a few places (which would have been located even further east in Kansas).

The election that Hawkins is investigating is meant to be the election of March 30, 1855 for the Territorial Legislature. The extensive fraud in that election (and others) is detailed in the *Report of the Special Committee Appointed to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas; With the Views of the Minority of Said Committee. Report No. 200, 34th Congress, 1st Session, 1856* (aka the Howard Report).

I am indebted to two books in particular for the historical background when writing this story. Nicole Etcheson's *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* provided a clear account of the complex politics of this period, while Thomas Goodrich's *War to the Knife: Bleeding Kansas 1854-1861* gave me a wealth of detail about the social history and conditions in Kansas at this period.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it nor was any infringement of copyright intended.