

 Preface

 This writing is a fictional narration of events based on factual happenings that occurred on the Texas western frontier of 1860’s America. Of John Steadman, who left Texas to fight for the Confederate cause with General Robert E Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, during the Civil War. Of Alin, his wife, who remained behind on their frontier homestead, to be taken by a raiding Comanche warrior band, causing her husband, on returning, a long disheartening search. Of Nathan, the son of an English father and Indian mother, a defending leader of his mother’s tribe.

 Though foremost, this is a story of a Texas Indian Tribe that allied themselves with the white settlers against brutal, blood lust Comanches, in an attempt to secure for the frontier and their tribe, the Tonkawas, a lasting peace.

 **CHAPTER 1**

 *I have done all I can to keep Texas from*

 *seceding. Now if she won’t go with me, I’ll*

 *have to turn around and go with her.*

 © Don MacNaughton Sam Houston

 John Steadman had watched the wagon approach for the last twenty minutes from his cabin front door but had said nothing to his wife, Alin, who sat at their cabin meal table, alone. It would only have added to the distress she was already suffering. Their cabin sat on a shelf on ground just above a small river that flowed southwards through the low plains of North Central West Texas and John was about to leave it, and his wife, perhaps never to return.

 Both John and Alin were born in Louisiana, into well-off families whose plantations bordered each other. In 1857 their wedding was the county’s social event of the year. But both were free spirits, eager to seek, explore and challenge, so shortly after the wedding they left for Texas, the new frontier. They traveled in a two-wagon train, John and Alin in the larger wagon, with their clothing, furnishing, household goods and a kitchen stove. The smaller supply wagon with tents and rations, pulled by a mule, Sam, was in the safe hands of their two slaves, Moses in his mid-forties and his seventeen-year-old son, Jonathan. Moses had lost his wife through a fatal illness a year earlier and now wished away from the place where this unhappiness occurred. John’s father willingly released both father and son from his service, mainly because he could see that John, twenty-one, and Alin just nineteen, would be in need of the extra help of Moses with his wise head - and as it turned out, Moses also in delivering, a year later, Ben, the couple’s son, in a tent on a rain-drenched night beside their half-completed, roofless cabin. They had been brought to this tract of ground by twenty-year-old Tom Sullivan, the son of a general store owner. This store was the most prominent building among a cluster of dwellings that was known as Hutton. At first sight the young couple were both taken by the setting of this lush green mile-wide valley, with its winding, tree-fringed river that extended southwards three miles or more before turning sharply to the East. It was from up this valley that John had watched the open, horse-drawn wagon arrive.

 As the team of horses drew up to the cabin’s well, for the horses to dip their noses into the water trough, Steadman announced solemnly,

 “They’re here!”

 Alin still sitting, took this as her last chance to persuade her husband to remain, “John! John! Please change your mind. Don’t go. We need. I need you. Please don’t go.” She was standing now.

 John looked at his wife for a moment before shaking his head, then taking hold of his rifle and blanket roll, stepped through the door.

 “John! John!” cried Alin rushing to the door but not going out.

 She watched as her husband strode across to the wagon to exchange a few words with the driver before climbing aboard to seat himself with five others. Two of these were young brothers just out of their teens, whose mother and father had a ranch seven miles south east of the Steadmans. Seeing Alin in the doorway, they shouted their hellos and waved but she remained motionless as if unseeing.

 As the waggon began to move off John looked to his wife and she to him, but neither waved, just looked. The date was April 1861. Texas was part of the Confederate States now and at war with the Union North and John Steadman was off to fight in that war, for his State, while Alin with Ben and the two black slaves, would remain at their homestead, with her, now six months pregnant.

 Ben, who had run to the water trough when the wagon arrived and received a kiss and a pat on the head from his father before he climbed aboard the wagon, now ran to his mother as she walked from the cabin. Lifting him into her arms she turned to Moses and Jonathan who had been silently watching their master leave,

 “Moses,” she began, “See to the animals and secure the chicken coop. It will be dark soon. Supper will be ready in an hour.”

 The two men had their own cabin but always ate with the Steadmans.

 “Yes Missy,” acknowledged Moses with a slight bow of his head.

 The animals were their two horses, Sam the mule and Molly a milk cow. The homestead’s chickens, because of night-time coyotes, had to be securely shut away in a small chicken coop.

 Returning to the cabin Alin began to prepare the evening meal. This cabin had only two rooms, a bedroom where Ben also slept in a small cot, while the other, larger, was a combined kitchen, dining room and parlour. The kitchen was the stove, pots, pans and utensils hanging from nails in the log walls. The parlour was four straight-backed nail-less wooden chairs, a small rough leather-covered easy chair and Alin’s rocking chair. Also in that room was stacked against the walls, trunks and wooden crates all containing their Louisiana crockery, pictures, curtains, fine clothes and other items that John and Alin had agreed would not see the light of day until lumber and beams could be acquired for building a proper house.

 The dining area had two tables. The larger was for John, Alin and Ben, while the smaller was for Moses and Jonathan. This the two slaves had asked for, stating they did not feel comfortable eating with the white family. However, when they knocked and entered the cabin as night began to close, they found the smaller table had been pushed to a corner. Seeing Ben sitting and Alin standing beside the larger table that was set for four, they both became unsure of what to do.

 Alin in a quiet but authoritative voice then began to speak, “Moses! Johnathan! Last night Master John made you both a promise, a promise that when he returns from the war he would give you your freedom. Well, I’m not prepared to wait what could be years. From this moment you can consider yourselves free men.”

 Alin paused. “Do you both understand what I am saying? You are now no longer slaves. You are friends and part of the household.”

There was a long wait with the men’s eyes looking everywhere except at Alin, before Moses began in a quiet voice, “But Missy …….”

 “And that’s another thing,” interrupted Alin, her voice a notch higher, “From now on you will not call me Missy. You will call me Alin and Alin only. Now! Sit down and eat before Ben finishes it all!”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 For the next few months life on the homestead, except for the absence of John, continued in its normal manner. The chickens were released, Molly was milked, Alin baked bread for the day and Ben got in the way of all three. The only time this routine altered was when once every three or four weeks a trip into Hutton would be necessary to replenish supplies. The two horses, Pluto and Mars, would be hitched to the wagon and either Moses or Jonathan would drive Alin the twenty-three miles to the settlement. Since their arrival three years earlier Hutton had expanded. It could now boast of a stable, a blacksmiths, and an establishment with rooms that mainly served the weekly stagecoach run from Fort Worth to Hutton, and back again.

 Alin looked forward to these trips because she would then be informed of all the latest news. Also, she could have a really good wife-to-wife natter with Lorna Sullivan, the young wife of Tom Sullivan who, with her own husband, had also gone off to the war. She too was a mother, of a girl of one year. Alin’s trips also allowed her to mail and collect letters, from her and John’s families in Louisiana and from John. Of John’s, only three would find their way to her before her daughter arrived.

 As her time approached, Moses and Jonathan were like the proverbial mother hen, hovering near and politely as possible scolding her for attempting any heavy lifting. The day finally came in late June, just after breakfast. Unlike Ben, who had inherited his father’s dark hair and brown eyes, Katherine, a name both parents had agreed to, the daughter, seemed to have allied herself to her mother’s hazel eyes and auburn hair.

 For the next few months Alin’s days were mainly restricted to the cabin - cooking, washing, mending - the two men saw to that, and of course nursing Katherine*.* It was not until September that she was allowed to make her first trip to Hutton.

 One early October evening, as Alin was just finishing preparing the supper, a horseman arrived at the homestead leading three others. On Ben making her aware of this, Alin first paused in the cabin door, then walked out to the well to greet him. In Indian dress, beaded vest, breechcloth and leather legging, his dark hair, neck-length, was not long and braided like most Indians. His features were also not that of an Indian. In truth he looked to be a heavily-tanned American, which only convinced Alin of that as he halted his pony and began to speak in English,

 “Good evening Ma’am. If it’s not a trouble I’d like to water the horses.”

 In one hand he held what appeared to be a short-barrelled muzzle-loading rifle, while tucked into a belt around his waist was a round-headed stone club, with on the opposite hip, a sheathed knife. Although so armed, his manner dismissed all sense of threat.

 “Oh! Yes do,” replied Alin, asking, “Have you come far?”

 “From my village north west of here. I’m headed for Hutton to sell these horses,” he stated, slipping off his saddle-less mount to draw the other three to the trough.

 “Well, it’s a long way off, so you’ll have supper with us and stay the night,” announced Alin, making a snap decision on this unusual visitor. Alin, in their few seconds of meeting, felt he had a story to tell and she wanted to hear it.

 “I’ll be fine Ma’am. I’m at home sleeping under the stars.” There was a smile on his face.

 “Well I won’t be fine knowing you had, when there was a roof I can offer. My name’s Alin Steadman. This is my homestead, my husband’s off to the war.” She was holding out her hand.

 “Nathan,” he said, reaching out to take her hand, “Pleased to meet you.”

 “Nathan?” repeated Alin with a puzzled expression.

 “My father did have a second name but my mother found no reason to use it,” he explained.

 “Well Nathan, please stay for supper,” she requested.

 “I won’t turn your offer down a second time. I will stay,” he replied with a half-defeated smile.

 “Thank you, Nathan. I’m looking forward to your company,” she acknowledged. “Now let’s get you settled.”

 Turning, she called to Jonathan who had been watching them from the corral gate.

 “Jonathan is one of the homestead hands. The other you will meet is Moses, his father,” she informed her new supper guest. Then, on Jonathan approaching,

 “Jonathan, this is Nathan. He is having supper with us. Help him with his horses, then put them in the corral with our other two. Supper will be ready in about half an hour.”

 As the five sat down to the meal Alin was pleasantly surprised that Nathan had the measure of his fork. Of course the talk was mostly by him and of him.

 His mother was a Tonkawa Indian captured when a little girl by the Apaches, and sold when about fifteen to a Spanish family who employed her as a housemaid. When turned twenty she was sold again, to an Englishman who owned a nearby ranch and had visited the hacienda a number of times. On gaining her release, he then asked her to marry him. He was much older than she, but a kind man, and they lived happily for five years until he left one day to fight a war and was killed while doing so. His wife, who had taken the Spanish name Camila, after waiting four months for Nathan to be born, sold the ranch and took him and a three-year older daughter north west some hundred miles to re-join her people, the Tonkawas. On her remittance to the tribe she was soon taken by a warrior as his woman. Tragically, after fathering a son, he and Camila’s daughter were lost during a measles outbreak.

 As was the custom of the tribe, Camila was then claimed by the first man’s younger brother, from which they also had a son. Sadly this brother also perished but only four years past, during a Comanche raid to steal their horses. Camila was offered a replacement man from the family but has resisted this, pleading, “I have lost enough men.”

 After hearing all this Alin retreated to the bedroom where she nursed Katherine then put both her and Ben to bed. Returning to the table Jonathan and Moses were excusing themselves for the night, but Nathan, who had now agreed to stay, bedded down on a mattress of straw with Molly in the cowshed, Alin refused to allow him to leave. She wanted to hear more about him, and refilled both their coffee cups.

 This he obliged for over an hour, of him growing into manhood in a village teepee on Texas plains. In following years he became a warrior but his mother also took him, as she did her other sons, in hand, teaching them to speak, read and write English. On Alin asking him if he had a wife and family, falling silent, his eyes turned to the near wall. Alin, sensing something in what she had asked, had touched a dark area. She waited. Then, after several seconds, in a quiet voice, his eyes avoiding Alin’s, he began,

 “A year ago I had a woman and a boy baby. Then the Comanches came. We thought they were after the horses. We went to protect them. It was a trick. They went after young mothers bathing their babies in the river. Took the women. Killed the babies.”

 Nathan looked to Alin for the first time: “They always kill the babies.” Then again looking away, “We followed them for three days. They had many rifles. We had only two. They were thirty. We were ten. They had taken five of our women. The first two days we found four. Abandoned on the trail. Naked, wounded with cuts, raped and dead.”

 Then after a brief pause, “On the third day we found the last. She was my woman.”

 Alin, thunder-struck, was frozen in horror but found her voice, “Oh Nathan! That’s awful. I am so sorry. So very sorry.”

 Nathan turned his head to her and nodded his acknowledgement before addressing Alin in a serious tone, “The real reason I called here was not to water the horses but to warn you.”

 “Warn us?” interrupted the woman, “of what?”

 “Just a few miles west I came across Comanche pony tracks.”

 “How do you know they were Comanche?” asked Alin, concerned. There had been none reported in her part of the country for years.

 “There are ways,” was all Nathan said before asking, “How will you protect yourselves if they come here?”

 Alin’s first thought was the pistol. “Well, my husband left his pistol. It’s hanging by the door.” Getting up, she crossed to the door and pulled it out of its holster to carry it back to the table in both hands.

 “He did show me how it worked a year or so ago but pulling the trigger is about all I remember.”

 Nathan eased the weapon from Alin’s hands to examine it under the dull light of the kerosene lamp hanging over the table.

 “Yes! I’ve seen one like this before,” admitted Nathan, “It’s a Naval Colt,” adding, “It’s loaded?”

 “Yes,” confirmed Alin, “My husband told me that before leaving.”

 “If you need to shoot with it you must first pull the hammer back with your thumb.” Nathan went through the motions of doing this before handing it back, allowing Alin to return it to its holster by the door.

 “Alin,” began her guest as she returned to the table, “The Comanche have become much bolder in the past months because of your white man’s war. The army has mostly gone and many of your best men have left your homes to fight a long way away.”

 “My husband, one of them,” agreed Alin.

 “I have heard already the Comanche have attacked homesteads and ranches to the west below the high plains. Soon it will not be safe here. You must be prepared to leave.”

 “And go where?” It wasn’t a challenge. Alin was now becoming worried. “Hutton,” advised Nathan, “You will be safe there.”

 The conversation ended then with Alin assuring him he was welcome to stay for breakfast, as she cleared the coffee cups from the table, while he left the cabin to join Molly in the cow shed.

 In the morning Alin found that Nathan would not be having breakfast with them. On opening the cabin door, she discovered him at the well watering his horses, dressed and re-armed.

 “I was just about to thank you for your kindness,” expressed her guest of the night, as Alin approached.

 “You’re refusing my breakfast then?” she jokingly scolded.

 “With regrets,” he smiled, mounting his pony. As he did so, Alin moved up to them.

 “Nathan, would you do me a great kindness and give these to the people at the Hutton General Store?” In her hand she held two letters. “They handle mail for us. One’s for my husband.”

 “Yes, of course,” agreed Nathan, taking them and slipping both into a pouch hanging at one hip. Then in a gentle but serious voice he offered strong advice, “Alin, what I said about Comanche last night. If you see smoke on the horizon, quickly leave for Hutton.”

 “Yes! Thank you, Nathan. If that comes about we will go.” Her reply mirrored his seriousness.

 Touching his pony’s flank with a heel, Nathan began to leave but turned his head as Alin called after him, “Tell your mother about us. She sounds a marvellous woman. I would enjoy meeting her.” The rider’s reply was an amused smile and exaggerated nod of his head.

 As Alin watched the horse and rider for a full minute before returning to the cabin, she was innocently unaware that her light-hearted whimsical request would, because of horrific circumstances, be granted her within a coming few days.



 **CHAPTER 2**

 *If I owned Texas and Hell,*

 *I would rent out Texas and live in Hell.*

 General Philip Sheridan

 For the remainder of the day Alin hardly had Nathan off her mind, not for one instant in a close intimate way, it was his gentle manner and entertaining conversation she found herself recalling. Ever since she and her husband had begun the struggle of homesteading on this vast Texas landscape she was aware of their isolation but she and John were in love, a love that dispelled the fear of isolation and the need for others’ company. This, however, for Alin had now changed. The homestead’s remoteness, the ranch seven miles to the southwards was their nearest neighbor. Their long durations of human contact and the absence of recent news availability was beginning to erode Alin’s doggedness in coping with her situation. Still, it was a situation she had willingly placed herself in. She was a mother and, at present the head of the household. She would do what had to be done until John returned.

 However, while cooking the evening meal at the close of another day this resolve was suddenly crushed forever.

 She began to hear a distance voice crying out, “Missy Alin! Missy Alin!”

 As Alin hurried to the cabin door she recognized the voice as that of Moses and was coming from the field below, where he had spent the day with Sam plowing, preparing the field for an early spring planting. Hurrying to the well where she had a clear view she froze in shock. Below her, Moses was running from the field leaving Sam still attached to the plow. Galloping past the animal, heading straight for the cabin, were five ponies, each carrying an Indian.

 Moses was still running, crying, “Missy Alin! Missy Alin!” when one of the Indians, armed with a lance, leaned forward and levelled the point. The tip penetrated Moses’ back and through his chest. Moses was pitched forward onto the ground as the rider recovered his lance and continued on, the pony not missing a stride.

 Alin, wrenched out of her shock by this, turned for the cabin to be stopped by a tiny voice beside her, Ben,

 “Mummy!”

 Picking him up in her arms she was about to dash with him for the building when she thought of perhaps a safer place for him. Bending down, she pushed him into a small gap between the trough and the well frame.

 “Ben” she begged “Hide!” Don’t come out until mummy comes to get you, “Stay there! Stay there!”

 Racing for the house she snatched the pistol from its holster by the door. Stepping back through the door, all five Indians, shouting war cries, crashed their ponies to a halt, three of them leaping from the mounts’ back and rushing at Alin. Raising the pistol, gripped in both hands, she pointed it at a closing warrior and squeezed the trigger. The pistol did not fire and before she could squeeze it again she was struck on the side of her head, knocking her out. She had forgotten, in confusion and haste, to cock the hammer.

 Awaking some minutes later she was confronted by a heated squabble at the corral gate. The Indians had Jonathan tied to one of the gateposts, frightened and cringing. Three of the Indians were warding another off who was trying to stab Jonathan with a lance, the same one who had attacked Moses. Being forced back and threatened with knives in the hands of the other three, he turned towards Alin. Her senses not fully functioning, she meekly lay on the ground as he approached then walked past into the cabin. At that point Alin suddenly remembered what Nathan had said the evening before, “They always kill the babies.”

 Alin, her mind screaming, rolled her body onto her knees and began to rise to her feet when she was grabbed from behind and flung on her back. Above her, the other three Indians, knives in hand, set upon the helpless woman. Alin struggled for her life, she believed, but it wasn’t her life they were after, far worse. Cutting and ripping, Alin soon found herself pinned to the ground, naked. Then the first one was on her. Throwing aside his breechcloth so his erection was unobstructed, he forced himself on Alin, guiding his hardened member, with a hand, to Alin’s opening, then in. Realizing the horror being done to her, she fought to free herself, but held so tightly by her assailants, her effort was no more than an ineffective twisting of her body, for which she began receiving blows. Instinctively she took a breath intending to scream, but remembering Ben and his location, fearing if he heard his mother scream he would emerge, she stifled her cry and for the rest of the assault remained silent and still while each took his turn.

 The fourth of her rapists wore a small gray cloth hat with a rounded brim and seemed to be the leader of the band. After he had completed his foul act, Alin was left alone to lay on her torn and sperm-sullied garment. Although Alin had been sexually assaulted for over an hour, she herself had not experienced its intended thrill. The force of her rapists attack, her shame, and her mental detachment from any participation in the act, denied her of this. As for her assailers, she judged them as little more than dogs in heat. She was merely the repository for their orgasm’s waste.

 While awaiting the arrival of the fifth member of the band to take his unresisted pleasure of her, she heard laughter. Raising her head, looking towards the corral gate where her captors had a small fire there, she could see four of them, two just standing and the other two remaining sat cross-legged. One raising a jug to his lips, with head back, he drank. They had found her husband’s whiskey. The two who had stood, approached Jonathan, still tied to the gatepost. One clutched a burning brand. As the other grabbed and held the black man’s head his companion thrust the burning wood into his face.

 As Jonathan began to scream and plead, the brand was worked around his face and ears. As Alin watched in horror she realized that this act of brutality could aid her. She was well aware she was on a knife edge, any move or action she made could result in her death or her joining Jonathan at the corral gate. Despite this, the moment her rape began, she swore to herself that she would commit herself to whatever these savages did to her in order to save Ben and Katherine. Although she could only see four of the Indians, Alin hoping the fifth was not near and watching, began to crawl towards the well.

 Reaching the trough, she began to call in a low whisper, “Ben! Ben! Darling!”

 “Oh Mummy! Mummy! What are the screams? It scares me,” came the reply from the hidden two-year old.

 “It is a wild animal that the Indians who came, have,” lied Alin, hoping this young mind would accept this. “It will scream for a while longer but you are not to worry, it will not harm you.”

 Then reaching in she began assuring her son, “Ben, you must remain here. Mummy has to go to baby Katherine and I want you to stay here hiding until I return.

 “I’m thirsty, Mummy,” he answered. Alin, reaching up, filled her hands from the trough for him to drink from. She did this several times, then began to crawl back to the cabin.

 All this time, Jonathan had been screaming while the Indians methodically worked their torture. Reaching her cabin door she continued to crawl well in before scrambling to her feet, then hurrying to the bedroom. It was dark within the room and she found she had to pick her way through the devastation of her and John’s treasured belongings. In the bedroom it was the same and Alin turned frantic on finding Katherine’s tiny cot no longer on its stand. Desperately searching, her eyes now beginning to see more clearly in the room’s darkness, but nowhere in the room or under the bed could she see any sign of her child. Then she heard a small cry. It came from behind their bed mattress that had been thrown off the bed to lean against the wall, mostly concealing one of the room’s corners.

 Pulling this back, with huge relief she gently lifted Katherine into her arms. Sensing the familiar act, she began to whimper which Alin soon stifled by placing a nipple in her mouth. Her mother then quickly hurried to the cabin door to take up a position where she could watch the vile act taking place at the corral gate, with Jonathan still screaming and his tormenter seeming to enjoy every cry. In the light of the fire, Alin watched as they took turns with their fire sticks on Jonathan, laughed and encouraged each other while drinking John’s whiskey.

 Alin observed her enemies closely as Katherine fed. If they took notice of her absence she would have to race to place her baby back in her cot, then present herself to the savages to face their wrath.

 As Katherine gave up her mother’s nipple, Alin stripped all the coverings from her and quickly cleaned the human mess she had expelled over several long hours, then washed her with water from a bucket that always sat beside the stove. Snatching up a curtain from amongst the scattered debris on the floor, a Louisiana wedding present, Alin wrapped her daughter in this, then sat in her rocking chair and watched and listened to the acts of savagery just a short walk from her cabin door.

 It must have been nearing midnight when after drunkenly dancing and chanting, the Comanches showed signs of looking elsewhere for entertainment. Jonathan was no longer screaming. Alin, fearing she knew where they would seek this entertainment, left her chair to hurry into the bedroom to place Katherine again in her cot behind the mattress. Returning to the main room she gathered up all the cloth articles near at hand that had been pulled from their trunks and boxes and thrown about the room, bunched them all in a pile against the wall, her wedding dress included. If she was to be violated by the savages once again, this time she would be in some comfort.

 Returning to the door, two of the Indians were just approaching the ragged remains of the dress Alin had been wearing on their arrival of the early evening. Stepping through the door, still naked, she showed herself to them with the intent of quelling any rage that may erupt on discovering her missing. As her movement drew their attention, with whiskey-fueled grunts they turned towards her, whereupon on entering the cabin Alin awaited them, reclining on her recently constructed nest.

 And so began Alin’s second fearful day, desperate, no matter what it took, to find and escape from this terrifying nightmare she was in. To do this she knew she had to set herself rules, unimaginable ones only hours earlier, but now vital that she applied them. The first of which was, in order to survive she must give her captors whatever they wished, the best way she could, and to that rule she now applied herself. As the first Indian settled himself over her body she showed no resistance, instead spreading her legs and giving him every assistance. So she did for the following two, each taking a longer time than in their earlier assault, which was understandable as they had all had her once just recently and were now drunk on the cabin’s whiskey.

 There was a several minute pause between the third and fourth claimant of her sexual use. Appearing taller than the others, it was the owner of the lance. While sitting with Katherine in her rocking chair, Alin had thought over all that had happened from the moment of the Indians’ arrival, mostly assessing the actions of this man. He had killed Moses and attempted to kill Jonathan but took no part in torturing him. Were both actions intended to spare them of his fellow Comanches tortures? It was he also who first entered the cabin and found Katherine but against what Nathan had foretold, did not kill her. In fact he must have been the one who had concealed her behind the mattress. He is with Comanches but seems not to be one.

 On appearing over Alin, he removed his breechcloth then lay upon her, remaining still. Alin felt his member hardening. He used a hand to slip it inside her much-used womanhood, then lay still for several seconds before beginning to gently push forward and then back. Although still and quiet, Alin’s mind was in turmoil. This Indian wasn’t raping her, he was making love to her.

 In each previous encounter her iron resolve ensured she did not share in their fornicating pleasures. But with this assailant, with his slow rhythmical action, her resolve was rapidly melting into reverse. With that rapturous sweetness she so enjoyed with John beginning to swell from her loins throughout her whole body, she surrendered to its enchantment.

 Irresistibly she raised her arms and with both hands gripping his waist, she began to force her hips upwards. With her head laid back, her eyes closed, the room began to fill with low moaning, hers.

 As Alin’s lover’s thrusting quickened, so too did hers, until both were breathing heavily into each other’s ears. As the breathtaking sensation of their coupling that Alin wished never to end, erupted into a shattering climax, she was totally unaware of the loud gasp that escaped her lips. For a number of minutes they lay recovering their breath, Alin taking even longer to realize her arms were now wrapped around her violator’s body, and in no hurry to release him.

 With reluctance her arms fell away as the warrior pushed himself off her to stand, replacing his breechcloth, all the time his eyes never leaving Alin’s, as hers him. When gone, she lay reflecting on what had just transpired. She had only enjoyed the act of sex with one man, her husband, but here she had freely allowed herself to be taken by a murdering savage and enjoyed it beyond belief. In self-justification she convinced herself that she had done the right thing. This member of this most brutal band would become a hidden ally to her and her children, she hoped.

 The last, that early morning, to enter the cabin was the one with the gray hat, the band’s leader. He was the one the woman needed to impress the most. He, like the first three, threw himself on her but Alin’s reaction to this was far different from the other three. As their bodies embraced she spread her legs wide and reaching for his manhood, guided it inside her. Taken aback, he at first remained still as he, surprised by the act, stared down on this wanton creature smiling seductively up at him. His half-drunken mind was puzzled by this behavior. He had raped many women but never one that reacted as this one now did, but in an instant he now recovered, committing his coupling as Alin had first experienced, as a dog in heat.

 However, the victim below him was not the same one he had pinned to the ground earlier. As he thrusted so did she, matching him in velocity. As his conclusion rose, so, it appeared, did hers. The woman below him was moaning loudly, her eyes tightly shut, her grip on his arms tightening like the talons of an eagle. As his climax shuddered through his body, so, it appeared, did hers.

 As he recovered, bracing himself above her, he watched as the woman below him opened her eyes, smiling, her hands no longer claws buried in his flesh, but gentle hands stroking his arms. Not understanding these actions, he quickly stood to leave but found this insatiable white woman wishing for more. Alin clutched at one of his legs, pleading for him to stay. Pulling away, he hurried out of the cabin door, not looking back.

 Alin, her smile instantly gone, was sickened with herself for acting as she did, but her only weapon in this fight for survival was her body and was determined to use it to her and to her children’s full advantage.

 From her sheer exhaustion of the previous terror-fraught hours, Alin soon collapsed in sleep but was awoken an hour before dawn by Gray Hat returning, which had Alin having to enact her whore-in-lust performance once again.

 **CHAPTER 3**

 *Hold on to life even if it is easier to let go.*

 Indian Blessing

As soon as Gray Hat had left, Alin quickly rose to her feet. It was plainly evident that as a captive, she would be taken with them and she intended that her children would be taken with her. Gathering a now-soiled tablecloth from the floor, French and finely embroidered, she draped it around her body, then ran to collect Ben. He was cold and complained of hunger. Searching around the stove area she found the remains of yesterday’s supper, a stew still intact and edible.

As he ate, Alin held Katherine to her breast, nursing her, all the time doing so, scouring the room for items they would need for a journey – she knew not where or when it would end. A shoulder bag she soon filled with Katherine’s needs and a few clothing items for Ben, while she saw to it that he would be wearing most of his. In a pouch slung around her neck she placed several hundred dollars of gold coins, yet another wedding gift, this from her father and intended for her and John to finance the building of their planned house.

As for Alin herself, she quickly recovered her yard working shoes from the ground where she was first raped. For her top covering she salvaged one of her husband’s old work shirts, large, warm, and with an eye to the near future, easily removed, as was the choice for her lower garment. These were trousers and the best that came to hand, the ones her husband were dressed in on their wedding day. As for the matching coat, it was nowhere to be found. John was almost six feet tall, and she, five and a half. This, Alin remedied with her kitchen knife, removing the extra leg length, then with a piece of cord for a belt, she slipped them on.

As the sun rose she made a point of taking herself and her children out to the well. There, watering at the trough stood Sam, having that morning dragged his attached plow from the field with him. Filling the water canteen which in the past had hardly been used, her glances took in all that was happening.

Their captors, too, were busy preparing to leave. Both Pluto and Mars, they captors also, had full bags and feed sacks slung over their backs, all filled with items looted from the homestead. Alin, however, quickly ended their trip to the well when she glanced towards what was left of Jonathan. During her second bout of raping he had suddenly burst into screaming again and now it was plain to Alin why. A fire had been set at his feet that burnt his lower limbs but not his top body, so there he hung slumped, secured to the gatepost, dead, dead from half his body being roasted alive.

Alin’s trip to the well had several reasons. One, to show the children to the band and gage what hostility this may cause. Two, to show them that their captives were ready for the coming journey and would prove no trouble. The third was important to Alin, to try to judge how closely she could trust each one. She was their sexual release but would that also transmit to safeguarding her and her children? In that, she had little success, mainly because all except the Tall One appeared to be suffering a white man’s hangover. This one opportunity her foray did provide though, was a clearer observation of the Tall One. In the bright morning light Alin could now see there was, as she had suspected, a key difference between him and his other companions. He, like Nathan, was a half-breed.

Shortly after entering the cabin, Alin was alarmed by a shot fired outside the cabin. Running to the door, there, was Molly with blood running down her neck. Confronting her were two of the band, one holding the homestead’s pistol. Gray Hat, in an angry outburst of Comanche direct at the pistol holder, began pointing at the cow’s head. It wasn’t until the third shot that Molly dropped to the ground, whereupon one of the other band began cutting strips of flesh from the animal’s flanks. Alin was horrified by this, but her heart was broken when Gray Hat directed the pistol man across to the well, where he emptied the weapon’s last two bullets into the head of Sam.

 Alin was on the verge of tears when a small voice beside her made this brutal act many times more so,

“Mummy, why did they do that to Molly and Sam?”

It was Ben reaching for her hand.

Shortly, Alin with Ben and holding Katherine, were stood in the yard waiting for some indication of when they were to depart, when with a sharp shock she noticed smoke beginning to billow from Molly’s cowshed, her mouth instinctively opening to raise an alarm, but was just as quickly checked. The burning of her homestead had, in the last half day, never entered Alin’s mind but now she acceded to its fate. Soon the cabin too began to blaze, for which Alin turned her back and never glanced towards it again. Ben however, looked everywhere but said nothing.

On the band beginning to move, Alin was given not the slightest indication of what part she and her children were to take in this, other than a sharp gesture from Gray Hat that she should follow. Alin, shocked at the thought of having to walk, only took a few steps when Tall One, leading Pluto, dismounted and taking her hand forced her to grasp a strap securing several bundles on the horse. Also secured with them were six of seven of the homestead’s chickens, alive but with legs tied, dangling upside down among the sacking. Ben, he wrenched from her side and threw him onto his pony, then remounted with Ben positioned behind him. Alin could now see that she, carrying a shoulder bag, blanket roll and Katherine, would be making this journey on foot.

The pace was at a horse walk forcing the American to match the stride. This she did, leaving her breathing hard and legs bounding. The key in her staying with Pluto, was her grip on the strap. This allowed her to bound with larger steps.

 At midday they stopped in a wood above a small stream. When the horses and ponies had drunk their fill they were allowed to graze among the trees. While this was occurring Alin had nursed Katherine and fed Ben with bread and Molly’s butter she had wrapped in their blanket roll.

Holding the canteen at arm’s length she indicated to Gray Hat that it had to be filled, by pointing to the stream. The day was warm and she had been sprinkling much of its contents on Katherine’s head. The band leader, sat cross-legged beneath a near tree, jerked his head towards the stream, granting her request. Leaving her baby in the care of Ben, this errand should have only taken ten minutes but was to be extended several more.

On making her way through the scrub brush that abounded upwards from the stream bank, she suddenly found her path blocked by Tall One. Not once during the whole morning had she seen him so much as glance back towards her, but now here he was.

Alin, in silence studied his face for a few moments which revealed nothing to her, but there was hardly a need. Moving into the concealment of the bordering shrub she motioned for him to join her. When he did, she dropped to her knees in front of him and with a swift tug of his breechcloth it slipped from his front waistband and trailed to the ground, uncovering the genitals beneath. Alin, reaching forward with both hands took ahold of these before lowering her head down to take his manhood between her lips. As this grew from its softness to rigid hardness, Alin began to draw her head slowly back and forth. As her lips and tongue began generating a warm friction, Tall One then placed his hands firmly on his maker-of-pleasure’s head.

Alin, then increasing the speed of her movement, raised her eyes to find him observing her actions. As she advanced her stroking, clamping her lips even tighter, Tall One’s eyes began to narrow, then close. With this, Alin’s bobbing increased even faster. For over a minute this continued until Alin’s mouth began to fill. As Tall One’s hips jerked, Alin, reducing her speed dramatically, waited until her pleasure-seeker’s eyes were fully open again and staring into hers.

As Alin allowed his firmness to slip from her lips, she replaced his breechcloth, then standing, indicated he should hurry away. The act was loathsome but to court favor with her captors Alin was prepared to do far worse.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

For the last two miles Nathan had slowed his pony’s canter to a walk. He didn’t want to arrive at the homestead as Alin was cooking the evening meal. He was without having to lead horses now, as his sale at the Hutton stables was done. At first the stable owner attempted to haggle at a low price but soon realized he would have to increase his offer when Nathan pointed out, these were not plains ponies but horses from Mexico, raised from colts. The owner, with the knowledge that the Confederate Army was short of horses for the war, and was paying the top price, agreed to what Nathen had asked.

On presenting Alin’s two letters at the General Store, a very attractive young blonde woman behind the counter held him in a long conversation about Alin and how she and the new baby were progressing. She then asked if Nathan was returning that way, for another two letters had arrived addressed to her. He had intended to take a more direct course back to his village but then he remembered Alin’s coffee. His mother, Camila, during her Mexican haciendas service had taken to coffee and introduced Nathen to it at an early age. Alin’s coffee was a good one and her smile attractive.

Nearing the low rise overlooking the Steadman homestead, Nathan began to smell the aroma of smoke in the evening air, not the mellow scent of a plains camp fire but with the heavy taint of many odors. With the light touch of a heel his pony started forward at a run, which only ceased when Nathan drew back his mount’s reins at the far slope of the rise, overlooking the homestead. His eyes only rested for a moment on the smoking cabin before lifting them to study the darkening evening landscape westwards, towards Comanche homeland.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

The band with their captives, were at rest for their normal midday pause in a small glade beside a tree-bordered river. It was Alin and her children’s fourth day as Indian prisoners. On the evening of their first day’s travel Alin had arrived at the night’s stop exhausted and in pain of legs and feet. Left alone she was able to see to her children, nurse Katherine, and praise and reassure Ben. Her only assistance required by the band was in cooking the strips of meat cut from Molly, on sticks over a small fire, the group’s supper. Shortly after this sparse meal, Alin made arrangement for what she knew was bound to come. Seeing that Ben and Katherine were snuggle-wrapped in their one blanket, she moved several yards from them to spread the French tablecloth on the ground, then removing John’s shirt and trousers, lay down, the garments dropped over her, to wait. It wasn’t long before the first arrived and then the second and third. As of the previous night, Tall One was fourth.

She had a lot to reward him for, taking Ben on his pony, showing her how to survive the journey by holding fast to Pluto’s strap and the saving of Katherine when they attacked the cabin – a debt she intended to continue to pay, as she had shown him at the band’s noonday rest earlier. Their pleasuring of each other appeared, to Tall One, to be just as wanton as the first, but for Alin it was less so. Although she again rose with him to the pinnacle of lust and shared again their breathless recovery, for Alin this time her pleasure was restrained. She and the children were in a perilous position. She must, in every minute, remain alert and on her guard. Tall One was doing enormous kindnesses for her and her loved ones but would that kindness remain? Gray Hat came late but stayed longer.

 The third day mirrored the second except Alin was now granted, in blessed relief, to ride Mars.

With the fourth day half-gone, Alin was sat with her back to a tree, nursing Katherine, Ben at her side, awaiting Gray Hat’s signal to mount again, when all five Indians began to stir. Over the past days Alin had subconsciously given the other three braves names. The one who had shot Molly and Sam, and had retained the pistol in its holster slung around his neck, to her was “Holster”. Another wore a dark suit jacket – the one that she couldn’t find the first night, the one John wore on their wedding day – He was “Jacket”. The third, in pale leggings, was “Leggings”.

As all five Indians rose to their feet Alin heard one utter a word she was now familiar with, “Tonkawa.”

Twisting her body so she could peer around the tree, her eyes came to rest on another Indian walking his pony towards them, Nathan. With a gasp Alin quickly placed her daughter beside Ben, with a quiet whisper, “Ben, whatever happens you must stay here and look after Katherine for Mummy,” then stood.

Nathan some minutes earlier had seen the band resting and chose a tree-covered arrival in order to cause the most surprise. He approached, walking not at them but so only his left side was seen. On his right, his right arm hung down with his hand, unseen, gripping his rifle, while, from two fingers hung secured, a rawhide cord looped through the handle of his war club. As he approached, Nathan was assessing the danger he was to face. He could see no rifles, quivers but no bows, knives but no tomahawks or clubs, but there was a lance and a pistol. He then marked each in priority, and walked his horse to a selected position of advantage.

The Comanches had watched this rider’s approach, astonished but unafraid. He was one, they were five. As Nathan drew his pony to a halt he knew he only had seconds, they were stunned by his boldness but this could fade in a moment. With a snap of his chin towards Alin behind them he announced, in Comanche, “She my woman.”

In less than a second Gray Hat hurtled back their challenge, “You lie! She Comanche woman now.”

As the other four began to raise their voices in support of this, Nathan snapped his rifle into his shoulder, took aim and shot Holster dead. Then with a tap of his foot, his pony charged straight at Tall One. With the mount instantly on him, all he could do was throw up his lance arm in an attempt to warn off the war club as it swung down towards his head - a defence that only partly saved him, the stone of Nathan’s club glancing off the lance’s shaft to strike a weakened blow to Tall One’s temple, leaving him unconscious in the glade’s dust. With just slight foot movements Nathan had his pony spin like a top, back to deal with the other three of the band.

To his right stood Jacket but he, Nathan ignored, and headed his pony towards Gray Hat and Leggings who stood together twenty feet away. This was a mistake for as he passed, Jacket leapt at him clutching his waistband. With the Pony racing past Gray Hat and Leggings, Jacket succeeded in pulling the rider to the ground. Falling in a tangle the Comanche was first up, striking down with his knife. It struck Nathan in the shoulder. However he on one knee, thrust as if a punch, his own knife into his enemy’s chest between the ‘V’ of his rib cage and into the heart. Casting the body from him, he quickly recovered his war club, then stood facing Gray Hat and Leggings, a weapon in each hand, and slowly began to advance.

Alin, who had watched in a trance as all this action and death whirred before her, in that instant, as Nathan took those steps, realized that the moment she had been praying for, her and her children’s means of salvation was unfolding before her eyes. But it wasn’t assured. Nathan still had two opponents to overpower, both now facing him, knives in hand. Alin, with hardly a thought of the consequences of her actions, began running towards Nathan. On passing the still unconscious Tall One, she snatched up his abandoned lance, levelling it at Leggings, who, as did Gray Hat, stood with their backs to her. Alin’s sudden contact with Leggings was a collision, her hands losing their grip and falling with her victim. As he grunted and thrashed on the ground, getting up, the woman yanked the lance from Legging’s body to then plunge it downwards twice, before levelling it again and advancing on Gray Hat. Nathan, who had moved between the two to guard against Gray Hat attacking the woman, now also began threatening him with forward movement.

Gray Hat began to step backwards, then like all who only fight when victory is certain, turned and fled for the ponies. As he passed Tall One, he began to awaken from his unconsciousness, then stand drawing his knife, looking quickly about. Nathan, moving forward to challenge this new threat, was stopped by a large shout from the woman to his left,

“No!”

But then she began, lance levelled, moving towards him herself. As she approached, one hand gesturing to emphasize the meaning of the English word, she shouted,

“Go! Go! Go!”

For a moment the two former lovers confronted each other. Then as Nathan approached Alin, Tall One replaced his knife in its sheath and turned to walk, then jog, towards the ponies. Gray Hat was no longer in sight.

As the two victors of the recent blood-spilled encounter stood watching their last adversary depart on his pony, both turned to each other, only for Alin to gasp, “Nathan! Your shoulder! The knife!”

Turning his head, Nathan found Jacket’s knife still embedded in his shoulder. Reaching to remove it, Alin stopped him.

“No Nathan! Leave it in for the moment. Come with me.”

Taking the lead she returned to her tree. Discarding the lance, Alin then kissed and hugged Ben, thanking him for watching over Katherine. On rummaging through her shoulder bag she had packed for her daughter, she selected half a bedsheet and began tearing it into strips. Then, ordering Nathan to sit down, requested, “If you can, remove the knife.”

Resting in the fleshy part of the shoulder, this he did with an upwards jerk. Alin quickly pressed a folded cloth over the wound, telling Nathan to hold it in place while she securely tied it in place with the strips of bed sheeting.

That completed, with Nathan stating, “Now we go to my village,” they were on their way, Alin on an Indian pony, with Nathan leading, he in charge of Pluto and Mars, with Ben sitting behind him. They cleared the glade in less than ten minutes.

 **CHAPTER 4**

 *Hold on to what is good even if it is*

 *a handful of dirt.*

 Indian Blessing

As they left, Nathan informed Alin that they would stay mounted and on the move until after dark. Alin more than agreed of that. She and her children were freed of their captors and only wished to be as far away from their reach as possible. As it turned out they did more than what their liberator had forecast. Stopping only briefly at a small stream to water the animals, just before overtaken by darkness, Nathan then marched them on, now on foot leading his pony. They only stopped when Nathan could see Ben was about to fall asleep, halting for the night beside a river.

There they slept, for Alin to awaken with the sun just appearing, finding Nathan cooking the homestead’s last chicken over a small fire. Leaving her blanket to Ben and Katherine she joined her savior squatting to extend her hands toward the fire’s flame. It was a Texas October morning, and fresh.

“Nathan,” she began, “yesterday I didn’t thank you for what you’ve done. How were you able to find us?”

“Horses,” he answered, turning a chicken breast he held on a stick over the fire.

“Horses?” she questioned.

“They are simple to track,” he explained, “from the cabin.”

“But why did you return there?” she asked, puzzled.

“Coffee,” he replied with a playful smile.

“Coffee,” repeated Alin beginning to chuckle but only for a few moments, for the reaction made her realize she had not happily smiled or laughed since the appearance of the Comanches.

“You seen what they did then,” she asked. Nathan merely nodded.

“They killed Moses,” the woman’s voice was matter-of-fact but angry, “and burned Jonathan alive. As for me, they….”

“They are Comanche. It is what they have always done,” interrupted Nathan with a steady voice.

Alin, on the verge of blurting out the suffering she went through while captive, welcomed the man’s intervention. It is something best not retold.

For several moments Alin studied the man across the fire, busying himself with their breakfast.

“Nathan,” she enquired, “why did you come after us?”

“My woman,” came his answer solemnly, not looking up.

For Alin those two words said a hundred. He had not been able to save her but was prepared to risk his life to save hers and her children’s.

When they resumed their journey of escape into the eastern rising sun, Alin did so, alarmed. Katherine would not nurse, no matter how much she coaxed with her nipples. Eight hours later while following an upriver river bank, Nathan pointed out teepees in the distance, to announce, “That’s my village,” and Katherine had still not taken her milk. Alin was desperate with worry.

Alin had never been to an Indian village - The jumble of teepees, the village dogs always barking, strips of meat hung on poles to dry in the sun, and animal hides stretched in frames, also drying. To the young mother they were things of no importance.

As a crowd began to gather, mostly women and children, Nathan stopped in front of one of the teepees. There, a woman wearing a plain buckskin dress, in her fifties Alin guessed, greeted Nathan, then took Ben from the pony. After a brief conversation, while holding Ben by the hand, she approached Alin. Although dressed like, and looking an elderly Indian squaw, she addressed the American in perfect English,

“You are Alin?”

On Alin! Replying, “Yes!” the woman introduced herself.

“I am Nathan’s mother. You may call me Camila,” then reaching up, “This is your daughter and she is ill. Let me see her.”

Alin, lowered her child to Camila, then slipped off the pony to stand in front of the woman as she folded back Katherine’s coverings. Putting her ear to the baby’s lips then looking at Alin, asked, “When did she last take your milk?”

“Last night,” said Alin, asking, “Is she sick?”

 Camila didn’t reply until she said something in Tonkawa to a young girl behind her, who began to run off.

 “I cannot tell, but there is a woman in the village who might,” she then answered.

 Alin took back her baby, holding her close, then began to sway from side to side while whispering in her ear.

 After several minutes the sent girl returned following a woman of Camila’s age, but with grayer hair.

 As the two older women conversed, the new arrival looked at the baby in Alin’s arms as she continued to sway, then approaching the mother and child she reached out to touch Katherine’s cheeks, brow and neck. Finishing, she looked into Alin’s eyes, her face expressionless. Then turning her head to Camila, she gave an ever so slight shake.

 “No! No!” Screamed Alin. On the woman’s arrival she had hoped that with her she would bring relief for her daughter. But even though seeing that small movement she refused to believe Katherine no longer had a chance of life.

 “Camila! Camila!” she shouted, “She is still alive. I can feel her heart beating.” Alin placed her hand on Katherine’s chest, “Feel it! Feel it! And she’s still breathing! Camila! Camila!”

 Camila stepped forward and took Alin’s upper arm. The mother was sobbing now, tears forming in her eyes,

 “Come with me, Alin, we have a special place,” she offered, beginning to guide her towards the river.

 It was a short walk not far from the teepee into a wood, where they stopped several feet above the river. Evening was near but the night cool was still at bay.

 “Sit here, Alin,” offered the woman pointing to the trunk of a tree perched on a small mound of earth.

 Taking a seat, Ben scrambling up one side to sit beside her, Camila placing herself on the other, Alin, with tears still appearing but no longer crying, gently rocked Katherine in her arms, and so they sat for a long period, not talking.

 It was Ben who finally broke the silence, “Mummy! When will we eat?” Ben was looking up at his mother but from her there was no response. Alin had shut herself away in her own private world of sorrow.

 “Soon,” answered Camila for her, “We will eat in my teepee with my family.”

 With the sun setting, Camila leaned towards Alin to, just above a whisper, inform the bereaving woman her intentions.

 “Alin, I must leave you. We will come for you when our evening meal is ready.”

 Alin made no reply and Camila wasn’t expecting one. Leaving her still rocking Katherine in her arms, she took Ben’s hand and led him away.

 Sometime later she felt a hand rest on her shoulder.

 “Alin,” began Nathan, “we have food ready.”

 With no indication from the woman hunched on the tree trunk he tried again,

 “Alin, you haven’t eaten since this morning. Please! Come!”

 This did cause a response from Alin, one that gave him a brief startle.

 “Nathan! Oh Nathan!” she sobbed, clutching his upper thigh while dropping her forehead onto it, “You saved us! You saved Katherine! You saved Katherine!”

 She spoke no more but sobbed against him for several long moments until she felt him ease her away. Not long after, she became aware of fur being draped across her shoulders and under her feet.

 Alin never slept that night huddled on her log, gently rocking Katherine, to begin with, sobbing, but in the night’s cold hours this changed to constant thought, thought that turned to anger, then anger to awareness, clear awareness.

 On arriving in Texas she had been so happy. She and John were in love. They had a home and had plans for a better one, and they were beginning a family – Ben, with Katherine on the way. Life on the homestead was not an easy one, but they were coping. Then the war and John leaving, and then the Comanches came. Over and over throughout the night Alin’s mind probed through all of this, looking for the one cause that led to the ruin she was now engulfed in, and no matter how much she attempted to seek it elsewhere, she continually found herself being brought back to that moment in their homestead when she begged her husband not to leave her, only for him to silently shake his head and step through the cabin door.

 With the dawn Camila arrived and as she did, a figure that Alin had not been aware of, rose and left. Unknowing, she had not spent the night alone. One of several village squaws had been with her – Camila’s doing.

 “Come, Alin,” she ordered, “this time you must eat.”

 “Camila! I want to bury Katherine here?” requested the mother.

 “Our burial place is across the river,” informed the older woman, “I have always looked on here as a special place.”

 “Can this now be our special place?” asked Alin, more a plea than a request. Camila studied the young woman for a moment before replying, “I will consult the village Chief.”

 Entering Camila’s teepee the senior woman or wife of the teepee was the owner of it, not the husband. It was Tonkawa law. Alin found four others in occupation, Nathan, his two step-brothers by Camila’s two Indian husbands, and Ben. As Alin joined the four sat round a large bowl, she was offered a cup of water. Both vessels, she was to learn, products of buffalo bladders. Placing gently her dead infant just to the side of her, she ate and drank in silence, only Ben with his odd question, managing to prompt her to speak.

 Camila had left them for some minutes but now returned to eat as well. When finished, she gathered Alin, her dead daughter and Ben, taking them back to the river bank, passing on the way three of the village women holding digging tools. On arriving at the fallen tree trunk they found a small grave had been dug. Placing Katherine in this, they covered her by pushing the dug soil into the remaining space of the small pit.

 “We will cover this with stone from the river later,” suggested Camila, stepping back.

 Remaining at the graveside, Alin took Ben’s hand and, head bowed, began to recite a prayer, one she had learned by heart while attending her Louisiana church. On finishing, Camila’s voice joined hers with,

 “Amen.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 Three days later, in the late evening after the squaw and young baby had just left, one of four visited each evening for their baby to nurse off Alin, relieving her of the pain of her still-producing milk build-up, when Nathan laying nearby, began to utter Tonkawa words. Earlier his wound had become inflamed and he, for the last day, had been confined to the tent’s buffalo robes.

 Alin, concerned, moved across to his side, dabbing his forehead and face with a cloth. The tent had plenty of cloth from Alin’s homestead, carried into the village by Pluto and Mars. As Nathan continued to utter words she did not understand, she turned her head to ask Camila what he was saying,

 “He is calling to his woman,” replied the mother calmly. It was not that she was not concerned, which she was, it was the fact that she was Tonkawa and trained not to show it.

 Alin watched Nathan for several moments, very worried, then turned her head again and asked, “Camila, what’s Tonkawa for “I’m here”?

 The older woman stared back for a few seconds, then told her, three times, before Alin, leaning near and whispering loudly the words in the fevered man’s ear, and did so until Nathan fell quiet, whereupon she lay whispering her reply every time he called, through that night and the next day, until the fever finally broke.

 A few days after his recovery when their evening meal ended, all returned to sit around the fire. It was early November now. There, Nathan rummaged through the pouch he had been carrying during Alin and her children’s rescue. He could only use one hand because he was wearing an improvised sling on his other arm, a sling that Alin insisted he wear as she believed the inflammation and fever he had suffered was caused by Nathan’s constant use of it. In the pouch he had found something that, because of the chase, he had forgotten, the two letters given to him by the blonde woman at the General Store, one, she had said, from her husband and the other from her family in Louisiana.

 With a short apology, he handed them to Alin. Examining both, she then reached forward and laid one on the fire. Nathan said nothing, but his eyes never left her as she opened the other and read, stopping at one point to put her arm around Ben beside her, and with a smile,

 “Ben! Your grandmother wishes you a happy birthday.” He was three now. Then recovering her arm, began again to read.

 Nathan made no comment but for days after he pondered this act. Alin had clearly rejected any wish to know what her husband had written, therefore rejecting him. Not long after she had put the letter away, Alin caught him watching her, and smiled that beautiful smile.

 This beauty was also commented on by his mother as the two had walked the river bank together, a few days earlier.

 “You were very fortunate Nathan found you,” she commented.

 “Yes!” agreed Alin,” Lord knows what would have become of us if he hadn’t.”

 For several steps Camila said nothing, and then, “Alin, you are a most beautiful woman. Comanche women are very jealous of their men. If you had reached their village they would have deformed your face with knives and fire sticks.”

 **CHAPTER 5**

 *To walk the Red Road is to meditate and listen*

 *with all your being to the guidance.*

 Native American Proverb

As the days entered December, Alin, with her breasts now dry, had finally come to the decision that she and Ben would remain with the Tonkawas as members of the village. During these last weeks of their stay with the tribe she could find no fault with them or the life they led. At all time, no matter who, brave or squaw, she was treated as a guest. Even Ben had found friends, or more to the fact, they found him. Early each morning they would flock in through the tent flap then despite their young age would be off roaming about the camp. Alin soon learned not to worry about his safety, the Tonkawas revered children. However, Alin’s judgement on remaining with the tribe was also based on two other factors. The first, she was pregnant, three weeks after being repeatedly raped by the Comanches, her bleeding time never came. Once the child was born, where could she live? Not the homestead, not alone, not in the ruins of her cabin. Make her way back to Louisiana? There, of course, she would be welcomed by her family but with a half-breed baby in her arms she would be shunned throughout the county.

The second dilemma for Alin, she believed, was even more of a torment, for she had fallen in love with Nathan. The moment he appeared at the cabin she found herself being gently drawn to him. It was his quiet manner, the way he would look at her when she spoke, as if every word she spoke was golden, and his humor, not coarse but mischievous. Then there were moments, the moment when he put his hand on her shoulder as she sat with Katherine dead in her arms. The moment in a delirious fever he called for his woman. But the image of him that Alin will never forget is that of Nathan with Comanche dead and retreating around him, standing, knife and war club in hand, an enemy blade protruding from his shoulder, alert and calm, prepared, if needed, to fight a hundred more.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Late that evening, with just the odd camp dog barking, Alin lay awake, waiting, waiting to discover if her intentions to stay with the village would be welcomed by the one who, to her, mattered the most. Turning back the buffalo hide that covered her, with caution for she was naked, she began to crawl on hands and knees across the teepee. Arriving over Nathan, who lay on his side, she lowered her head to whisper in his ear, “Nathan!”

Startled awake, he instinctively rolled on his back to see her above him, Alin with a finger to her lips, then again in a whisper, “Nathan! I love you.”

Lowering her head she began to kiss him.

For several seconds there was no response but then slowly Nathan’s hands appeared, one on Alin’s head, the other her back. Being forced down, she broke the kiss, whispering, “I love you! I love you!”

Shifting his body so this invasion of passion could snuggle beside him, he now rose above her, then it was his lips pressing down on hers. This kissing and embracing continued for some minutes. Then Alin felt Nathan move over her body. As his hardened member sought her opening, Alin eased her legs apart for him. Twice they made love before the morning light prompted movement among the sleepers and Alin’s first day as a Tonkawa.

After the men had gone to their work and Ben off to play, Alin made her confession to Camila,

“Camila! I’m in love with Nathan.”

Camila, sewing beads to a moccasin, answered but didn’t look up,

“Yes! I seen. And heard.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

From that day Alin’s life suddenly took several backward steps. Born into a very well off, Louisiana family, all through her growing years she had wanted for nothing: never gone hungry, overwhelmed with clothing, servants to help with every need, and blessed with a loveliness and charm that had boys at her feet before she was hardly into her teens. Now she had become an Indian’s squaw, but for Alin the squaw of a man she loved beyond care.

On announcing her wish to Camila, she took her immediately to the village chief. On hearing her request his face hardly changed its expression, while asking Camila a number of questions that of course Alin couldn’t understand. On asking the older woman of these on leaving the chief’s teepee, she replied,

“He could not understand why you will not return to the whites.”

“But he still let me stay?” Alin questioned,

“Yes,” Camila replied, “When I told him you were in love with Nathan.”

So began for the twenty-three year old Louisiana Belle a new life of learning, the first of which and most important was for her to master the Tonkawa tongue. This, Camila took in hand, with the aid of the winter nights. At the start, a confusing endeavor, but by the time the village had migrated to its summer location on the high plain, Alin could converse with all in the village on an acceptable level. There were also the domestics to master, foremost, the cooking. The plains Indian was a hunter-gatherer, which meant he only ate what he could hunt or pluck from mother nature, or as Alin was to find, grow at their summer camp. The meals she now prepared consisted of animal meat, dried as well as fresh, dried berries, fat, bone marrow, dried beans and corn, most mixed together by pounding in the stone pounding bowl.

The tribe’s social occasions, the few that occurred that winter and spring, consisted mainly of dances. Although nothing to compare with the grandeur of the ones Alin had attended in her home state, still, most of the Tonkawa tribal ones did allow both sexes to dance…

 Except the Ghost Dance where only men took part singing, beating hand-held drums and in doing so, sending themselves into trances. The Wolf Dance was the tribe’s sacred dance, because to them the wolf was sacred. They, unlike most of the plains Indians, did not worship a great spirit. The Wolf was as near as this came. The tribe believed the Tonkawas descended from a mythical wolf and would never kill one. Still, Alin did see a number of the male performers dressed in wolf skins.

As for Alin’s dress, she soon discarded John’s shirt and trousers. She now wanted nothing near her that reminded her of him.

Most of the clothes that had arrived with her, the Comanche plunder, she had given away to the tribe. In their place she had adopted buckskin leggings, a cloth breechcloth and a shortened buckskin dress. The leggings gave her a mannish look but she had them because of the riding. After learning Tonkawa, riding a horse was next for her in importance.

Alin could ride and with a degree of skill but not on a bareback plains pony. To overcome this she had asked Nathan to teach her, completely unaware as to what she was asking.

Taking his woman on his pony to the herd’s grazing field, he then had her stand with him looking towards the whole herd.

“To ride as a Tonkawa,” he began, “you must first master four disciplines: Spirituality, Instinct, Awareness and Balance.”

Alin at first thought Nathan was pulling her leg, but said nothing.

“Spirituality is the ability to enter into the horse’s world and mind so that each works as one,” Nathan then went on,

 “Instinct. In order to trust each other you first must disperse your initial fear. I will show you.”

Jumping on his pony, Nathan rode into the herd to soon return leading a brown and white mare. Dismounting, he took the bridle off, then said to Alin,

“You must start by first causing the pony to be frightened of you.” He told Alin then, “Wave your arms and shout.”

Alin, not quite understanding the point, began to protest.

“Nathan, I thought we were here for...”

“Please, Alin,” interrupted her man, “There is a reason.”

Alin began to flap her arms and shout, but not enough.

“Scream! Scream! Wave your arms faster!” encouraged Nathan.

The pony, genuinely disturbed, began to trot away.

“Now! Run after her but keep shouting loudly!”

“Nathan, this is sill…”

“Run! Run! Shout! I am not being foolish,” he ordered, now running with her, to stop after a few yards. “Keep running, Alin.”
 With the pony trotting away from her, Alin did, until Nathan called again, “Stop! Alin! Stop!” Which she did, until Nathan joined her as the pony came to a halt.

“Now!” he directed, “Walk towards her until she starts to walk away, then when she stops you start to walk again. Do that three more times, then stand still until she comes to you.”

“She comes to me?” replied the woman doubtfully.

“Yes!” said Nathan, “Now go!” and so Alin did her three walks and waited, and waited, and waited. An hour passed, an hour in which Alin had looked towards Nathan some twenty times, expecting to have him call this foolishness off. Then the pony which had been alternately grazing and glancing at Alin, stopped grazing to just stand and stare at the woman. Then she began to amble in a slow pace towards Alin. Stopping a few yards short of the astounded woman, it again began to stare, but only for a few breaths, then moved forward to begin to nuzzle Alin’s cheek.

With a cry, Alin exploded with joy, clasping the pony’s lower jaws and kissing its cheeks.

“You thought I was mad, didn’t you?” accused Nathan, now joining them.

“How did you know? How did you know?” squealed Alin still amazed at what had just happened.

“Instinct,” he smiled, “Instinct.”

Over the early winter months of 1862 Alin would also conquer the secrets of Awareness, the blending of soul, body, and mind and Balance, the hearts of humans and nature standing in respect of each other. In so doing, she and her pony, Alin named her “Cleopatra”, would race the prairie’s winds together.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Mid-April was the time when the tribe left their winter camp and moved to their summer residence on the high plain, not that they had a calendar to consult, almost all were completely ignorant of even the white man’s year. But calendar they had – their noses smell the wind, and their eyes – to see the grasses grow. Alin had heard this move talked of since the chill nights had gone and was curious as to how it would be done, and was surprised at how quickly it happened. One day the village chief announced that “the tomorrow, they would go”.

As soon as the morning meal was consumed all the teepees were cleared of their contents and placed in small separate piles. Then the skins and buffalo hides of the teepees’ coverings were removed. After the poles were taken down ponies arrived, whereupon the poles were then utilized in a second role, with the ponies in becoming a travois or wheel-less sled. The ponies were fitted with a crude harness at their shoulders or withers. Next, on each side of the horse the pole’s narrow end was then attached, leaving the pole’s butt end to drag on the ground. On the poles, just behind the pony’s rear legs, short lengths of wood were tied, securing the two poles together, which provided small transportation platforms for each of the small piles of the teepees’ contents and their former coverings. To Alin’s surprise, the tribe and village were on the move, north, in less than an hour.

On the third day of their trek they arrived at a beautiful lake with forests on two sides and high grassy ridges to the north and east. Although Alin was seven months pregnant, she was also a squaw now and had worked just as hard as if she wasn’t, and continued to do so with the planting of their crops, corn, squash, beans, sunflowers and tobacco. In ancient folklore it was declared that because the wolf did not plant and harvest, then nor should the Tonkawas. However, the village chief overruled this. When much younger, he had seen the effects of starvation, and intended that his tribe should never again suffer its want.

It was there at this lakeside on the 27th of June 1862 that Alin suffered the pain of her third childbirth. Ignorant of the date and ignorant of the fact, her husband John, fourteen hundred miles to the east, also lay in pain, on a Virginian battlefield, with a Union rifle ball in his leg.

 **CHAPTER 6**

 *Hood’s Texas Brigade shall retain*

 *its formation as long as there is a man*

 *to wave its flag.*

 *President Jefferson Davis CSA*

It was almost midnight before John Steadman and the wagon with its passengers of war volunteers, there were nine now, arrived at Hutton. There, they were given coffee by Matthew Sullivan, the General Store owner and his wife Marla, then told to bed down for the night on the store’s veranda.

In the morning, after given a breakfast again by the Sullivans, they were gathered together by their militia Captain, Bill Gary. John, as were all the others, had been enrolled a year earlier as a force to react against any hostile Indian encroachment into the frontier. Gary informed them that they would be leaving in an hour for East Texas where they will be formally enlisted in the Confederate Army. To do this they would have to walk. They were thirty five, none had horses and the one mule draw wagon was their chuck wagon.

As they formed up to leave, Tom Sullivan kissed his wife goodbye. She, unlike his own departure, with newly born baby in her arms, tears flooding her cheeks, smiled and waved. Reflecting on this, Steadman’s doubts on his decision to leave his own wife began to flicker as a tiny flame within him. A tiny flame that would build to a roaring blaze as the years progressed.

Their journey was a duration of three and a half days, arriving to find a camp in shambles. It was a tented camp which accommodated two fledgling battalions, the 4th and 5th Texas. Steadman’s party was placed with the 5th. The company they formed within this battalion was soon to be known as L Company, also referred to as, The Brazos Boys, which their own Bill Gary was assigned to command. Although most were eager to get to grips with the Yankees, the two Battalions remained in Texas, doing very little to improve their appearance as soldiers or master much needed soldier skills.

The reason for the first was because they had become an unwanted orphan. No one, Confederate Government nor State, were prepared to provide the funds to fit them out with uniforms or issue them with proper arms. As for the second, Texas, apart from Indian bands, had not fought a war for twenty years, so those with the knowledge to do so were few to be found. For six months they wasted away, wearing the cloth they arrived in and shouldering arms from muskets to Colt revolver rifles and shotguns.

In that time John wrote Alin four letters, it would have been more except for the scarcity of writing paper, and he received five. He always expressed his love and sorrow for being apart and finished with overwhelming love for Alin. Encouragingly, so did she. These letters he kept and constantly re-read – the one the most, contained the news of the arrival of Katherine, their daughter.

Finally, in September, the orphans were found adoption, but this adoption would involve a very long journey to the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia. Once there, again occupying a tented camp, all their needs were provided for, uniformed and armed with British Enfield rifles. Here also, they became a full Brigade, being joined with their 1st Battalion and the 18th Georgia. Their Brigade Commander was Brigadier General Wigfall, South Carolinian and highly puzzled by the Texans carefree way of confronting army discipline.

Shortly they moved to Dumfries on the Potomac River to be now in shouting distance of Federal troops in Maryland on the far shore. Here, sickness prevailed, measles and pneumonia, ending a number of lives. But a close watch on the enemy had to be maintained. During one occasion Steadman was on a nine-man scouting patrol, when a large force of Federal troops trapped them in a house. To make their escape Mel Peterson climbed on the roof, then shouted down to the others loud enough for their enemy to hear as well, that a large body of Southern cavalry were about to arrive. As the Federal force around them withdrew to form a line of defence, Steadman and his patrol made their escape.

Since he had arrived in Virginia, John had received only one letter from his wife, posted in October. It was after Christmas that he learned the reason. Sitting on a log outside his tent with a blanket over his shoulders one afternoon, passing the time with other company members, he watched as Tom Sullivan appeared from his own tent. There had been a mail arrival just after the noon meal so there was nothing odd about the letter he held in his hand.

On arriving among the group he approached Steadman, putting out his hand with the letter.

“Here, John, this was sent me by my Pa, but it’s for you.”

“Me?” questioned Steadman, taking it.

Tom said nothing as he stepped back.

“John,” it began, “I’m afraid I have bad news for you. At the back end of October Sep Adams had cause to pass by your homestead. John, I’m truly sorry but he found Moses and Jonathan dead, the cabin burned and no sign of Alin and the small ones.” There was more about he, himself, searching through the cabin’s ashes but finding no human remains, how he held all of Steadman’s mail, not sending it back to him and only now with no news of his family from any source, finally writing to inform him through a letter to his son.

This, John never read. After the first three sentences he was on his feet and running, blanket discarded, letter clutched in his hand.

Bursting into his Battalion Commander’s tent he found Colonel Archer in conference with two of his staff officers.

“Colonel! Colonel! You got to release me. My family. They got my family. I got to get back to Texas.”

Colonel Archer straightened himself in his chair, “Steady, son! Steady!” Then to his two officers, “Gentlemen, we’ll continue this later.”

“Colonel, please. You gotta let me go. They’re taken! They’re taken!”

“Steadman, sit down.” It wasn’t an order, it was a request.

Colonel Archer had been in command of the 5th for some time and was close to his men. Steadman he had marked as steady and reliable. The man before him now was in shock and no longer in control of himself, something he well understood. He was familiar with the Texas Frontier and instantly knew why he was raving.

“I can’t, Colonel. I got to get going.” The soldier was stepping first one way and then another, looking at his Colonel but aware of nothing. “Please, Colonel, I gotta hurry! Gotta hurry!”

“Steadman!” The Colonel’s voice was high but not a shout. Then lowering it “Let me see the letter.” It hadn’t been hard to notice.

Steadman froze still for a moment, then quickly he spread the sheet out on the Colonel’s small desk for him to read. Archer, picking the letter up, took several long minutes in reading, hoping that when he next spoke to the young soldier, he would be calmer.

“Steadman!” He began, finally lowering the letter and looking up, “I clearly understand your request to return to Texas. Your wife and children are missing and you have to get back to search for them.”

“Yes, Colonel! Yes!” confirmed the soldier hastily.

“Steadman! You are not the first,” the Colonel informed him, “Similar letters have arrived in the Brigade in the last few months, one in the Fourth Battalion and two in the First. In each case the request by the receiver of the letter to return home, has been refused.”

“Refused?” repeated Steadman, “But why?”

“The war.” answered the Colonel. “We have a war to fight and win. If we allowed our men to leave because of hostiles attacks or fear of attacks we would lose half the troops overnight.”

“But Colonel,” pleaded Steadman, “My family, they need help. They need me.”

“I understand, Steadman,” sympathized the older man,” but the Army has set this rule and it’s a rule we are both bound by. I cannot grant you your request.”

“I can’t stay, Colonel. I can’t stay,” half-threatened, half-pleaded the soldier.

“Steadman! You will stay,” explained the Colonel, even though his own feeling sided with the younger man.” You can desert and try to make your way back to Texas but it’s a long walk, and if you are caught you will be brought back and, no doubt, shot.” He let this take its effect before adding with a voice heavy with sympathy, “Now son, I have a Battalion to command. You will have to leave.”

John stood for a moment, lost, then recovering himself took the letter from the Colonel as he held it out, then left the tent and began to walk. An hour later he was still walking until coming to a wooded area, then stopping to lean his head against a tree. All the time he had been walking, his mind was racing with thoughts, thoughts of Alin, the homestead, their boundless happiness, Ben, then his leaving and the unforgivable way he did it. Alin was right. He should have stayed. The letter proved that, and so far his presence in the war had not provided him with one hint that he being in it was having the slightest effect on its outcome.

In anger, then rage he began to kick the tree, harder and harder before collapsing at its base, tears running from his eyes. After dark he returned to the camp, in pain and limping on an injured foot.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

From that day John Steadman ceased being John Steadman. The man who replaced him seldom smiled, no longer laughed. Still, he didn’t cut himself off from his comrades, complain or refuse – in doing so, becoming the perfect soldier, always volunteering, getting on with every trial and seeing it done. To others it may have appeared that he had taken to army life with a will, but to John it was quite the reverse. He now considered himself a prisoner of the war and desperately wished to see it finished with.

As winter reluctantly released both armies from their imposed “neutrality”, the Texas Brigade, under its new commander, John B Hood, left their winter quarters in early March 1862 to first, encamp north of Fredericksburg on the Rappahannock River. This was the beginning of John Steadman’s first taste of war, a bitter taste that was to remain with him for the next three years.

In early May the Brigade left for Eltham’s Landing where the Fifth Battalion, under command of Colonel Archer, fought their first action, one in pursuit of a fleeing Federal force, which caused them only light casualties. The next morning with enemy forces arriving, all Confederate forces retreated back to Richmond to take up a position in defence of their capital. Then on June 11th, Hood’s Brigade along with others, were sent by train to Staunton, close to the Shenandoah Valley, coming then under the command of General “Stonewall” Jackson. After a short rest, they and Jackson’s troops then began a roundabout journey by rail and foot, under strict secrecy, back to Richmond. There, still in secret, they prepared for battle.

On the morning of the 27th June the Brigade with their Fifth leading, under their new Colonel Jerome Robertson, marched towards their first major battle, to be known as Gaines Mill. In late afternoon they found themselves approaching a part of the line that was no line at all. Parties of troops huddled in shelter, others engaging the enemy from behind cover, while cannon fire was landing about but not doing much damage, just frightening, if close. General Hood, halting his troops, rode off to enquire of what use he and his command could be.

Returning at the gallop he began shouting orders to his Colonels, resulting in twenty minutes later the whole Brigade facing a bush-covered ridge line. With the order to advance in two ranks, they began to climb the ridge, struggling through the bush. On reaching the crest, Steadman reformed with the rest of his company into their two ranks, he in the front. The struggle up the ridge had caused the Brigade to separate. The Fifth was now alone, except for three hundred yards to their front there were enemy entrenchments where several hundred Federal troops were engaging them with rifle fire. Perhaps they were green troops, for their fire was going mostly over the Texans’ heads. With cooler heads and deadly frontier aims they returned the firing, then on the command “Charge” from Colonel Robertson, the whole battalion sprang forward, reloading as they ran. Seeing them come, the Union troops fired one more volley, then fled. The Fifth took the emplacement but were not to halt, Colonel Robertson leading them further. On crossing an open field soon after, they came upon a Union Regiment, flags flying, approaching them. Preparing to fight, they watched amazed as their enemy halted, lowering their flags, and proceeded to wave their hats in surrender.

John Steadman, however, was not there to witness the act. When the Union troops occupying their defences on the ridge fired their last volley, he received a wound, shot in the calf of his left leg, and was knocked unconscious on falling. When Steadman awoke it was dark and he, unable to walk. Not discovered until the next morning, he was soon taken to an aid post to eventually spend a month recovering in a Richmond hospital.

 **CHAPTER 7**

 *The secret to happiness is freedom*

 *And the secret to freedom is courage*

 Thucydides

Alin sitting astride Cleopatra, with closed eyes. She raised her face to the sun for several seconds to feel its young warmth as it began its climb into a new day.

 Then lowering her head and opening her eyes again, before her she gazed upon a centuries repeated sight, of a Tonkawa village on a Texas plains migration. It was Mid-September 1862 and Alin’s tribe was just beginning its return to their winter camp site on the Maslak River. As happened on leaving the winter camp in April, the whole village was down, packed on travois and with a hundred or so tribal members and a hundred and ten ponies and horses, were on the move, just a tiny speck on the vast Texas panorama.

 On Alin’s back she carried her three-month old daughter, Silent Star, the name Nathan gave her just minutes after her birth, when he left their teepee to gaze skywards. Also on the pony was Ben but she didn’t expect him to remain; soon off to share a ride on one of the travois with his play friends.

 Alin was not sad at leaving this, to her, heaven-sent paradise. On arriving there was much work to do, mostly the planting of crops. But once completed, life fell into a set routine of normal camp life. The men hunted and fished, using nets from three canoes the tribe kept with them while in both winter and summer locations. For Alin and the other squaws, their days of course were kept busy with cooking, tending the crops and seeing to the hides and furs the men provided from their hunting. Between all this though, Alin treasured most the few times she and Nathan were able to leave the village, alone, and seek out a shady wood or grassy slope where they could express their shared love for endless hours.

 Alin’s pregnancy restricted these special moments but on signalling to Cleopatra to join the moving column with a light touch of her foot, she was already looking forward to the next summer when their days of lovemaking would be more plentiful than the last.

 Despite the crudeness of Indian village life Alin at this moment did not regret the choice she had made although there was much she wished she could have retained, contact with her Louisiana family, soap and Molly’s milk, a stove to cook on, her visits to Hutton for news, and her and Lorna Sullivan’s long young-mother to young-mother talks. Still, on accepting the life of a Tonkawa, these deprivations also had their compensations.

 Ben was no longer lacking companionship. He now had a whole village to play with, and Cleopatra, who to Alin was a sister – when mounted their flesh was joined, their minds as one. Her Tonkawa was now becoming fluent, able to joke and discuss matters with the other village squaws without ignorance of words. For all these points of goodness there was one other that overwhelmed the rest. It wasn’t just their lovemaking that had Alin so devotedly beguiled of Nathan, it was much more, far more. An example occurred shortly after Silent Star had arrived, when Alin, propped up on the teepee floor among their sleeping coverings, reached up, asking Nathan to return, “My daughter.” “Our daughter,” He corrected, “Our daughter.” From him, although the child Comanche breed, there would be no rejection.

 During the harvest period, the tribe eating well on boiled or roasted corn, spent long hours drying the corn, ears, beans, tobacco leaves and sunflower seeds, all filling sacking and hide bags for transporting on the travois back to their winter camp, as food source to see the village through the cooler coming months.

 And so they left with Alin dreaming of their return when she and Nathan will have the whole summer in which to indulge their passions for each other, unknowing that, during the coming summer, she would again be pregnant, this time with Nathan’s daughter.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Nathan stood with his pony’s reins in one hand, looking down into a shallow valley where a large stream ran eastwards, the senses of his eyes, ears and nose alert. The setting very much reminded him of the Steadmans homestead, cabin on raised ground, well in front, corral and outbuildings. The tragedy of the scene was they matched too well, for this cabin was also a gutted, burnt-out shell.

It was early April 1863. The plains were no longer harsh and wind-blown and he was on his last hunt before the tribe once again moved north to their summer camping ground. The day before, he and his party of three others had encountered the tracks of a Comanche war party of perhaps twenty. Sending the other three back to the village to warn of their presence, he followed the band in hope of learning of their intentions. Having arrived an hour earlier he had spent most of that time out of sight of the cabin, walking a wide circle around it. On the far side, near the stream, he found the Comanche tracks leading southeast, but he was wary of approaching the cabin. The band, from their tracks, told Nathan they had left two days past. There was no logical reason any should have stayed but Nathan had long learned that Comanches do unpredictable things.

 An hour later he was at the cabin, still smoldering. However, hunting through the remains of the homestead, all signs were hopeful that the family had escaped before the band arrived. No blood, no male adult’s mutilated or burnt remains. All the indications were that the Comanches had set fire to the abandoned homestead. Nathan followed the band for another day until he was assured their murderous intents were destined elsewhere. But the band’s presence was yet another indication that the Comanche had to be considered, at all times, a constant threat.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 After her second winter with the tribe, Alin Steadman was once again sat astride Cleopatra watching her village being dragged behind ponies destined for another summer stay on the Texas high plains For her, the winter months passed much as the last except having to, for a third time, mother a baby, Silent Star, or as her grandmother named her, Martina, a Spanish name. In the evenings by the fire, Camila spoke often of her days with the Spanish family, which lead to the start of her teaching Alin the language, something she was wholeheartedly in favor of. She had mastered the challenge of Tonkawa and with winter winds restricting movement to the interior of the teepee, adopting to learn yet another language was bound to make the nights hurry by.

 They had lost one of their tent members that winter, Tall Buffalo, Camila’s second son. He had taken a woman and was now living with her in her mother’s teepee. Once children arrive, they will then erect and make a home in their own teepee. This left Sky Owl as the sole bachelor in the tent, a standing, it seemed to Alin, that he had not the slightest care about. He was eighteen and asked Alin many questions of her growing up in Louisiana and the way of her upbringing. Most, she could see he didn’t understand, which only prompted more questions - questions Alin recognized as keenness in wanting to know. Not too many years ago she too was listening and asking, listening and asking just as her young brother-in-law was doing now.

 As Cleopatra stepped off, joining the pony and buckskinned pageantry, Alin held Martina tightly as she sat at her front. She was ten months old now. Cleopatra was restricted to walking because she was dragging a travois, on which, as well as a normal load, sat Ben and two of his companions.

 Unlike her husband, Alin knew where she was going. John at that moment, also on the move, had no indication of his destination - not until his arrival at a small, Pennsylvanian railroad junction town, north of the Maryland border, Gettysburg.

 **CHAPTER 8**

 *The Hood Brigade.*

 *Their ragged clothes make no difference,*

 *The enemy never see their backs.*

General Robert E. Lee

When John Steadman was released from the Richmond hospital, after recovering from the leg wound he received at the Battle of Gaines Mill, he re-joined the Texas Brigade at a camp on the Mechanicsville Road, just three miles from Richmond. On the 8th of August 1862 the Brigade broke camp and headed north until on the 28th they fought the Battle of Second Manassas. On winning this, the Brigade buried its dead and with barely a pause marched north again, where the Confederate and Union Armies clashed once more, at Antietam Creek.

It was here that John lost his close friend, Tom Sullivan. The fighting began at 3.a.m. on the morning of the 17th of September. Late in the morning, Steadman’s Fifth Battalion was told to drive some Federal soldiers out of a wood, which they did, but on the wood’s far side, came against several Union regiments advancing towards them. Taking up a battle line, the Fifth stood their ground, engaging the enemy before them. Tom Sullivan and John Steadman, as they had done several times before, were fighting shoulder to shoulder, screaming and cursing, as was the whole Battalion, between loading and firing their rifles.

With a set drill they would first rip open with their teeth the powder end of a ball-enclosed cartridge, ram this down their rifle barrels before placing a firing cap in the recess where the rifle’s firing hammer could strike it, on the trigger being fired. Then it was rifle into the shoulder, aim and fire. This was a cycle of battle that in their line was now constantly in motion. The fighting had been in progress for half an hour or more when Steadman involuntarily flinched as a screaming rush of air erupted to his right, and Tom was gone.

Looking over his shoulder John found himself staring at a crumpled form screaming on the ground. Tom Sullivan had been in the path of a cannon ball which tore through his lower stomach, removing his backbone and paralysing his legs. Steadman quickly resumed his loading; one sharp glance told him that, for the young man with a wife and daughter back in Texas, his life was finished. An hour later with the Union troops in retreat and them out of ammunition, the Battalion and others were removed from the line and marched away.

Some weeks later he wrote a letter to Tom’s wife, with the description of his death much reduced in horror.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 After the battle of Fredericksburg, Steadman was promoted to corporal. The Brigade spent the winter and spring of 1862/1863 mainly on the move, until they were given several weeks’ rest at Racoon Ford, on the Rapidan River, from mid-May to mid-June. Then they were on the march again in several unwarned-of directions until they found themselves in Pennsylvania, well north of the Union capital, Washington.

 On the afternoon of the 2nd of July the Hood brigade stood facing a high hill feature known to the citizens of the nearby town, Gettysburg, as Little Round Top, which the Union army was holding in some strength. The Confederate Army, just under a mile to its front was also in some strength, with the intention of capturing the hill. At just after 4p.m. the order to advance was given.

 John Steadman, now with the rank of Sergeant, grasped his rifle and holding it in the high port began to study the enemy ground. At the base of the hill was a low stone wall where firing was coming from. Above them, a hundred feet, was a level where more firing was being aimed their way. Above that were more levels on which more batteries of cannon artillery were posted, also firing their solid metal balls that landed among the Southern troops advancing towards them.

 When General Hood, mounted on a horse, judged the distance right he gave a cry:

 “Forward! Steady! Forward!”

 With a rebel yell the Confederates sprang into the charge.

 The Union sharpshooters behind the stone wall, to a man, took to their heels. As they climbed the hill-slope, men in gray below them halted to take aim. Most gained the first level but this was no place to rest, the Texans were at their backs. The level was near two hundred yards across, with boulders and trees scattered about. The size of the boulders varied greatly, from very small to that of houses.

 Among these the Union soldiers took up defences engaging the Southern soldiers as they scrambled onto the level. Worst though, for those arriving, was to find they were also being targeted from the heights above by cannons as well as rifles. Scattering to cover, boulders, trees or stumps, all cohesion of a disciplined attack vanished as if mist in the sun.

 Everyone, both officers and men, began shouting orders. None were obeyed, even by those giving them. For the men fighting that day, this tiny field of battle would be given the name; “Devils Den.”

 John Steadman, crouching behind a tree trunk, was like so many others, lost as how to advance further. Of the enemy at ground level, they could be engaged and attacked but to do so meant leaving cover, which exposed this brave act to aimed-fire from above. Steadman, looking about, could see only others like him keeping in cover, none daring to attempt a lone attack. But there were some in the “Den” who well understood an attempt must be made.

 With the Colonel laying dead, and the second-in-command wounded, it was Major Rogers who faced the challenge. Throughout the rest of the day and into late evening, he led attacks. Three times the Texans charged forwards, and three times they had to retire. As the men tried to force through the gaps between the large boulders, the Union soldiers picked them off. The next day the Hoods men held what they had, then in the evening, slipped away. Repulsed, with ranks thinned but never bowed, they conceded. For them and the Confederacy, the Battle of Gettysburg was over.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 The following day, 5th of July 1865, General Lee, the commander of the Confederate troops in the battle, put his army into retreat back to Virginia, upon, as it transpired, the Texas Brigade spending most of that time providing the army’s rear guard. At the turn of August the Fifth Battalion was stopped at a small stream just north of the Rapidan, guarding the rear of the Army as it crossed the river.

 L Company, the Brazos Boys, had just returned to their small camp area beside the road, after a night of guarding at a stream crossing, when a Colonel rode up with a young Lieutenant, also mounted, following. Looking over the scene for a moment, he then snapped, “Who’s in command here?” Steadman, about to settle down in the shade of a tree, stood observing the senior officer before replying. The man, unknown to John, was attired in an un-soiled uniform, as was the Lieutenant.

 “I am, Colonel.”

 Which was regrettably true. The Brigade, on withdrawing from Little Round Top, could muster to the colours only a third of the men they had advanced with. The rest – dead or wounded. The Brazos Boys had only fifteen left out of a starting of forty-one.

 “Well, wake those men up and get them on their feet.” He pointed to six or seven of the Company sprawled on a turf of grass, “You are supposed to be the rear guard.”

 “What did you have for breakfast, Colonel?” asked Steadman in reply.

 The Colonel, taken aback, puzzled, said nothing.

 “We haven’t had any,” continued the Sergeant, “None yesterday as well, in fact we haven’t eaten a meal for two days.”

 Before the Colonel could come up with a counter to this, another voice behind Steadman spoke up, justifying the slumbering soldiers,

 “Shucks! Colonel! Them aint a’sleepin’. Them’s our ambush. When the Yankees turn up and see them a’sleepin’ like, they’ll all rush in and then we shoot ‘em.”

 Steadman didn’t turn around. He was well familiar with the voice. Mel Peterson could find a light-hearted side in all situations, no matter how bloody it got.

 The Colonel looked about at the grinning soldier for a moment, unaccustomed to Texas humor, then with a curt, “I’ll make a report about this,” before turning his horse to trot away, followed by his Lieutenant and a parting well-wish from Steadman:

 “Hope you enjoy your supper, Colonel,”

 Leaving L Company blithely laughing, while slapping Steadman and Petersen on their backs.

 Once returned to Virginia, the Brigade made a three-week halt at Fredericksburg. There the Battalion used the time to refit, replace losses in men and elect officers to replace those killed or wounded. Each company member had a vote and with all officers from L Company either dead or disabled, Bill Gary had lost an arm at the Devils Den, they had to elect replacements. When the votes were counted, it was John Steadman’s name that stood out. Apparently, the only member of the company that didn’t vote for John Steadman, was John Steadman.

 **CHAPTER 9**

 *You shall bring out much seed*

 *to the field but you will gather in little*

Deuteronomy

For the first time since becoming a member of the tribe, Alin was having significant anxieties. Not of her actions in doing so, or of her reasons for remaining, the cause was their isolation. It was November 1863. Two months earlier she had given birth to a fourth child, Morning Light, and now on returning to their tribe’s winter camp she was once again sat in her special place, with another daughter like Katherine in her arms and like Katherine, dead.

It was becoming dusk and Alin had been sat since mid-day, when Morning Light had died. Her cheeks were tear-stained but long dried, for Alin’s sorrow was within her. Sorrow that the daughter, the loving creation of her and Nathan’s blissful mating had died, had died far out of reach of modern doctors and their modern medicines. Over and over she pictured in her mind the occasion when she, as a child, had fallen from their garden swing and sprained her ankle. As she was being carried into the house to be laid on a sofa, a rider was dispatched into the town for the family’s French doctor, Doctor Larousse. Within thirty minutes he arrived, racing up to their front entrance in a one-horse open carriage.

As Alin, remaining on her tree log entrapped in her dreams of – if only – she started as something brushed her ear. Glancing quickly over her shoulder she found Cleopatra standing silent. Alin had left her at the teepee and she had now come to share her sister’s mournful vigil. Reaching under the mare’s jaw, Alin held her while laying her cheek on the pony’s. “Oh Cleo! Oh Cleo!”

In the morning, Alin, Camila and Nathan buried Morning Light beside Katherine, while Ben, Martina and a small group of other children watched. The brief ceremony ended with a short prayer from Alin and a whispered sigh, “Please God. No more. No more.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

The following spring the tribe was once again at their lakeside, planting, hunting and fishing. Only this year they were to, experience an horrific, unimaginable tragedy.

The year before a drought had begun shortly before the tribe returned to their riverside camp. This drought was now persisting into the year of 1864, causing the tribe members, or more so the squaws, extra labour. Without water the crops would not grow, which necessitated the carrying of water from the lake to the crop field. Most was transported in water skins on ponies but also by hand in the larger buffalo bladder pots.

It was on a mid-May day as it approached the high sun period that heads in puzzlement began to turn and stare southwards. There on the plain’s edge a darkness had appeared and was gradually creeping up into the sky, spreading outwards east and west. It was not storm clouds or a wrongly-placed eastern night that was approaching. To all, this was a marvel that the members of the tribe had never witnessed before, except one.

As Chief Standing Elk emerged from his teepee, it took him only a glance before he began screaming commands and waving his arms. As a young boy fifty years or more earlier, he had seen and suffered the wrath of a similar force as the one rapidly approaching his village now, hundreds upon hundreds of millions of locusts. With the threat racing ever closer and their Chief screaming, most just stood in disbelief, but then began to obey. His orders were simple. Everyone was to seek shelter in their teepees, cover all food with robes and blankets, then lay on the floor and cover themselves.

Alin who was transporting water skins to the crops with Cleopatra’s help, raced to the teepee to find Camila covering their food as Ben and Marta looked on with bemused expressions that only children possess. Seeing all was in hand she returned to her pony to watch in wonderment as this black swarming upsurge approached. Within minutes, large grasshopper-like insects with wings began landing and attempting to land on both Alin and her pony. Re-entering the teepee, Alin, once assured Ben and Martina were well covered and Camila tucked in, she returned to Cleopatra, who was in the first stage of fright, stamping her hoofs and shaking her head wildly, with good cause for she was now infested with the forerunners of this mass insect attack, as was Alin as soon as she appeared from the teepee.

With speed of action as well as decision, Alin threw back the teepee flap and led her pony inside. Letting it fall back in place she snatched a blanket from the floor, wrapping it around both Cleopatra’s head and her own upper body, which resulted in her spending the next three hours in a frantic war, waged in slapping away and crushing hundreds of the invading insects. For she could not seal the blanket completely, allowing free entrance to all who attempted. This was the result of the open smoke outlet of the teepee, through which thousands entered and never left. At one point Alin became aware of movement into the teepee. She could only assume this was Sky Owl, who had been on the lake fishing, which it was. He had fought his way to the shore while the others sought refuge in the lake’s waters.

“Sky Owl!” shouted Alin, “Lay down and cover yourself!”

She received no reply and assumed he heard and complied.

Her real worry at that moment was for Nathan. He was with a hunting party, unprotected in the open prairie.

On reaching a point where Alin was convinced this madness would never end, she gradually became aware the creatures’ hideous combination of whirl in flight and beating of wings, was slowly diminishing. With the teepee’s many thousands trapped within, Alin still had to repel those invading her blanket. But then in frantic desperation she threw off the thing and with Cleopatra, fled into the open. The insects were still thickly about but in ten minutes the air was blessedly empty of them. Re-entering the teepee she quickly had everyone out and into the fresh air, where Sky Owl rapidly turned to the task of removing the teepee’s lower coverings to allow the entrapped locusts the opportunity of freeing themselves. Hardly had the tribe a moment to catch their breath before Standing Elk began directing a recovery operation. Their pony herd was nowhere to be seen, the crop fields where a few hours earlier, infant, bean, squash, sunflower and tobacco plants showed and knee-high corn flourished, was now but bare earth. Also, the vast dense green forest that spread away from the lake’s shoreline had now altered dramatically. Trees that had only hours before been enshrouded in leafy foliage, now stood as skeletons, limbs raised in bare surrender. Under Standing Elk’s firm instructions, any rider with a horse, which included Alin, was despatched to gather in the absent herd, while the women were organized to begin replanting seeds. For this, these had been saved from the locusts in stored hide and sacking bags and intended for use as part of the tribe’s food stock until the harvest. Even so, the amount would only provide for just over half their normal crop. The Tonkawas were looking before them, a coming year of lean times.

Nathan’s hunting party, which had also been engulfed for three hours by the locusts, rode into camp early next morning. Although they had ridden through the night, Standing Elk immediately despatched them off in hunt of their missing ponies. Only twelve had been found the day before and as all knew, a plains tribe without horses was a tribe in desperate need.

Over the coming months they were to recover all but nineteen of their ponies. A sizeable number, but the nineteen represented a sixth of the original herd.

Because having to wait an extra month for the second planting to ripen, the tribe were unable to return to the banks of the Maslak River until early November. Six months before, General Robert E Lee of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia would be signing his surrender to General Ulysses S Grant of the Union Army of the Potomac, the first step in ending four long ruinous years of American Civil War.

 **CHAPTER 10**

 *I claim not to have controlled events,*

 *but confess plainly that events have controlled me.*

Abraham Lincoln

John Steadman in the act of slowly pacing up and down a narrow roadway was stopped when asked a question:

“Capt’n. When you planning on us leaving?”

“As soon as Marse gets back, and stop calling me Captain, Lawrence. The war’s over,” was Steadman’s leisurely reply.

The question had come from an eighteen-year old soldier of what had been L Company, Fifth Texans, which had been Steadman’s command for over a year.

After Gettysburg the Hood Brigade had been sent to Georgia to serve under General Bragg, where they fought as part of his army at the Battle of Chickamauga, where Steadman received his second wound, shot through his left arm. In early 1864 he was promoted to captain and placed in command of L Company, the Company he had always served in. On returning to Virginia and General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, he led his company through two major battles, the Wilderness and Cold Harbor. However, for the last year the Hood Brigade had more or less remained in positions of defense.

Just days earlier, General Grant, commander of the Union Army of the Potomac, attacked Lee’s entrenchments, capturing the Confederate capital, Richmond and sending his army into full retreat, resulting in Lee being surrounded at Appomattox and he forced to surrender his army, which included Steadman’s Texas Brigade.

Grant’s terms of surrender were fundamental and generous. Each man had to relinquish his weapon, then sign a document of parole, stating that he wishes to be reinstated as a citizen of the United States. With that, he and his horse, if he had one, were free to return to his home, which is what ex-Captain John Steadman was at that moment contemplating.

The roadway he was pacing on was part of the small township of Appomattox. All around him soldiers of what had been Hood’s Texas Brigade were stacking their rifles, then joining lines to sign their parole.

For Steadman it was the end of a very long wait. Since the afternoon when Tom Sullivan had shown him the letter from his father, stating his family were missing and most likely in Indian hands, his concern for the war and of its outcome vanished. However, he was not a coward and he would not desert his fellow Texans. He would fight for the South but as for the Confederate cause, that to him was dismissed by the Vice President of the Confederate States, Alexander Stephens. He arrived at the Richmond hospital where Steadman was recovering from the leg wound he had received at the Battle of Gaines Mill, to address the wounded. There were no encouraging or appreciative words spoken by him, just a heated rant about damn Yankees and worthless niggers, which immediately brought to John’s mind the rain-stormed night when Moses, having delivered Ben, his baby son, washed him, wrapped him in a sheet and holding him out, said,

 “Here, Master John. You’re the father of a son now.”

“Here. He’s comin’ Capt’n,” It was Lawrence again, pointing down the road.

“Yes, I see. And stop calling me that,” acknowledged Steadman with a second rebuke.

The Army of Northern Virginia was now disbanding which meant a large number of released soldiers were free to go home. For a minority this would entail a distance of three or four hundred miles. For the majority, a lot less. However, for those destined for Texas the distance could be fourteen hundred miles or more. In the two days since the surrender there had been much discussion on how the Brigade was to make its return to their home state, with the general conception being, we will have to wait and see what the Yankees come up with. As for that line of thought Steadman had no hesitation in rejecting it. He had waited four years for this release. He was setting out for Texas, on his hands and knees if must, but he wouldn’t be alone; three others had thrown in their lot with him.

Lawrence Gregg from Fort Worth had lied about his age and been with L Company for a year. Marse Logan joined the Brigade just before Second Manassas and rose to the rank of Sergeant. Then there was Mel Peterson, he like Steadman was one of the originals, and like Steadman couldn’t see the sense in all the killing but remained because as long as Texas was in the war, then fight on he would.

As Logan re-joined the small group he waved his parole paper.

“Ah guess this makes me a Yankee now.”

“Mel, you awake?” asked Steadman of Peterson who was stretched out just off the road with his hat over his face.

“Some, just a’thinkin’ most,” he replied, pushing his hat back.

“Well, up on your feet and we’ll get along,” advised Steadman.

As they stood ready, John gave them one last chance in regards joining him.

“Before we start I best make it clear about what we’re about to do. I want to get back to Texas and I can’t wait for other people to work out how I’m going to do it. I’m going on foot so if you all still got a mind to follow along, fine, but it’s a long way and will take some time.” He paused to glance at each man. No one responded until Mel Peterson raised his arm and pointed to the south-west.

“Texas! That way, John.”

Steadman said nothing, just turned and began walking, south-west.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

On the outset of this venture, the only worth praise that could be given, was that at least they were dressed for the road. The Confederate Army, all through the war, lived hand to mouth. What funds that could be found were used to purchase arms and ammunition. As the war progressed, uniforms and footwear became scarce. When Lee took his army into retreat many men left their entrenchments barefooted. Rations were also hard to come by, especially when on the move. In Virginia where the war had gone on for four continuous years, this was a major issue, for the civilian population as well as the army.

However, the shortages for the South were not confined to just food and clothing. The Union Navy had within a year of the war’s start, placed a blockade around the Confederate States from the Atlantic Ocean, across the Gulf of Mexico and up the Mississippi River that reduced its world trade to a trickle, the result of which could be judged by the dress of our four Texas-bound travelers. Steadman wore Yankee soldiers’ boots, as did Logan and Peterson. There were Federal shirts and trousers on some as well. Gregg wore issued boots, somehow procured from England but they were coming apart. Three had US Army knapsacks on their backs, while Peterson had a sack slung over his shoulder. In those were scraps of food and bits of clothing. There were no souvenirs being taken home to remind them of the war except concealed in each was, Steadman had two, a Colt army revolver of Federal issue and acquired from the dead or prisoners. They were bound by their parole to have presented them to the collection point with the rest of their arms but they were returning to Texas where to travel unarmed was not advisable. Steadman also carried a sword, one handed to him in surrender during the Wilderness fighting.

Their first night they spent on the roadside as they had done hundreds of times past. In the morning they struck out again, south but with Peterson’s insistence, changed their route to a smaller side-road where perhaps there would be a farm where they could negotiate labour for a meal.

For five miles they found no habitation until on gaining a gentle rise they came to a house just off the road. As they neared, a figure was seen in the yard, making slight motions in a rocking chair.

“Come on. There’s a well and I’m done parched,” proposed Peterson, turning in the gate.

Entering the yard they could see it was a farm with a barn behind the house, all showing disuse. But it was the man in the rocking chair they were all eyeing. In his forties, gray hair, dressed in Yankee blue and smoking a pipe. Over the back of the chair hung his jacket, sergeant stripes on its sleeves.

“Mind if we help ar’selfs to the well?” asked Logan as they neared the rocker.

“Take your fill,” was the reply as the sergeant removed his pipe to point with it. “You gotta be quick hauling the bucket up. It leaks something fierce.”

Steadman was the first to ask the obvious question,

“You’re not alone here, are you?”

“Yup! Just alone and waiting,” was his quick answer.

“Waiting for what?” It was young Gregg who asked the obvious question this time.

“You see them horses in field just below,” pipe again pointing at a herd of thirty of forty grazing horses in a field beyond the barn,

 “They use’ta belong to your boys. They took one each and rode off yesterday. Them, they had to leave behind. I’m keeping a watch until some horse Quartermaster fella’ comes for ‘em. Where you boys headed?”

 “Texas,” answered Steadman.

 “That’s a fair piece away, Captain.” Steadman still had his Confederate rank on his shoulders. “You fixin’ to walk all that way?”

 “Not much choice at the minute, Sergeant,” Steadman replied, beginning to move towards the well.

 “Would be a mite easier if you rode.”

 Steadman spun around as the Union Sergeant explained,

 “No one’s counted them horses, excluding me.” Then again, pointing with his pipe, “In the barn there you can find saddles, bridles and blankets. If you got a use.”

 With the well bucket dropped all four ex-rebel soldiers were running for the barn, with the Sergeant shouting after them,

 “See what you take has all four shoes on its feet”.

 Twenty minutes later the four rode past the good Yankee Sergeant, still in his chair, reaching down to shake his hand. On taking Steadman’s, he wished him well.

 “Glad to have you back in the Union, Captain.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 With this God-sent gift their journey took on a set pattern. In the late afternoon they would look for a farm or homestead that would give them and their horses a meal and a roof for the night, in exchange for them doing jobs. In most cases this was readily accepted, especially where the household lacked an adult male. And so they worked their way steadily south-west, turning their hands to whatever was asked, chopping wood, digging a new outhouse, repairing roofs and fences. Averaging fifteen to twenty miles a day they rode from state to state through the Carolinas and into Georgia. It was after crossing into Alabama that the other three parted from Marse Logan.

 This occurred at a farm where the only occupants were a mother with two sons aged ten and eight. Her husband away at the war, she had not heard from for a year and a half, and was desperate to plant her crops, wheat and corn. Agreeing to help her, the first late afternoon and evening the four men prepared the plows and harness for the mules. The next day they plowed the field while the mother and two boys sowed the seeds.

 In the evening Marse stayed with the mother in the kitchen quite late, only joining the others in the barn after they were asleep, then up and back in the house at first light. There, as the others entered for breakfast, they found Logan sat at the kitchen table, his beard shaved. Over the meal both he and the mother explained how Marse had agreed to remain at the farm until the husband returned or they had harvested the crops in the late summer. Later, as the other three were about to mount their horses, Logan admitted to them,

 “There’s no one waiting for me back in Texas and that’s a fact.”

 On the road leading from the farm, on a slight hill, all three reined in to wave a last good bye. At the farm gate Logan and the two boys returned the compliment, while the mother remained motionless, her eyes fixed firmly on the tall Texan.

 On lowering their arms, Mel Peterson asked, “How many more nights you figure Marse’s gonna be sleeping in that old barn, John?”

 “Oh!” began Steadman pretending to think about it, “One. Maybe two.”

 With the others laughing, John Steadman once again pointed his horse towards Texas.

 Now down to three, as the days and weeks passed, they steadily progressed on their homeward odyssey. Leaving Alabama they crossed Mississippi to the Eastern bank of the mighty river that also claimed that name. Riding into a riverside town they found a passenger steamer tied to the jetty. They presented their parole documents to the Union Army Major who controlled all river craft, asking for permission to cross to the Arkansas side as their destination was beyond, Texas, only to be given a crusty reply of:

 “You’re welcome to do so but will have to pay a two dollar fare, in United States currency.”

 This presented a problem. They had no money, not even Confederate, which now was worthless anyway. However, on leaving the jetty building Steadman was caught by the arm. It was an office clerk who had heard the Major’s reply and in a quiet manner:

 “Come back in an hour when the Major has gone to his lunch.”

 Once across the river and into Arkansas their direction now was slightly north of due west. While doing so, skirting around what was referred to as the Arkansas Badlands, they were involved in a violent incident, the first since leaving Virginia.

At a small township they stopped to water their horses in troughs fronting the local saloon. Three steps up from the dirt street, on the board walk, sat two men in chairs. As their horses began to drink Mel Peterson gave both a friendly,

 “Howdee.”

 Neither replied, instead giving the three riders searching looks. In silence now all five sat, while the horses drank. This was disturbed when the saloon swing-doors were pushed open by a large man with a week’s growth of dark hair on his face, and moving on unsteady legs. Leaning on the door frame he gave the three horsemen a blurred stare before asking the two chair sitters:

 “Who they?”

 In answer one tapped his shoulder while nodding towards Steadman, an obvious indication to his rank insignia.

 Saying nothing, the drunk just stared at Steadman while his drink-affected mind decided a course of action, which came with an announcement,

 “I’m gonna get me a reb,” a plain admittance as to which side he supported in the recent conflict.

 Pulling a knife from a sheath at his waist, on wavering legs he came down the saloon steps into the dirt street. With the knife held up he advanced on Steadman until an arc of reflecting sunlight on sword caused the drunk to reel back, his knife and the hand that held it laying in the street’s dust, as the three horsemen cantered away.

 Steadman’s four-year awaited goal was just over the horizon. Deterring a knife-wielding drunk with consoling words didn’t even enter his head.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 Two weeks later the three were being led down a Fort Worth street by Lawrence, who turned off between two of the houses to approach a woman hanging out washing on a line strung between two wooden poles. With her back to the riders she hadn’t heard them arrive; only becoming aware of the men’s presence as they sat side-by-side on their mounts, when she turned to pick another article of clothing from a basket. Shading her eyes, she asked:

 “Now what can I do for you boys?”

 Two were bearded men, the other a youth with teenage stubble patching his face. She recognized none.

 “Well!” Spoke up the youth, “A helping of your plum cake would do just fine, Ma.”

 Thunder-struck, the woman dropping pegs and shirt, rushed at the youth dragging him from his horse, tears bursting from her eyes, shouting:

“Lawrence! Lawrence!”

 **CHAPTER 11**

 *Hold on to what you must do*

 *even if it is a long way from here.*

 *Indian Blessing*

Lawrence got his mother’s plum cake and more, all three were taken under orders of the mother to the town’s barber for hair cuts and removal of beards, then to the bath house. After years of scrubbing themselves in a hundred un-named streams and rivers, the combination of soap and hot water was pure delight, as were the clean clothes given to Steadman and Peterson.

Dinner was a trial for Mel; he was brought up in a cabin on the Brazos River. The workings of a knife and fork were a wonderment to him. But no one paid any attention to him, except for Lawrence’s younger sister. She couldn’t take her eyes off him but not because of his table clumsiness. In the evening they talked with Lawrence’s mother, father and uncle; Little of the war, mostly the effects of it, the Union blockade of the coastline and up the Mississippi River, which resulted in so many shortages and the disruption of the mail service. On finally taking to their beds, all three new arrivals had a bed to themselves and each, after an hour, took their pillows to the floor for its greater comfort.

It was late morning before Steadman and Peterson left Fort Worth. On hearing what John was returning to and why, no one encouraged him to stay longer and Mel was looking forward to re-joining his folks. They camped down that night on the Brazos River, a day’s ride south of Mel’s family homestead. In the morning the two men, who had, for four years lived, fought and faced death together, shook hands in farewell.

“It was a bloody war, Mel,” stated Steadman.

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” was Peterson’s grinning reply.

In the evening of his second day alone, Steadman rode into the track junction that he had known as Hutton. It was late August 1865 and he had left here for the war almost four and a half years earlier and it was now three times the size he had remembered. John rode to the back of the house behind the General Store, then dismounting, knocked on the kitchen door. There was a faint lighting from the windows but this brightened as someone came from another room with a lamp.

On the door opening, two people stood before him, a six year old girl, Kathleen, and her mother Lorna Sullivan. When John had last seen them, one was in the other’s arms.

“I’m sorry, Lorna, I didn’t know where else to go,” apologized the man, stood half in darkness.

“Yesss?” was Lorna’s drawn-out reply, puzzled by the words from someone she couldn’t place a name to.

“Oh, it’s John. John Steadman,” quickly identifying himself, blaming the poor light. Not aware that to those who had known him, his appearance now had aged ten years.

“Oh John! John, come in. Come in,” beamed the mother guiding her daughter to one side, then over her shoulder called;

“It’s John Steadman, Dad.”

“What?” came back another shout?

In a rush Matthew Sullivan, followed by his wife Marla, entered the kitchen, both with surprised looks.

“John! John! Good to see you,” Matthew said, reaching to shake his hand. “When did you get back?”

“Just this minute. Rode in from Fort Worth,” Steadman replied.

“Well, go into the front room. I’ll see to your horse,” informed Sullivan as he eased past Steadman and through the back door.

“Lorna! Take John through. I’ll put the coffee on.” Marla already had the pot in her hand.

And then they began to talk. After the first hour Kathleen was put to bed. Two hours later Marla excused herself for hers, where, soon after she had gone her husband joined her. John had asked to spend the night in their stable but Marla only laughed.

“You’ll sleep in our spare bedroom tonight, even if I have to nail you there.”

This left Lorna and John alone sat at the kitchen table drinking a last coffee, for Lorna an intentional act, for John an inevitable toil he was dreading.

“John,” Lorna began, “I’m so glad you returned. This gives me the chance to thank you for what you did for Tom when he was killed.”

John knew she was referring to the letter he had written describing her husband’s death.

“The way he died quickly, in your arms, with his last words of how much he loved me.” John was silently nodding his head.

“And the trouble you and your friends took in carrying him to the nearby church to bury him and say a last prayer over his grave. I’m so pleased you did all that. It really did happen the way you wrote?”

With the image and sounds of that day vividly before him, the contents of Tom’s stomach and intestines spilling over the ground where he had to be left, and he screaming for John to shoot him, Steadman reached across and took the sorrow-filled wife’s hand in his, her eyes anxious as he solemnly answered,

“Every word.”

-------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

The following morning Steadman, with a borrowed shovel and axe from Matthew Sullivan, rode out of Hutton westward to the homestead where he and Alin had been so happy. Arriving in the early evening he found everything just as Matthew had described it to him the night before. The two cabins and cow shed just burnt shells with overgrown grass and small shrubs bordering what was left of their log walls.

Over the next two days Steadman burnt all of the wooden structures that had survived, scattering their ashes. On the first day, leaving his fires to burn, he rode down the river seven miles to pay his respects to the ranch family of the two boys who had left for the war with him, over five years earlier and now long dead. A wasted trip, for it was burnt, a relief to John in a way. He had not been looking forward to awaking the family’s grief. On the morning of the fourth day Steadman rode away from his former home, satisfied that all trace of it was removed with the intent that, with or without his family, he would never return there again.

With that done his mind was now firmly set on the one burning task that had not left it for almost five years, through hell and damnation if need be, to recover his wife and children.

That evening Matthew and John came to an agreement on how he should conduct his searching, which would benefit both their requirements. As a result of the Union blockade, very few needed items of import were able to penetrate through. Because the South as a whole manufactured very few goods and Texas hardly any, the State suffered many shortages, which resulted for Sullivan, during the last years of the war, in becoming a General Store owner in name only. Now though, with the war ended and the blockade removed, all items for him to sell were flowing into the state. With one disadvantage, no one had the money to buy them, or more to the cause, the right kind of money. On re-joining the Union all the Confederate States had to again accept United States dollars. On the date of Lee surrendering, the Confederate Dollar was an inflation-riddled scrap of paper, with no gold reserve to back it up, which was one of the reasons why the U.S. Government refused to exchange the Confederate one at any value at all. The result of this, for the South, was that from the highest to the lowest, all were now utterly penniless, which left them facing a stand-off situation, where an army of providers with unlimited goods to sell, could not do so because those in most need had no money. Having explained this impasse to Steadman, Sullivan then told him of a method his Galveston supplier had proposed to overcome it. He would send all the goods Sullivan would ask for on receipt, but not paid for until the Yankee dollar was being earned and flowing more freely.

“That’s taking one almighty gamble,” exclaimed Steadman.”

“It’s all down to trust,” admitted Sullivan, “which is where I was hoping you could help me out.”

“In what way?” Steadman asked.

“Well, John, in a way that would help us both.” Steadman waited to hear more, “You have set your mind to finding Alin. That means searching up and down the Frontier. All along that Frontier are ranches, homesteads and farms. They are right now desperate for a lot of goods. If you could take a full wagon out with you every time you went searching I’d be much obliged.”

“I think,” began Steadman pondering what had just been said, “I think you have a deal.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

So it began, John Steadman’s quest, a quest for a woman and two small children taken four years earlier by a band of Comanche Indians. A successful outcome most viewed as hopeless. If they were captives of the Comanche they would be in Comanche Territory and that is somewhere no one with good sense would enter. Steadman, though, did his best. Touring the Frontier from homestead to homestead, ranch to ranch, asking each if they had seen or heard of an American woman with auburn hair and two children, probably held by Indians. This went on for several months, each trip taking from between two or three weeks depending on how long the goods lasted. Items like sugar, salt, nails and horseshoes he had to ration but most of everything else he stocked was also needed. The war had been long and the blockade effective.

After Christmas, Steadman feeling a bother to the family, he was living between trips in the Sullivan’s spare bedroom, mentioned it was about time he found a place of his own.

With Matthew and Marla assuring him they were more than happy he stayed, Lorna proposed;

“How about the Watts place?”

Over the next hour John was to learn that the Watts place was a ranch two miles north of Hutton on the Plum Road that ran beside Plum Creek. Watts had built a house and set up home there in 1842, with a young family of two boys and a girl. With the war his two boys went and were both soon killed. Then his daughter ran off with one of his ranch hands. Followed tragically when, just months later his wife died. For him that was the end of ranch life and Texas.

“Came to me one day. Asked if I would look after the place for him. Sell it if I could. Left me with a signed paper saying I could do this,” informed Matthew, finishing with, “Then he just lite out. That was over a year ago,”

“What’s the place like?” Steadman asked.

-------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Passing through the gate which had a high wooden arch with a skulled head of a Texas longhorn firmly attached, Lorna began pointing.

“That lake beyond the house is part of Plum Creek. It flows through the ranch for a couple of miles. Then to the right there, those building are the barn and bunkhouse.”

At the entrance to the barn a figure stood watching them.

“That’s Frank, John,” informed Lorna.

This was Frank Winkler, according to Matthew, born in East Texas, fought in both the breakaway by Texas from Mexico War and the Mexican-American War of 1845, and had been a Texas Ranger up to two years ago. Now, employed by Sullivan to live on and look after the ranch. On halting the buckboard by the barn, Steadman found himself shaking hands with a tall, thin but slightly stooped man of early fifties, his drooping mustache matching a gray-fringed but balding head.

“John Steadman,” introduced the younger man. “Lorna tells me you’re Frank?”

“Yup! Reckon.”

Steadman was soon to realize that this was Winkler’s set answer for most questions asked of him.

“How do, Miss Lorna. What you doing out here for?” He asked, shading his eyes.

“We come so John can have a look around,” piped up Kathleen who had traveled from Hutton in the back of the buckboard.

Frank took them first through the barn then a quick look in the bunkhouse where Frank lived, cooked, ate and slept. There was also a corral and stable that housed three horses. One was Frank’s while the other two belonged to the ranch. On asking about cattle Frank replied that they were running free on nearby ranch land, about a hundred and sixty head that he checked on most days. The house, they visited last.

Two story, with four bedrooms upstairs while downstairs there was a kitchen, pantry, dining room, large parlor, and a small room with a desk that appeared to be an office. The house veranda extended around all four sides. There were furnishings in the parlor but heavily shrouded in dusty coverings. Lorna removed one covering to examine a sofa. In the kitchen there was a stove and a sink with a pump. Steadman grasping the handle, began to pump and wonder of wonders water emerged from the spout.

Steadman was satisfied with what they had seen but Lorna insisted on one final confirmation that the house was suitable to move into, the stove. While John got a fire going Lorna found cups and washed them in the sink, and Frank fetched coffee from the bunkhouse. There then followed an hour sat on the front veranda overlooking the lake. At one point Kathleen asked, “What are those trees, Mister Frank?” aiming a finger at the ones ringing the lake. Without hesitation Frank answered, “Plum! I reckon!”

-------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

John, after the visit, told Matthew he would be more than pleased to take over the Watts spread. With no money to buy the ranch, he proposed a deal that would involve ownership of his homestead being pledged to Matthew as payment. This however would mean proving ownership and with the deed of this now just ashes in the dirt, he would have to make a trip to the land office at Fort Worth. This, Sullivan agreed to, suggesting he do so the next day. Staying with the Greggs, he had hoped he would complete the transaction of replacing the deed with another copy in the one day, which it turned out was the case. However on leaving the building he was slapped on the back by an old war friend, Bill Gary, only one-armed now but still active in the Militia Force, with the rank of Major. Over a drink in a nearby saloon they began reminiscences of events of the war but on Gary learning that Steadman spent his working days touring the frontier beyond Hutton he became very interested, insisting Steadman come to his office the next morning. John was in a hurry to return but this was the man who at the height of the Battle of the Devils Den, had stood up, looked around him, then shouting “Brazos Boys! With me,” and began running straight at the Federal fire.

His office was in a small building not far from the town hall. A sign over the door read, Militia Headquarters. When he arrived Gary had a map spread over his desk.

“Right John,” he began, “Show me the territory you’ve been covering.”

John, finding Hutton, began tracing a finger west, then south, then west again before turning north and east then back to Hutton.

“Yes! I thought so,” commented Gary, as much to the room as to Steadman, “We haven’t organized a force up there. No one we could rely on to do the job right.”

Steadman, with four years’ service in the army didn’t need a flag to show him where this was leading.

“Bill, I’m already up to my neck with my job with the wagon and trying to find my wife,” he stated, “There’s plenty of other good men in the State.”

“Yes,” countered Gary, “but none of them are roaming through that part of the frontier, getting to know the people and the lay of the land, and can pick the right men to form a Militia Company.”

“But Bill…...” began Steadman.

Thirty minutes later John Steadman left Bill Gary’s office having been sworn back into the Texas Militia once again, this time with the rank of Captain

On leaving the Greggs that afternoon Lawrence took great delight in saying, “Goodbye, Captain.” But it was his eighteen year old sister that sent him off pondering, when she asked him, “Should you see him again, say hello to Mel Peterson for me.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Throughout the spring and summer and into the autumn of 1866 Steadman worked devotedly in combining the four roles that was now his life. With the horse-drawn goods wagon selling Matthew Sullivan’s much needed commodities to the frontier farmers and homesteads, enrolling militia recruits, putting his newly-acquired ranch into working order and more important to him than the other three, maintaining his search for Alin and the children.

For the first, gradually life on the frontier was beginning to improve, Yankee dollars were beginning to circulate and debts were being honored, and his enrolment of Militia members proved no trouble. During the war, Comanche, Apache and Kiowa raids had pushed the Frontier back a hundred miles and had not yet stabilized. Steadman had twice come upon a homestead that he had visited earlier, burned, the occupants either killed, taken, or had abandoned the farm beforehand.

The ranch, he was finding, was a welcome improvement from the Sullivan’s spare room. He missed their company between his trips to the Frontier, but now the ranch, although not yet considered home, was an assuring place to return to. He was beginning to acquire ranch hands as well. A youth of sixteen arrived one noon asking for work, any work. His name was Jamie Pearson, a casualty of the Frontier. His family’s cabin was attacked while he was away fishing. On returning, the cabin was burning, his father cut up and dead, the mother and two sisters nowhere to be found. He was twelve and walked forty miles to Hutton to join, and be taken in by the hundred other homesteaders also seeking sanctuary. He was now under the guiding hand of Frank Winkler.

A second person looking for ranch employment turned up on a June mid-day, someone who Steadman was overjoyed to see. Sat at the desk in the house bringing up to date his sales account ledger he kept for all his frontier sales, he was startled to hear something dramatically familiar, a rebel yell. Hurrying to the front door, a rider and horse were jogging down from the front gate. On recognizing him, Steadman without hesitation returned the rebel yell. It was Mel Peterson.

Sitting the afternoon away on the front veranda, Peterson had a sad tale to tell. Returning home he found his father had died and his younger brother with a wife and two small children, running the homestead. Receiving a lukewarm welcome he spent three months hunting and fishing, then just up and left and began roaming from one ranch job to another, ending up a few weeks past in Fort Worth.

“You stayed with the Greggs then?” asked Steadman, raising his coffee cup to his lips.

“Ya, three days,” Peterson replied, “Might have stayed longer if it wasn’t for the sister.”

“Sister?” asked Steadman, controlling a smile.

“Ya!” he replied with an exasperating stretch, “She was always getting me alone and just couldn’t stop asking questions about me.”

“Well, girls that age are all that way,” offered John, his smile now uncontrolled.

Mel took up a third bunk in the bunkhouse, and Steadman glad to have him.

Another attraction of the ranch was that every Sunday John was there, Lorna would bring Kathleen with her and cook a Sunday dinner for everyone. Sunday was the only day she could do this as Kathleen was now attending Hutton’s newly-built school. Not only was she working in the General Store but also assisting with the teaching at the school. John though, began looking forward more and more to her Sunday visits.

It was John’s searching that was the constant hurt in his life. At every ranch or homestead he kept asking if they had heard any talk of a woman with auburn hair, probably held by Indians. He would ask the same question also of anyone he met, either on horseback or wagon. The disappointments were continuous but he wouldn’t give up.

It wasn’t until October that he was told something that sounded hopeful. The Ekwan River Valley lay at the foot of the high plains. John hadn’t been this trailway before and was working downriver visiting the farms and ranches as he did so.

It was early evening at a small farm that as he handed several bars of soap to a beaming mother of two young girls, he asked his question.

“Auburn hair,” repeated the husband with a studied look. “Aggy! That squaw who wanted the flour, now she had auburn hair. Spoke good American as well.

“Squaw with auburn hair!” Burst out Steadman.

“Yes,” explained the wife, “She rode up to the house here on a pony. Asked us if we had any flour she could trade for a buffalo robe.”

“When?” Demanded Steadman, unaware he was almost shouting.

“Two, three weeks ago,” answered the husband, “We gave her half a small sack we had. The robe is in the house by the fire. Girls are never off it.”

“Are you sure she had auburn hair?” John asked, desperate to have no doubt.

“Oh yes! She had light hair alright,” continued the mother, “She was dressed like a squaw but sure didn’t look like an Indian.”

There was silence for several moments as Steadman’s mind raced.

“Oh, and another thing,” added the wife, “She was pregnant.”

John heard the woman but her words only joined the rest of the turmoil going on in his head.

“Which way did she go?”

“That way, to join up with her tribe that was passing us by,” replied the husband.

Steadman looked west where the man’s finger pointed.

“But,” he continued, “I did ask her where they were headed and she said, the Maslak River.”

“Where’s that?” asked Steadman. He’d never heard the name before.

“It’s Injun for white,” replied the farmer, “about a day’s ride from here.”

“If it’s not too much of a trouble I’d like to leave my wagon here for a spell?” asked Steadman, “I’m going to have a look for this river.”

This was the only scrap of information John had been presented with that gave him some indication that Alin was alive and he intended to track it down.

 **CHAPTER 12**

 *All men are made by the same Great Spirit Chief.*

 *They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people*

 *and all people should have equal rights to live upon it.*

 Chief Joseph Dez Perce

It was late afternoon when Steadman arrived at the Maslak River. He was riding one of the wagon team horses, with a saddle he always carried with him on all his trips. The other horse he had on a lead carrying light camping equipment and rations, also as a second mount, should he have the good fortune of finding Alin and his children.

From an escarpment three hundred feet above he looked down to the river bottom where it gently ambled southwards to an eventual junction with the Brazos. Remaining on the escarpment on the river’s east side, he turned south, following the river’s course. Two hours later the escarpment bent away from the river where a large grassy basin had been formed centuries earlier when the river’s level was much higher. Guiding his mount and the pack horse down into the basin floor, intent on regaining the escarpment on its far side, he sighted a large herd of horses near the river. On seeing these, John’s heart, for a number of seconds, increased its tempo, taking their presence as an indication that his rash pursuit may not be a folly.

Not wanting to make contact with whoever may be managing the herd, he circled eastwards around them. To no avail, for when only halfway to the escarpment and a good mile from the herd, two horsemen appeared coming in his direction. It took several minutes before the two riders, he could finally make out, were Indian. As John continued to ride the Indians halted for several minutes observing the white man. Then, as one returned to the herd the other began trailing him.

Half an hour later John was back on the escarpment looking down on the river again. Here, below was bush that extended for two hundred yards or so towards the river but was halted by a thick wood a hundred yards from it, that extended along the river bank for as far as John could see. Beyond the river, only twenty or thirty yards across, were more trees and then the river’s western escarpment, although more cliff-like than its sister to the east. But the rider’s gaze was not drawn to that, for below where the brush ended was an Indian village of twenty or more grayish or light brown teepees. Seeing these, Steadman showed no outward emotion but within him he was ecstatic with hope. Could this village bring an end to the wishes and prayers he had been repeating to himself for the last five years?

Several hundred yards beyond the village a cutting from the escarpment allowed John and his two horses access to the river level. Once there he turned back to the north in the direction of the village. As he did so, from the escarpment above he heard a sharp “Yep! Yep! Yep!” cry. Looking up he could see the mounted Indian who had followed him, giving a warning to the village that a white man was about to enter. The village was on a slight rise where, as John and his mounts paced their way up to its level, he found a large number of the villagers standing among the teepees staring in his direction. Even the children who would normally be at play were still and silent. Only the dogs voiced their welcome. Steadman, although he kept a half-smile on his face as he scanned to his left and right, was doing so with iron determination within him. He knew he was taking a risk entering the village alone but his mind was firmly set to end his search, even if he had to fight for it, for he had armed himself with three loaded pistols. If his wife was here he would spill blood to get her back.

As John’s eyes searched he also looked for any indication of a chief’s teepee so as to state his arrival in an official manner. To his left he passed a squaw with two small children, a boy of seven or eight wearing just a breechcloth, and a girl three or four clothed in a plain buckskin skirt. The squaw was dressed in a cloth shirt, wraparound deerskin skirt, with a rabbit skin shawl over her head. All three he ignored until with a jolt he heard his name called in a commanding tone;

“John!”

As Steadman pulled sharply on his horse’s reins, stopping it dead still, his head spun around, his eyes searching, for it was his wife’s voice that had called. But she was nowhere to be seen, just the squaw and the two children. Then the shawl of the squaw was pushed back onto her shoulders to reveal her hair in one large braid resting over the front of her left shoulder, not Indian black but auburn.

John, with a cry, “Alin!” leapt from his horse, rushing at the woman, still crying, “Alin! Alin!” Only to be halted as he was about to crush his wife in his arms, by a sharp command and an arm thrust forward, “John! I’m pregnant!” Steadman checked himself but so overwhelmed with joy, he, his mind refusing to register the implication of her abdominal bulge, gently maneuvering his body to one side of hers, took her in his arms and began to kiss her. Between kisses he uttered words of his happiness and reason why.

“Oh Alin! Alin! You’re safe! You’re safe!” Ever since I returned I’ve been searching for you and the children. I refused to give up and now at last I’ve found you. At last we will…Will…”

Steadman’s words trailed off because he suddenly realized something was wrong. His wife was not engulfed in the same happiness as he was. In disturbing bafflement he became aware Alin’s arms were not embracing him as he was she, her lips tightly closed were not returning his kisses. Drawing his head back he found himself looking at a face he had never seen. Alin’s eyes, the eyes he had known, that once only sparkled with love and tenderness, now did not gaze into his with desire but stared straight ahead, showing a coldness drained of compassion. Steadman, now in mute shock of his wife’s defiance, knew he had to speak, had to say something that would unfreeze this bewildering anger and return her to the woman he so loved, the woman he had so desperately searched for and had now found.

“Alin! Alin! I…” he began, but was cut short.

“How many came back?” Alin loudly demanded, her eyes for the first time fixed on his, but eyes aflame with anger.

Steadman not understanding the question could only stare back at his wife.

“John!” Alin continued in a cold deliberate voice,” The day you left the homestead you climbed into a wagon with five other men.” Then in a slow clear demand she asked again, “How many came back?”

John didn’t have to think on the answer to the question. The reply was painful and took a number of seconds before, in a sad voice stated,

“None. I’m the only one.”

Alin said nothing. The glare in her eyes spoke for her.

Then stepping back she took the young boy’s hand, who with the young girl, had remained near the teepee, and placed him in front of herself before announcing,

“Benjamin! This is your father. He has returned from his war.” Go to him and welcome him home.”

Obeying, the boy moved forward while looking back over his shoulder at his mother, before arriving in front of his father to say hesitantly:

“Welcome home,” but with a slight tribal accent.

Ignoring that, Steadman went down on one knee clasping his son’s upper arms in both hands, to ask, smiling, “Ben, do you remember me?”

The boy stared at his father for a few seconds, then began to shake his head.

At this, Alin then regained his attention by announcing, “And this is my daughter Martina.” The girl was now positioned in front of her mother as she leaned slightly forward with her hands on the youngster’s shoulders, continuing, “She is not our daughter Katherine. She died soon after we arrived in this village. No, she is my daughter. Her father is, or was a Comanche brave, which brave I wouldn’t know. There were five of them.”

Now stranding, Steadman heard her words but as his mind began to understand their meaning Alin again spoke up.

“John, we have to talk.” Then speaking to her son, “Ben, you and your friends, look after your father’s horses. Remove their loads and saddle, put them in our teepee, then water the horses and see they have grass to feed on.” Now turning to her husband, she gave him an order more commanding than any he had ever received in the army:

“Come!”

Taking the young child’s hand she then turned towards the river with John following ten steps or so behind.

Approaching the river bank, through the trees which at that point were well spaced-out, Alin sat herself on the trunk of a fallen tree perched on a small mound of earth.

Steadman, following, stood facing his wife while she settled Martina on the log beside her. From the moment he had left his saddle she had firmly set her manner towards him, as one raw and angry. So it was with surprise verging on shock, that when this same woman looked up at him and with sad, soft eyes and a softer voice began to speak to him with the well-bred politeness he so fondly remembered.

“John! Since you have been away this is the fifth child I have carried.” Alin laid a hand on the top of her prominent bulge. “After Ben, there was Katherine who, only thanks to the Comanches, lived for two months. Then came Martina.” Her arms went around her daughter’s shoulders. “And then I had another daughter by the man I’m now with, but she died soon after birth.”

Looking hard at her husband, Alin emphasized the dangers of the life she now lived.

“Here, village life can be at times, so cruel. Both my babies are buried just behind you.”

John half-twisted his body to see just ten feet away two small stone-covered mounds.

“Our village burial-place is across the river but I requested their remains be buried here. It’s my special place to come and cry if I wish.”

Then once more placing a hand on her large swelling she continued,” And finally we have this one, again by the man who I now share my life with.”

Steadman, forcing back an anger to demand who this man was, instead asked in a controlled voice,

“Is the arrival close?”

“Yes, John, very close.” Replied his wife with a smile that instantly unveiled a stream of past history memories to the man she faced.

As the smile slowly faded her face became more sombre, which now matched her voice as she began to speak:

“John, that night after you left I just cried and cried all the way through until the morning.”

This led on for the next hour of Alin telling of how she, Ben, Moses and Jonathan coped with the running of the homestead for the following five months after he left. Finishing with Katherine’s birth for which Moses was given full credit, as he had been for Ben’s. She then made a point of telling him of the arrival of Nathan and repeating all he told her about himself and his warning of the Comanches. At that point her eyes remained fixed to the ground just beyond her feet, as she described the events of the Comanches’ arrival, the killing of Moses, the torture of Jonathan, her assault and rape, how it continued into the night, but not about the decision she made to give herself to her attackers, nor in the manner in which she applied her surrender to it: The price of survival.

It wasn’t until she began to tell of Nathan’s arrival, at their noon pause of the fourth day of her and her children’s captivity, that Alin once again raised her eyes to her husband’s.

“Yes John, Nathan.” Her voice was again hardening. “He just walked his horse in amongst us and a few minutes later three Comanches lay dead at his feet and the other two fleeing for their lives.”

Her voice was now rising with every breath.

“Nathan had come to save us. Come to save your family, John. When he had returned to our homestead the evening we were taken away he could have done a number of things. Go back to his village. Ride back to Hutton and raise the alarm. Or just water his horses at the well, then leave.”

As Alin listed her presumed choices that Nathan had, her voice rose again in anger and remained so.

“But he did none of those. Instead he came after us; after your family, John. Risking his life to rescue your family.” Alin paused before lowering her voice. “At the end of the fight he had a Comanche knife buried in his shoulder.”

When Alin finished, her eyes aflame with anger, were locked to John’s, but over the following seconds began to weaken, then once again dropped to her feet. Steadman, stunned speechless, stepped forward to sit beside his wife and attempt to take her hand but was gently withdrawn as she again began to speak:

“He brought us here to his village. That evening Katherine died. We live in his mother’s teepee with Nathan’s younger stepbrother. Nathan’s wound gave him a fever so I slept with him for two days to comfort him. We did not mate. That came later. For the first few days here I suffered pain because Katherine was gone and my breasts were filling. However, this was relieved when Nathan’s mother had the mothers of young babies come to nurse from me. Nathan, over the following weeks had repeatedly offered to take me and Ben back to the white settlement at Hutton but I refused each time, pleading the breast problem. But that soon ended when we became lovers.”

Alin paused to look up from the ground and turn her head so their eyes met, his in hurt sorrow, hers a guiltless calm.

“He didn’t take me,” her voice raised, “I went to him. One night on my hands and knees I crossed the teepee, and kissed him - and kissed him until he rolled on top of me and we joined as one.”

Alin paused as her eyes left his, but soon drifted back.

“You see, John, very soon after arriving here I realized I was falling in love with him, and never wanted to be again without him.”

Again her eyes drifted away but then once more returned.

“I don’t hate you, John. I did once, but not now. It’s just that I no longer love you. That day back at the homestead when you left, I pleaded with you to stay, but you said no! You said that Texas was at war and you had to go.”

Alin slowly exhaled a saddened silent breath before continuing, “John, you had a decision to make. Texas, or your family, and you chose Texas. When Nathan rescued us from the Comanches I too found I had a difficult decision to make: you or Nathan. With you gone and the homestead in ashes and a Comanche child in my womb,” His wife fixed Steadman with a dominant stare:

“I chose Nathan.”

In the silence that followed Steadman felt it to be a clear signal that he should say or do something. Rising from the tree trunk he walked off several steps before turning around.

“So you are both husband and wife now?” He questioned.

“Well! Perhaps!” replied Alin, a slight smile appearing, “We Tonkawas don’t put much stock in weddings. More ceremony is reserved for burials than a marriage. In our case I and Nathan just strolled around the village one evening, I behind, he in front announcing to everyone that I am now his woman. It was nothing like our lavish Louisiana church wedding but I felt just as proud. Maybe more so.”

Then she asked, “John! How did you find us?”

Steadman related to her about the farm and the American-speaking squaw bartering for flour.

“Oh yes,” confirmed Alin, “I try to get flour where I can. I add berries to the flour and bake Ben and Martina buns,” then added, “We were on our way back from our summer camp on the higher plains. There is a lake there where we can fish, and fertile soil where we plant crops. After the harvest we return here for the winter. It is sheltered from the wind.”

Over the last hour Steadman had begun to realize that his long search for his wife was only half successful and could only remain as such. She had made it plainly clear that their marriage as man and wife was ended. Not only did she no longer love him but had now embraced a different life. Her short description of the villagers’ year disclosed that, not once did he hear the word “they”, only “we”. Alin from this moment was no longer his, and he with great reluctance would have to accept that.

These thoughts were suddenly swept from his mind as a trampling of horses hooves sounded, approaching from the north.

“These are the village ponies,” informed Alin, standing to watch as they trotted between the teepees. “They graze in the grassland up river but in the evening they are brought into the basin next to the village where they can be guarded,” adding, “Nathan has been with them all day. You will be able to meet him soon.”

The meeting occurred sooner than she expected. A tall figure was seen striding towards them from the village with Ben behind, struggling to keep up.

“Oh!” exclaimed Alin, “He’s coming now.” As the figure neared he saw John standing while Alin re-sat. Martina for the last hour had remained on the tree trunk at her mother’s side, watching and listening but saying nothing. Only then did he slow, allowing Ben to close up. As he neared, Alin rose, taking her daughter’s hand to walk towards the new arrival. As they joined, Alin closed into the man and as their bodies touched, she turned to face her husband.

“John!” She began, “This is Nathan, the man who saved us from the Comanches.”

“How do you do,” acknowledged Steadman, adding, “and I am most grateful.”

Nathan, with dark shoulder-length hair, beaded vest with a matching collar around his neck, buckskin leggings, breechcloth and beaded moccasins, was foremost a Tonkawa brave but because of his half-English lineage also remarkably handsome.

“Nathan!” continued Alin, “This is John who used to be my husband and has now returned from his war.”

Nathan acknowledged Alin’s introduction with a slight bow of his head but said nothing.

“Now!” said Alin, breaking the silence, “I have to help to prepare the evening meal, while you two have much to talk of,” nodding at both men. “Nathan! Don’t stay here long. Bring John up to the teepee. He will eat and sleep with us, then leave in the morning.” Ending, Alin took Martina’s hand and with Ben following, they made their way towards the village.

With Alin and the children gone Nathan was the first to speak,

“When I returned with the horses Ben told me that his mother was at the river with his father.” In a break of silence John was about to reply to this when Nathan continued, “If you have come to take her, I will fight you.”

Steadman was not alarmed by this challenge. In truth he had been half-expecting something of this nature.

As John moved to sit down on the tree trunk he shook his head. “Nathan, you have no reason for that. I have been speaking to Alin and she told me how you tracked down the Comanche band that took her and my children and freed them, killing three of their captors doing it. I owe you an unpayable debt.”

As Steadman sat hunched on the log staring at the ground, Nathan broke the silence.

“Two.”

John looked up, puzzled, before asking,

“What?”

“Two Comanches. I only kill two Comanches. Alin killed the other,” came the reply.

Steadman was immediately on his feet. “Alin? How?”

“A lance,” Nathan answered.

“A lance,” repeated John, shaking his head but this time in disbelief. “She never told me that.”

With that short exchange of words any barrier that may have been between them vanished in an instant.

As darkness closed around them they talked of the village, Steadman’s war and his utter disillusionment of the cause and waste of life, and the Comanches and their threat, and only returned to the teepee when Alin sent Ben to fetch them.

The teepee measured no more than twelve feet at its base, with the cooking fire in the centre so the smoke could drift freely upwards and out through the opening where the tent’s supporting poles entwined. The rest of the space within the teepee was occupied by individual living and sleeping areas. Even Ben and Martina had their own small share. The exception was an eating place where everyone gathered to consume their meals.

After shedding his coat, hat and weapons, and placing them with his saddle and camp stores arranged just inside the tent flap by Ben and his friends earlier, the eating area was the first portion of the teepee he was taken. There, sat in a circle, they shared a pot of meat, sitting cross-legged, using fingers to select their morsels.

As they dined they talked which soon had Steadman swept into a foreign world, a world that Alin had willingly entered and embraced. As the evening progressed, with the meal finished they continued to sit and talk, and John listened and learned, of camp life by the lake on the high plain where they fished and hunted buffalo. The winter nights at this camp where they sang and danced, and the women with leather, furs and beads made garments for their families. They did not just speak of happy times though. Nathan’s mother Camila, or as she is known in the village, Bright Spirit, talked of her early life, her capture and being sold into a Spanish household. Her English husband and of him buying her in order they could wed. His leaving to fight a war and die, and to Steadman’s surprize, at the Battle of the Alamo. Then her decision to sell her small ranch, and returning to her tribe with a one-year old son, and three-year old daughter that was soon destined to die during a measles epidemic. Alin had warned him to not assume her to be a village squaw, a wise warning. Although sat in a village teepee, the woman beside him was articulate, astute, spoke two European languages, English and Spanish and three Texas Indian dialects, Tonkawa, Comanche and Waco.

Nathan and Sky Owl, Camila’s third son, then told of their early days with the tribe, which also included an older brother, Tall Buffalo, who also lived in the village but in his woman’s teepee with their children. And so they talked until one by one they rose to seek sleep among their blankets and buffalo skins.

The first was Alin patting her child bulge, stating her need to lay down. The last was John and Nathan. As John made himself comfortable, his head propped up on his saddle he used as a pillow, Nathan joined Alin across the teepee settling himself on his back beside her. Steadman, aided by the fire’s flickering light, watched as his wife raised herself on one elbow, then lowering her head, kissed her man on the lips.

The moment was interrupted for John by movement at his shoulder. Ben had silently crawled up to him.

“I remember now,” he whispered, “You took me to the field one day and put me on Sam’s back while you plowed the field.”

As John was about to reply, Ben recounted another memory.

“They killed him… and Molly.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

The village working day began before the sun rose. Steadman woke as Nathan left to assist in herding the ponies out to the plain where they would spend another day grazing. He shortly returned though, because John had asked Nathan to introduce him to the village Chief. While waiting, Nathan’s second step-brother, Tall Buffalo, had made himself known as John was removing his saddle from the teepee, an effortless introduction because of his mother’s teaching; he spoke clear English. In the evening before, John had also learned that Tonkawa names had been given to everyone. Ben was White Hawk, Martina, Silent Star and Alin, Twilight Glow because of her hair.

Returning from the visit with the village Chief, Standing Elk, in which Steadman had presented him with one of his pistols, they found Alin waiting for him beside his two horses, saddled, packed and ready to leave.

He only carried one pistol now, the other he had also given away, to Nathan. Of all he had learned in this last day, the biggest worry the tribe suffered was Comanches. His talks with Nathan made this quite clear. The Tonkawa only wished peace; the Comanche sought plunder, rape, torture and killing. The two pistols he was leaving were well welcomed.

Nathan and John parted with a warm handshake. He had to hurry away with a hunting party, for they intended to return before dark. Now only Alin, Ben and Martina remained to say their goodbyes. Earlier, John had sworn to both Alin and Nathan that he would lay no claim on Ben. He was to remain with his mother. On straightening up from saying his farewell to the young children, Steadman found Alin confronting him with a serious expression.

“John, please don’t take this wrongly,” she warned, “I want a divorce.”

Before the husband could reply she went on,

“I love Nathan and I think I’m beginning to love you again.” Alin halted before adding, “A little, but I want an end to us. I don’t care what lies you have to tell or falsehoods you have to put on paper, I want it ended.”

John, gathering his horse’s reins took a moment to reply.

“Our wedding papers are ashes, and you have been missing for a long time. If I can get us a divorce, you will have it.”

After she had thanked him he asked her a question he needed an answer for. “What do I tell your mother and father? They’ve been waiting?”

“Dead! John. Just tell them I’m dead,” she replied firmly. “If you told them the truth they would never understand.”

Mounting, he was about to ride off but checked himself to ask, “Why didn’t you tell me you killed one of those Comanches?”

Alin’s reply was a stern glance.

“Did you find it difficult?” He further asked.

“He had been raping me for four days,” Alin replied, showing no emotion. “No! John. It wasn’t difficult at all.”

 **CHAPTER 13**

 *May the stars carry your sadness away*

 *May the flowers fill your heart*

 *May hope forever wipe away your tears*

 Indian PROVERB

It was almost ten in the evening when Steadman reined his team to a halt at the rear of the Sullivans house. As he did so Lorna emerged through the kitchen door to stand, lantern raised to spread the light. Dropping the reins, he climbed from the waggon to walk with measured steps towards the woman standing on the back landing holding the lamp.

“John, we were worried. You’re days overdue,” greeted Lorna, her voice a mixture, annoyed and concerned.

“Will you marry me?” asked Steadman, still walking.

“Oh my god! She’s dead!” burst out the woman.

“No! Alin’s alive and safe, but she is no longer my wife. You haven’t answered my question?” His reply and request were spoken in an unemotional manner.

Lorna studied the man in front of her for several moments before giving him firm directions:

“Put the wagon away and see to the horses, then come in. I’ll have something cooked and ready for you,” then turned about.

She did set a plate for John but he hardly touched it, drinking three cups of coffee over the next hour instead. In that hour he covered the whole event in detail, much of it word for word, as Alin had told him. They were alone as Matthew, Marla and Kathleen had gone to their beds well before Steadman had returned. As he finished, he was expecting the woman, who had sat silent listening through the whole hour, to begin asking him a rapid number of questions.

Instead, Lorna reached across and slapped one of his hands.

“So! That was why you asked me to marry you. So you could have a good reason for granting Alin her divorce.”

Wide-eyed with surprise, Steadman, startled by her assumption, for a full three seconds stared across at the woman until she suddenly flowered into a smile, whereupon John just suddenly erupted into a roar of laughter, rocking back in his chair as he did so. This was the first time Lorna had seen the man laugh since returning from the war and was in fact his first time doing so for over five years. When he began to settle Lorna took his hand and led him out the door and into the middle of the rear yard. Above them the moon now shone with the silver brilliance that only a Texas moon can.

Positioning Steadman at arm’s length she then requested of him;

“Now, John. Ask me now.”

There was no need to state what.

“Lorna! Will you marry me?” He asked, just above a whisper

Closing into each other’s arms, Lorna’s lips brushed his ear and as if a sigh:

“Yes John! Yes!”

And then they kissed. And kissed. And kissed.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Three days later Steadman was again in Fort Worth, this time as instructed, presenting to a lawyer a forged request from Alin, written by him and signed by Lorna, for a divorce. On explaining the circumstances the lawyer agreed. He had practiced on this violent and troubled Frontier for a number of years and had dealt with a wide number of issues far more complicated. The following morning John collected from his office, two copies of divorce.

John and Lorna’s wedding took place a month later at the ranch, and as Hutton had no minister, one had to be brought in from Fort Worth. Bill Gary and his wife were invited and arrived on the stagecoach, as did Lawrence Gregg and his sister Daniella, or Dani as she was called by everyone except her mother. For a three-day stay the Garys were put up at the ranch along with the minister, while Lawrence and Dani stayed with the Sullivans. All in all there were about a hundred guests, most from Hutton but many also from nearby homesteads and other ranches.

From somewhere, several wagon loads of planking turned up and a crew, who laid out a dance floor near the lake. The wedding ring, John insisted, would be one she already wore; the one Tom Sullivan had given her. Lorna had cried a little when asked to do so. The wedding actually took place on the newly erected dance floor. A number of benches had been hammered together but most of the guests stood. The dinner after was plentiful, and enjoyed sat on the grass near the lake’s edge, as was the wedding cake baked by Marla Sullivan and her neighbors,

In the afternoon the dance floor was cleared and dancing began with a three-piece orchestra – an accordion, a violin and a banjo. When Lawrence and Dani had arrived the day before, Mel Peterson met them at the stagecoach office. It was running twice a week now, and took them to the Sullivans. Dani, as Mel expected, began peppering him with questions, which cut short his stay. However, when she arrived with the Sullivans at the ranch the next morning in a pale blue dress that highlighted her shoulder-length silky blond hair, she was no longer the chattering teenager but a constantly smiling, lovely young woman. This time it was Peterson who was doing all the staring.

The only time they left each other’s side was when Dani was tempted onto the dance flooring. Mel, raised in a frontier cabin, had had neither the need nor occasion to learn the steps he now watched Dani so easily perform. Towards the evening Steadman watched the two leave the dancing to begin a walk around the lake. An hour later they appeared, coming around the other side, holding hands.

Late the next morning Peterson arrived back at the ranch, after seeing Lawrence and Dani off on the stagecoach back to Fort Worth. Climbing off his horse he approached the veranda to call up to John and Lorna who were relaxing there after having a late morning breakfast.

“Lorna, can you teach me to dance?”

“Yes” Of course!” replied the newly-wed wife, “When we have the time.”

John said not a word. Here before him was not the war-hardened youth he knew who had fought more battles than Julius Caesar. This was now but a love-struck Romeo.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Shortly after Christmas Steadman again set off with his stores wagon for another tour of the Frontier farms and homesteads, only on this trip he had company, Lorna. John had told her that he had planned on visiting Alin on the Maslak River, to deliver to her, her divorce paper. Lorna, in an instant, made it plainly clear that if he was off to see his ex-wife, then so was she.

 Two weeks later on a bright sunny January 1867 morning, Lorna found herself sat with her husband beside her, looking down from a river escarpment at an Indian tented camp. Without comment Steadman guided the horse team to the cutting that led off the escarpment and down to the river level. Of course they had been seen and as they came out of the basin where the village ponies spend their nights, onto the village camp area, the adults remained within the village but all the children were advancing, as were the dogs, barking. Every child’s face a picture of curiosity, a wheeled vehicle had never been seen in their village before. As they were about to be overwhelmed, a rider on a brown and white pony came racing towards them, to rein to a halt beside them in an effortlessly controlled motion, crying out with uncontrolled surprise:

“John! Lorna! What are you doing here?” It was Alin.

“Why, to see you, you savage creature,” smiled Lorna.

Alin, to keep the crowd of children back, shouted in Tonkawa a string of words at them, then to John:

“John! Bring the wagon into the village to our teepee. Nathan is with the herd. I have just come from there,” directed Alin, shouting once again at the children. Squaws and some males were also present now and called to them as well.

“What are you saying to them all, Alin?” asked Lorna.

“I’m telling them that you are friends and have come to visit the village,” she replied.

“Hello father,” came a voice from a young boy that had begun to walk beside John’s side of the wagon. It was Ben.

“Hello Ben!” acknowledged Steadman, stopping the team to hold out a hand, “Come up.”

Ben was soon sat between the two on the wagon seat.

“Hello Ben,” greeted Lorna, “You wouldn’t remember me but I’m a friend of your mother. We’ve met before. My name’s Lorna.” She was holding out her hand.

At the teepee, still followed by most of the village, when John stopped the wagon, Alin sprang from her pony but held the mount close.

“Ben, take Cleo and go to the herd and tell Nathan to come back to the village.” Scrambling over Lorna, the boy leapt onto the pony’s back and was galloping off in an eye blink.

“Lorna, you and John come down. We will wait here for Nathan then you and he can pay your respects to Standing Elk,” elaborated Alin, turning to find Camila had emerged from the teepee. She was holding a young baby in her arms, Alin’s.

“Camila, John’s returned and this is a friend, Lorna.” As Alin indicated to the blond woman, Lorna stepped towards her to extend her hand.

“Oh Camila, John’s told me so much about you. I’m so glad to meet you.

Camila slowly removed one hand from holding the baby to extend it towards Lorna’s.

“You are his wife.”

“Oh! No! corrected Alin quickly, “Lorna’s a friend.”

There was silence as Lorna, still holding Camila’s hand, turned to John.

“Well I did tell you she had a gifted sense of judgement,” reminded her husband, turning to extract a leather case from under the wagon seat, producing a sheet of paper to hold it out to Alin.

“Your divorce paper”, announced John, breaking into a smile.

At first bemused, Alin then threw her arms around Lorna, crying out:

“I should have realized.”

When Nathan arrived, John began to introduce his wife but was cut short by her with;

“There is no need for introductions, John. Nathan and I have met. We exchanged letters,” extending her hand.

Steadman then took Nathan to the rear of the wagon to explain another reason for his visit. When Bill Gary attended the wedding, John had put to him a course of action that had been playing on his mind ever since he had returned from finding Alin. During his months of building his Militia Force, it was made plain to him that, should he have to pursue any Comanche attackers, he would need a scout force, scouts who can track. After meeting Nathan and hearing of the worries he had of their conflicts with the Comanches, he was convinced they were the answer. Regrettably there was one drawback, they were poorly armed. On hearing Steadman out, Gary replied he approved of the idea and asked him to come to Fort Worth in a week’s time. This John did, and was taken to a small store house where the Fort Worth Militia kept their arms.

Holding up a single-shot Springfield carbine, “The Yankee cavalry had a lot of these during the war,” explained Gary, “and have now sent them along to us. Thought we could find a use for them but as you see it’s a one-shot and most of our boys want repeaters, so they buy their own. Would these be any use for your Indian scouts?”

“How many do you have”, quickly asked Steadman.

“About twenty or so,” replied Gary.

“Ammunition?” John enquired.

“Substantial, and can get more I’m sure.”

Gary handed the rifle to Steadman.

“I’ll take them all,” replied a very happy man.

Steadman explained all this to Nathan, then reaching into the wagon, handed one of the Springfields to him. “If you accept becoming scouts, this is what you will be armed with.”

Taking the weapon in his hands, Nathan could feel a surge go through his body. With these, no longer would we fear the Comanch or run from him and hide.

“I will take you to Chief Standing Elk. How many do you have?” he asked.

“Twenty-three,” was Steadman’s brief reply.

“We’ll go now. You present him with the rifle and I’ll explain why you want to arm his warriors,” explained Nathan, adding with a grin, “I don’t think he’ll throw us out of his tent.”

On informing the women, Lorna asked Alin, “Well, while they’re off doing that, you must show me your special place.”

In the evening they had a supper of Alin’s bean soup and coffee; coffee which Lorna had brought with her to present to Camila. A welcomed gift, for they were without because the Mexican traders whom the tribe normally barter with had failed to appear last year. Nathan blamed the Comanches, for their signs of aggression had increased. Around the fire they talked of many things, both of white and of red, while Lorna spent a motherly hour rocking Alin and Nathan’s three-month old son, Thunder Light, in her arms. Sky Owl, Camila’s third son, spoke the least but he listened the most. Unknown to those around him, he had a desire which everyone would be informed of the following day. On all taking to their beds Lorna snuggled up to John, delighting in the unfamiliar ecstasy of being wrapped in a buffalo robe inside an Indian teepee.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

In the morning before the herd was taken to the plain, Standing Elk presented twenty-two Springfield rifles to the warriors of the tribe. Another eight or ten had to go without, but it was their Chief’s decision of who received them, and had to abide by it, Afterwards John asked Nathan to gather those who had received a rifle around him and then he formally enlisted them. Raising his voice he began;

“You will as Militia Scouts bear true allegiance to the State of Texas and serve faithfully against all her enemies.”

Then to Nathan, “Just ask them to shout, “Yes”.”

After the shout died away, Steadman then acknowledged to Nathan,

“Well, that made it official. You are now all scouts.”

When Nathan informed the warriors of this, another shout arose.

The next hour, Steadman spent in demonstrating how to load and fire their new weapons, an act that Nathan insisted on.

While this was taking place, Camila with Lorna’s assistance was shifting through the contents of John’s wagon. To Camila this was a gift to the village that had to be seized. Cloth, spools of thread, needles, salt, a sandstone grinding wheel mounted on a frame with a handle to spin it, digging tools, soap for Alin, and a number of other items all of much necessity for the village.

On seeing the pile of his goods stacked beside Camila’s teepee, he was not joking when he asked, “And who’s paying for all this?”

“You and I. John,” smiled Alin, holding out a gold coin, money she had saved from their homestead cabin before the Comanches burnt it. Almost the last, for Alin had over the years used most to purchase from the Mexican traders at their improvised plains fairs, items needed by the village.

It was in the early afternoon that John paused on the rim of the escarpment after their climb up from the river bottom. Now though they had a companion, Sky Owl. He had approached Steadman and asked if he could work on his ranch. On asking why, Sky Owl’s answer required no more questions from him.

“Because I want to learn the white man’s ways.”

Gazing over the valley with smoke drifting from a number of the teepees, Lorna grasped her husband’s arm and gently laid her head on his shoulder, to confess:

“Oh! John, I’m so glad we came.”

In answer, he turned and kissed her forehead. A moment later she straightened herself up and called to Sky Owl, sat astride his pony several feet away;

“I’m sure you’ll miss all this.”

“Yes! Much,” he replied, “but not being woken at night by Alin moaning as she and Nathan make love.”

Lorna, unable to check herself, erupted in giggles of laughter.

 **CHAPTER 14**

 *Texas is a den of thieves…A rendezvous*

 *of rascals for all the continent.*

 Horace Greeley

When Steadman agreed to take Sky Owl on at his ranch he had no idea he was bringing with him a colossal surprise. On introducing him to Frank Winkler the older man shot back gruffly;

“Tonkawa! Ah! Don’t reckon you got an hombre in the tribe call Nathan?”

When the answer came,

“He’s my brother.”

Winkler in a fit of glee leapt forward, grabbed Sky Owl’s right hand in both of his and began pumping it up and down.

“Well I’ll be hornswaggled. Howdee do! Howdee do! How’s he gett’n on? How’s he gett’n on?”

It wasn’t until an hour later that John was able to pry Frank away from Sky Owl long enough to hear his tale of how he and Nathan came to meet. Sat on the house veranda he listened as Winkler told of how in 1858 the Comanches were terrorizing the Frontier, attacking homesteads and farms, killing, burning and taking captives. And how it was John Salmon “Rip” Ford of the Texas Rangers who put an end to it.

Gathering a hundred strong force of rangers, Winkler among them, he set out for the Comanche homeland. However, hearing of this, another hundred Tonkawa warriors joined them. The Tonkawas were a peaceful tribe wishing war with no one but were repeatedly being attacked by the Comanches. They too wanted an end to the butchery. On finding the Comanche main camp, Ford led his force directly towards it. As they approached, the Chief of Chiefs rode out of the camp gesturing and shouting, halting in front of Ford. He wore a Spanish metal breastplate and was believed by his people to be invincible and immortal. He believed it too. Listening for several moments to the savage’s rants and threat, Ford then drew a pistol from a saddle holster and shot him off his pony, then galloped his two hundred revenge-hungry horsemen into the attack.

It was an extremely large Indian camp, estimated to contain six hundred Comanche warriors. Undeterred by the greater number, they swept in shooting down any braves in the way of their advance. At one stage Frank found himself unhorsed and with his pistol empty was defending himself against three attackers with just his Bowie knife, when a Tonkawa brave rode in to them swinging a stone-headed war club that felled one of the three to the ground, his head slashed open. He then sprang from his pony to place himself at Winkler’s right shoulder aiding him in dealing with the other two in seconds.

The camp was, within a few minutes, overrun and most of the Comanche braves put in flight but left almost a hundred others behind, dead, and unlike they would have done, not one of those dead were old, a woman, child or baby. For the rest of their time sweeping through Comanche lands, Frank and the Tonkawa half-breed rode and fought side-by-side. He was a young man of twenty-two and called himself Nathan.

“And his Pa had fought and died at the Alamo,” finished Winkler with a dramatic burst.

“And he saved my wife and children,” cried Steadman’s mind as he sat back in silence.

Over the coming month, although preferring to sleep in the barn, Sky, as everyone now called him, settled in with the other ranch hands well, eating and working with all. There were six now. John had taken on another two, for he intended to build up his herd, in so doing having to give up his wagon trips around the Frontier. Matthew assured him it was no cause to regret. The war had been over for two years now and the ranches and farms were becoming self-reliant. Steadman was pleased Sullivan looked on it that way for as well as the ranch his Militia appointment was becoming a major concern.

Although he had over a hundred men on his roll, they were spread out for fifty miles in all directions. If an attack occurred somewhere within that area he could never muster his whole force in time to deal with it. Governed by that restriction he was forced to concoct a plan for alerting those nearest the attack, a plane where, on being informed of their need, each Militiaman would ride to warn two or three others, who would converge on a pre-arranged rendezvous, farm, ranch or river crossing. From there they would ride to where they could deal with the trouble or to another rendezvous to form a larger force. It was a simple plan and worked to a degree but like all pre-planned plans, luck was also needed.

In early May two men on horseback arrived at the ranch, not cowhands looking for work, but seeking information. Respectably dressed, they introduced themselves as stagecoach representatives who Matthew Sullivan had recommended John to them. They explained that their stagecoach company intended to extend the route from Fort Worth through Hutton then on to El Paso and beyond to San Francisco, and were planning to mount a scouting expedition to locate the most favorable route.

John invited the two to sit themselves on the veranda while he went and found someone. Frank Winkler was in the barn and by the time they reached the house Lorna was already serving the two men coffee. John introduced Winkler to them as an ex-Texas Ranger who might help them in a choice of routes. When asked if he had been to El Paso, Frank replied that he and some other Rangers were sent there in the second year of the Civil War to see what the Federal troops from California, now in occupation, were up to.

Frank then invited them to trace their intended route on a map they had produced. As one began to do so, after about fifty miles Frank stopped him.

“Nope! Too many Comanches that way. Come north.”

Then, “Nope! You’re in a box canyon. Come back and go west about five miles.”

Another start and another:

“Nope! You sure ain’t gonna get across that river there. Go downstream about ten miles.”

It was when Winkler again said:

“Nope! Apaches!”

That the two men gave up, offering Frank instead a substantial amount of money if he could provide his services in leading their expedition.

Frank looked at John, who nodded his head.

“Yup” I reckon!”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Not long after Winkler left, accompanied by Sky, Matthew brought another man to the ranch. He spoke English but with a heavy accent. He was Danish and had left his family in Europe temporarily, to come to America to plan a new life. Matthew, when the man arrived by stagecoach and told him he had come to Hutton in search of farming land to buy, his first thoughts were of John’s old homestead, which was why he had escorted him to the ranch.

The next morning Steadman and the Dane spent half the day in the ranch buckboard, getting out to what had once been, for John, a happy home. During their journey, his passenger related to John his reason for being in Texas.

It transpired that while John was fighting the Federal army in Virginia, the Dane was also fighting a war, with Germany, which he lost, and was forced to live under the occupation of German rule. Having sold his home in Schleswig Holstein to a German, he now intended to begin farming again, in Texas. When John casually mentioned that they did have an ongoing problem with Indians, the Dane scoffed;

“Indians! I’ve fought Germans!”

They spent less than an hour at the homestead, most of that on the high ground overlooking the shallow valley.

Finally, after a long period studying the map that came with the land deed, John was asked what price in American dollars he would sell for.

“Four thousand,” he replied, prepared to go lower.

“That is good. That is good,” replied the Dane.

The next morning they were together again, this time on their way by stagecoach to Fort Worth’s Land Office. After this transfer of his homestead, Steadman visited the Bank where he placed three thousand dollars in a separate account for Watts, on recommendation by Matthew. In so doing legalizing his ownership of Plum Tree Ranch, a name Kathleen had begun calling her new home.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

The following week he and his ranch-hands were intent on branding un-branded cattle found on the ranch land, the brand was “PT” for Plum Tree Ranch, when John’s attention was taken by a horseman galloping up to the house. There, Lorna on the veranda pointed his way. As the horseman reined to a stop outside the corral John and his men were working in, the rider shouted across:

“John! Matthew wants you in town, fast. Brad Whiting’s been shot.”

Whiting was a gambler who made a living at Hutton’s newly established saloon, running a friendly poker table.

Expecting trouble, John asked Mel Peterson and one of the new hands, Garth Roland, also ex-Confederate Army, both now in his Militia Company, to accompany him into the town. With a quick kiss for Lorna as he strapped on his three Colt revolvers;

“Bit of trouble in town but won’t be long.”

He led the others out the gate at a gallop.

Arriving in the town they found the main street empty of normal life. Dismounting, the three made their way to the Sullivans General Store opposite the saloon. There, they found Matthew and about twenty other men of the town watching with apprehension the saloon across the street.

“John! He greeted Steadman,” Thanks for getting here so quick. We have trouble over in the saloon. Early this morning four strangers rode in, went into the saloon, started playing cards when one of them jumps up and called Brad a cheat, then shot ‘im. Everyone cleared out except Stan Peirce who you know owns the place and tends the bar. They’ve been in there close on two hours now. I got you in here ‘coz you as a Captain of militia, you’re the nearest thing we got hereabouts that’s our law and order. Darn it, John, I’ve been saying it for over a year now, Hutton needs a town Marshall.”

“There’s four of them and they’re in the saloon, drinking?” questioned Steadman, nodding at the building across the street.

“Yes. Four,” confirmed Sullivan, adding, “That’s their horses at the hitching rail,” also nodding.

Of all the lessons John learned during the war, one of the first was, you don’t rush into attack without first carrying out a reconnaissance of your objective. Removing his three pistols he then stripped off his outer vest and shirt so he now stood with just his pants braces over a white cotton inner vest. He then informed the others why.

“Matthew! I want you all to stay here,” he instructed, “I’m just gonna have a look at what we’ve got on our hands here.”

Then stepping into the street ignoring the shouts of protest that rose from behind him, he strode across the street. Mounting the board walk he stamped his boots to announce his arrival, then pushing the swing butterfly doors, stepped inside. Taking just a few paces, hooking his thumbs in the braces straps, he shouted at a very downcast and solemn Stan Peirce behind the bar:

“I’ve come for my whiskey, Stan.”

Then looking around the room, allowed his eyes to rest on four men at a table with scattered cards, whiskey glasses and a bottle of whiskey on it. One, in a Union Army blue jacket of Mexican appearance and all armed with pistols, sat with legs stretched out. On the floor lay their rifles, as did Brad Whiting, dead. Their stares back at Steadman were more quizzical than threatening, which was the way he hoped it would be. Widening his eyes and dropping his open-mouthed jaw in mock surprize and fear, he turned and rushed out the door, leaving the room to fill with roars of laughter from the four, taken-in, desperadoes.

Outside the door, Steadman leapt into the street, as did Mel Peterson and Garth Rowlands who had been standing outside, both a pistol in each hand.

“Come on, we want to be quick on this,” he called to them as they hurried across the street.

Reaching the store he began re-arming himself while informing everyone what he planned to do and how he wanted the others’ help in making it work.

“Matthew, “he began, “I, Mel and Garth will go in the back of the saloon and deal with those four in there but we will need your help. When we leave I want you to slowly count to a hundred, then start shooting in the air and whop and holler. That will be you making a distraction that will be a big help to us. Is that understood?”

“Yes! Yes! John, and good luck.”

Mel then asked the town blacksmith:

“Josh, I’d like to borrow that side-by-side.” Peterson was indicating a short-barrelled shotgun held by the blacksmith, who handed it over with;

“Make good use of it.”

Leaving the others, with Sullivan beginning his count, John led his two around to the saloon’s rear entrance, where he had them remove their boots. Entering the kitchen they found Stan’s wife sat at a table in a state of worried distress.

“Oh! John!” She gasps on seeing him enter.

Steadman, putting a finger to his lips, indicated she should remain seated while he continued on into a hallway that led into the saloon’s large barroom, where it looked up the length of the bar where Peirce still stood.

“When the shooting starts we all go straight into the bar. Don’t shoot anyone unless they go for a gun,” whispered Steadman, receiving a confirming nod from both his companions.

When the expected firing began John waited just a few seconds, long enough for the four gunmen to react. Bootless they silently hurried into the saloon to find the four men standing with their backs to them.

“You are all under arrest,” shouted John.

Quickly turning about, the four men after a split-second pause, acted as one, all going for their pistols.

“As Stan Peirce dived for the bar floor, two shotgun barrels and four pistols burst into life. There was only one shot in reply, fired into the bar’s roof by a hand whose owner was already half-dead. On closing the four sprawled bodies on the floor, one began to plead; “Doctor. Get me a doctor. I’m hit bad.”

Garth Rowland stood over him, gave his reply;

“Hutton don’t have one.”

Then shot him through the head. “Don’t have a jail none either.”

He had spent a number carefree nights sat at the poker table of the man who lay just feet away in a pool of his own blood.

The four killers were dragged by ropes to a corner of the town cemetery and thrown into a single grave, while their four horses made a welcome addition to the Plum Tree Ranch stables.

This incident only highlighted Matthew Sullivan’s concern for a town Marshall, for since the end of the war Texas had become a state over-run by outlaws, Mexican bandits, aimless ex-soldiers and men with no intent of upholding the rule of law.

 **CHAPTER 15**

 *A good soldier is a poor scout*

 Indian Proverb

Through May and well into June Steadman had concentrated his and his hands on collecting in and branding any unbranded cattle roaming on or near his ranch. Herds were being driven out of Texas now, north to railheads in Kansas, then east to beef-hungry markets, and John was anxious to have enough heads of cattle to take part in the next drive in the coming spring.

The year was nearing July when Frank and Sky returned from their stagecoach trailblazing expedition. They had stayed with the party until a hundred miles from El Paso when Frank’s guidance was no longer needed but he did not return in a satisfied mood.

“They are headn’ for a heap of trouble, John,” he condemned, “All along that thar trail they wer’a pick’en out places to put them relay stations, and I told ‘em they were fixin themselves a whole lot of grief. Them hostiles will come ‘a killing and burning just whenever they take a mind to.” Sky remained silent but nodded his agreement.

John on hearing him out promised Frank he would send a report to Bill Gary, but could do no more. As it proved in the coming years, Winkler’s prediction tragically turned out to be all too true.

It was in early July, shortly after Lorna informed him that it appeared she was pregnant and that they could expect the baby’s arrival sometime in February, that John received word that he should embark on a trip north. A letter arrived from Bill Gary instructing him to go up the Brazos River and make contact with the Army who were establishing a new camp.

Taking Sky with him, after a three-day hunt they found the post on a high bluff overlooking the Clear Fork’s joining of the Brazos River. Riding into the camp, John found himself entering a familiar scene from past army days, rows of tents, horse lines, wagons in motion, or clustered together horseless and empty. Throughout were soldiers mounted or on foot, or gathered in small groups at tent entrances. On a rough boarding was a sign, Camp Wilson. Enquiring of a passing corporal as to where he could find the Commanding Officer, Steadman was directed to a large tarpaulin strung on stout poles, under which were four occupants, two sitting slightly apart at two small tables. Securing their horses to a tent picket, John and Sky approached the leaning structure.

A Sergeant, standing sorting papers on a table, asked; “What can I do for you?”

On John introducing himself and stating his purpose, the Sergeant turned to call;

“Colonel, there’s a Militia Officer just arrived, who’s asking to have a word with you.”

One of the sitting men, late forties, light brown wavy hair and oval face, looked up then waved John towards him. Standing to greet the new arrivals by putting out his hand, he introduced himself.

“I’m Colonel Samuel Sturgis. I command the troops here, Sixth Cavalry. Now what can I do for you?” indicating that Steadman should sit on a chair. Sky, he ignored. Although dressed in shirt and trousers his braided hair confirmed without any doubt, he was an Indian.

Before sitting, John also introduced himself and Sky.

“Good morning Colonel. I’m John Steadman. I’m a Militia Captain in command of a company south of you. This is Sky Owl, my chief scout.”

Then beginning to sit, he continued;

“I’ve come to make my presence known and to try to explain as to what you will be facing here, and help in any other way that I and my men can.”

“That’s an offer I’m prepared to accept, Captain. You see, we have been in Texas for over a year but down in Austin trying to keep the peace. It was not easy. You Texans seem to think the war is still on. I found it a great difficulty in receiving cooperation in getting things done.”

John could see that the Colonel had let escape a recent worrying frustration.

“Perhaps, Colonel,” Steadman offered, “You should have looked at it from our side. Here in Texas there was no heavy fighting. Our governing structures were never ruptured. Then you arrive, start establishing martial law and replace with your own people from up north, ours, who all through the war had held it together.”

“A valid point, Captain,” responded Sturgis, “But your opposition to us went beyond objecting to our presence. It was naked hatred. I’ve had men killed and some taken and never found.”

Steadman did not respond; these revelations were unknown to him.

“Colonel, you’ve touched on another reason why I have come.” From a small sack John had been carrying, now on his lap, he drew a Union Army jacket.

“Back a few months, four men rode into our town and shot one of our citizens. We had to deal with them. One was wearing this. He was a Mexican and the name inked under the collar is American.” Steadman held the jacket up.

“Let me see that.”

The voice was that of the officer sat at the next table.

“This is my adjutant Captain Firbank,” informed the Colonel as Firbank left his chair to approach Steadman, extending both hands, one to shake John’s, the other to take the jacket and study the name.

“He’s one of ours,” he announced, then looking at the Colonel, “Spencer, F Troop.”

“Spencer,” repeated Sturgis glancing at the Militia Captain,” He went missing around Austin six months ago.”

There was silence for a number of seconds before the Colonel asked;

“You say you dealt with them, Captain?”

“Those are our bullet holes.” Steadman pointed to the jacket.

“Were you in the war, Captain?” asked the Colonel, after another pause.

“Hood’s Brigade, Colonel.”

After Sturgis studied John for another long pause, “Lee,” he uttered.

“John knew it wasn’t a question. It was a respectful acknowledgement.

Sturgis then suddenly sat back, asking;

“Captain, we have been sent here to stop the Indians raiding along the Frontier. Who are they?”

“On this part of the Frontier we have a number of tribes, Shawnee, Wichita, Osage, Kiowa, Caddo, Comanche and Seminole. But most of these have been peaceful since the war ended. The only two giving us here any worry are the Comanche and Kiowa; the Kiowa from the north and the Comanche from the west and south.” Steadman had been ready for the question.

“And how do we defeat them?” asked the Colonel.

“How many troops do you have, Colonel?”

“Two hundred and seventy,” came back the answer.

“We couldn’t do it with ten times that, Colonel,” replied John. “In time we could deal with the Kiowas but the Comanches we would find difficult to handle. They raid. A number of quick attacks then they hurry away back to their homeland.”

“You don’t paint too bright a picture, Captain.” The Colonel had clasped his hands together on the table.

“Colonel, you have just arrived. You and your men have no idea what’s over the next hill. In order to get a grip on that problem, so you know where to go and how to get there, you will need good scouts who know the country.”

Steadman was hoping he was getting a crucial point made.

“Your scouts?” The response was blunt.

“Yes! Colonel. We have the best.”

“What tribe are they?” Sturgis asked.

“Tonkawa,” came the answer from Sky, the first word he had spoken since entering the shelter.

“Tonkawa,” repeated the Colonel, “They sided with the Confederacy during the war.

“The Comanche and Kiowa have always been our enemies. When the white man came the Comanches and Kiowa attacked them.” Sky spoke without raising his voice. “Tonkawa and the white man have always fought together. When the war between the white man began, we stayed loyal to our friends, and the Comanche and Kiowa still fight us both.”

“I don’t think it could be put plainer than that, Colonel. The Tonkawas weren’t rebelling against the Union, just fighting with people who fought beside them,” offered the Militia Captain.

For the next two hours that day much was discussed and many factors of Indian fighting agreed on. When Steadman and Sky left Camp Wilson, Colonel Sturgis shook both men’s hands.

They returned to Hutton by way of Fort Worth, to inform Bill Gary of their finding Colonel Sturgis, and their agreeing to support each other.

Steadman set about seeing to improve his company’s reaction to Comanche raids. In counsel with Frank Winkler it was decided to have pack horses with dry rations and spare ammunition included to the Company. In so doing, Steadman and his men could move light as the Indians they would be pursuing, and pursue longer. Now that they were committed to supporting the army, he intended that the support would be quick and effective.

 **CHAPTER 16**

 *Sing your death song*

 *and die like a hero going home*

 Indian Proverb

It was mid-August now and the tribal camp on the high plain was busy with the harvest. Sunflowers were cut down and the flower seeds dried in the sun, as were the tobacco leaves and ears of corn. It was a busy time for all, including hunters, which had Nathan wondering why his half-brother was returning to the camp, alone, after only being gone a few hours.

Tall Buffalo was one of the tribe’s skilled buffalo hunters. His pony was a valued animal, trained to chase and stay close to the buffalo’s every move so its rider’s bullet or arrow flies true, which had Nathan, and Alin at his side, puzzled as to why he was galloping his mount at such speed into the camp.

In a rushed halt before them the rider shouted just one word;

“Comanch.”

“How many? How close?” responded Nathan in a calm but loud voice.

“About thirty,” replied Tall Buffalo, “We seen them riding west, towards the Ekwan River.”

“The Dog River, repeated Alin using the English translation, “There are many white farms and homesteads all along its banks.”

Nathan had no need of Alin’s prompted warning. The Ekwan lay across their migration path and was well aware of the danger, from Comanche raids, the settlers were in. And now as sworn Militia scouts, they had a vow to honor.

“Tall Buffalo,” he shouted to his brother. “Come. We must see the Chief.”

At the meeting Nathan asked of Standing Elk two requests; to send Tall Buffalo to Hutton to warn of the Comanches, and for him to take a party of scouts to the Dog River to warn the whites, both quickly granted.

In less than half an hour Nathan and six of his scouts were riding hard, westward. With them also rode Alin when she pointed out that they would most likely be taken for a war party by the homesteaders, than friends with a warning.

Riding quickly they reached the river valley within three hours, arriving at the farm where Alin had obtained the flour. Approaching the farmhouse, Alin had Nathan halt his scouts a short distance from it.

“I’ll go on, Nathan,” she cautioned. “When I’ve explained who we are I’ll call you.”

As she rode at a slow trot, the husband and wife appeared on their front porch, the husband armed with a shotgun. On Alin halting at the porch he asked in a loud voice;

“Who are you and what do you want?”

“You may remember me,” began Alin, “I traded you a buffalo robe for a sack of flour two summers ago.”

“Yes you did,” confirmed the husband,” but why are you here with a party of Indians?”

“Please,” answered Alin, “You must believe me. They are not a war party. They are Tonkawa scouts, part of John Steadman’s Militia Company.”

“We know John, and you’re the woman he was searching for,” announced the wife.

“Yes! But the reason we have come is to warn you that a Comanche raiding party has been seen approaching from the east. It may not…”

“Daniel! Daniel!” interrupted the wife, clutching at her husband’s arm while pointing southwards, downriver.

Alin, turning her head sharply, found herself looking at a thin column of black smoke beginning to rise into a blue mid-day sky.

“God, No! That must be the McLeod’s,” gasped the husband.

“Jenny! Jenny their daughter. She’s just had a baby,” spoke the wife in an alarmed voice.

In moments, Nathan and the six scouts galloped up to the house.

“Do you have riding horses?” called Nathan to the husband.

“Yes! Yes! But they’re at the bottom of the pasture,” he replied, a little confused at Nathan’s clear spoken English

“The Comanch have set fire to the house. That means they are on the move. If they come this way they will be here soon,” warned Nathan, continuing, “You can’t stay here. You must get mounted and we must leave quickly.”

Before Daniel could reply one of the scouts called out, again pointing south. Below the black smoke a faint mist of dust appeared at ground level.

“There is no time to run now, warned Nathan, “We will defend the house.”

Then with no regard to the farm owner, he told his scouts to take his and Alin’s ponies and with their own hide them in the barn, then return to the house. Climbing the steps to the porch, he gave the farm couple a quick outline as to what they could expect to happen.

“When the Comanches arrive they will rush the house not expecting a violent welcome. That could be an advantage for us.”

As Nathan talked, all four had entered the house. This was directly into a large combined dining room and parlor. Looking about, Nathan asked;

“Where does that door lead?”

“Into the kitchen,” replied Daniel.

Without a word Nathan went straight in. There he found a plain frontier kitchen, stove, sink with pump, cupboards and a large work table. Continuing on to the rear door that opened onto another porch, he looked towards the barn, to see his six scouts hurrying towards the house. He then turned back into the kitchen, now finding the time to introduce himself.

“I’m Nathan. We are Militia Scouts attached to John Steadman. We had come to warn you about the Comanches. I’m sorry we arrived too late. But we still have a good chance of getting through this. The Comanch don’t know we are here.”

“I and my family are in your hands, Nathan. What can I do?” Daniel had realized very quickly that the Indian scout seemed to have a firm understanding of the trouble he and his family were in and had no hesitation in obeying any order he gave.

“When my scouts arrive send them into the main room. Then close the back door and push the table against it.” Having given these instructions, Nathan re-entered the front room to find Alin talking to the wife, with two young girls, one eight the other ten, clutching her skirt.

“Nathan! Called Alin, “This is Aggy and her two daughters, Alice and Mary.”

Shaking the mother’s hand he gave the two girls’ shoulders a light squeeze before saying softly;

“When the scouts arrive, you four go into the kitchen, shut the door and don’t come out until we call you.”

When the scouts hurriedly entered, Alin and the other three left. Nathan then quickly briefed his six men on what they were to do and where to position themselves for the defence of the house. When Daniel appeared, he now explained what part he was to play but first asked, “How many cartridges do you have for the shotgun?”

“Eleven,” was the reply.

“Good,” responded Nathan, “Now this is what I would like you to do. We have opened the door and the windows. When the Comanch arrive they will try to storm the house. This we want them to do. I want you to be against the far wall but facing the door. When they try to come through I want you to open fire. None of my scouts will fire until you have. Is that clear?”

Daniel nodded while breaking open the shotgun to make sure both chambers were loaded.

In the near distance the Comanche band could be clearly seen as horses and riders. Within the room all watched in silence. Dressed in toughened buffalo hide vests, the six scouts had come prepared for a fight. Two wore their feathered war bonnets.

In the kitchen Alin had placed Aggy and her two daughters on the floor with their backs to the stove.

“Will we be safe here, Alin?” asked the concerned mother.

“Of course we will,” assured Alin, squatting down to smile at each of the daughters in turn.

“You will hear shooting but that is just our scouts frightening the bad Indians away. We’ll just have to wait here in the kitchen until they have gone.” Then standing, she continued to the mother;

“It will be noisy with the shooting, Aggy, but here in the kitchen we will be protected.”

An assurance Alin could only hope to prove true. Turning her back, she drew the Naval Colt revolver from the holster slung over her shoulder, the same one she couldn’t fire at her homestead six years earlier. She could fire it now, though, Nathan had seen to that.

With the approach of pony huffs beats, that could now be heard by those waiting in the house, the scouts began to retreat further back from the front windows but not in fear, in anticipation. They had found, in hunting, their new rifles to be accurate. They were now looking forward to finding out how accurate.

There was no fence around the house to hinder pony and rider, which allowed the Comanches to arrive whooping and screaming war cries, to the farmhouse steps. Nathan, on watching them arrive from within the room, saw at the rear of the ponies and riders a young white woman, secured to a horse.

The first two Comanches onto the porch both crowded through the door at once, only to be blown back from it by two blasts from Daniel’s shotgun. The scouts also opened fire at clear targets scrambling onto the porch. Nathan also took aim and shot, then quickly reloading, aimed and shot again, but this time at the horse the white woman was astride. The animal reared once, then side-stepped a few yards before collapsing to the ground.

Closing to the windows and door, the scouts were loading and firing with eagerness. Their opening volley had stunned the Comanches. They had attacked many farms and homesteads but had encountered nothing of such ferocity of fire that they were faced with now. Some attempted to fire back, but wildly, for there was no visible target. In less than a minute the assault turned into a frantic retreat. Remounting ponies, it became a mad jumbled race to get away from bullets that struck among them.

Once out of range, one of the raiders wearing a gray hat, stopped to look back at the farm house. On the porch a figure in a war bonnet could be seen.

“Tonkawa,” came the single word as if a curse.

Vowing revenge, the rider raced off to re-join his beaten band.

In jubilation the scouts converged on the dead and dying, the latter they hurried their end with quick knife thrusts, not as their victims would have done, with multiple barbaric torture.

Nathan’s first act was to race to the white captive who had a leg pinned under the horse. The moment Nathan arrived at her side she began to scream hysterically. He immediately backed away. She had been in the hands of Comanches. Hurrying into the house he went to the kitchen where Aggy was sitting with her two daughters. Nathan, on mentioning white women, she rushed from the kitchen to the front yard.

“Jenny! Oh Jenny!” She cried, to receive in reply, “My baby! They killed my baby! They killed my baby!”

To remove her leg from beneath the horse, Aggy and Daniel blocked her view as Nathan and his scouts removed the horse, whereupon she was taken to an upstairs bedroom and kept there for three days.

The dead, there were eight of them, were taken to a nearby gully and left. Any blood on the porch Daniel washed away. Before the sun set, Nathan and three of his scouts rode the five miles to the source of the smoke that had alerted them earlier, the McLeod farmstead. On returning, Nathan took Daniel outside to explain what he had found in regards to the occupants, a father, mother, son and young baby.

The following late afternoon, Captain Steadman with Tall Buffalo and twenty of his Militia arrived, having briefly stopped at the McLeods to bear witness to the Comanches inhuman labors. Frank Winkler greeted Nathan as if a long lost son and although knowing she had once been John Steadman’s wife, on being introduced to Alin, greeted her in his normal old Texan way. Indicating Nathan;

“Now what got into a good lookin’ gal like you to go and git hitched up to an ugly varmint like him?”

“He saved my life,” tossed back Alin.

“Yup! Mine too, I reckon,” concluded the ex-Texas Ranger.

The next morning Steadman had some of his men dig a pit to throw the dead Comanches into, to remove the stench from spreading to the farmhouse. Others he took to the McLeod farmstead to give the remains of the family a proper burial.

While doing this Nathan and his scouts rode a broad sweep down the valley to ensure the Comanches had no intention of returning.

In the afternoon a troop of the 6th Cavalry arrived, guided by Sky Owl, who on his brother’s arrival at the ranch had been sent by Steadman to warn Colonel Sturgis. The young Lieutenant in command of the troop made a strong point of praising Sky and his skills in getting him and his men from Camp Wilson the many miles to the farm.

The next morning all three parties left for their separate destinations; Sky again with the soldiers, and Jenny McLeod with Steadman. With nowhere else to go she would remain in the care of the Sullivans until family could be contacted, just another victim of the fearful Texas Frontier.

The Chandlers waved them all away, to once again be left to the seclusion of their farm.

 **CHAPTER 17**

 *A danger foreseen is half-avoided*

 Indian Proverb

On returning to his ranch, John Steadman spent several hours composing his report of Nathan and his scouts’ defence of the Chandler farm. It was a disturbing account, mainly because it highlighted the vulnerable situation most frontier settlers faced. The Comanches and other warring tribes had the advantage; appearing without warning, kill, torture, burn, kidnap, then vanish into the vast western wastelands. Pursuit of great length was an ill-advised option. The Comanche were breath-taking horsemen and could out-run, out-maneuver and out-fight any white man on horseback, and ambush with cunning success. John knew Bill Gary was more than aware of these facts but felt they still had to be stated.

The most worrying finding that emerged from the attack was that, of the eight rifles found with the dead Comanches, four were cartridge loaded repeaters. The source of these, Steadman had no doubt, were the Comancheros. They were an assorted band of mixed races that had traded with the Comanches for decades, accepting all items from their far ranging plunder, including white captives. These would be spirited across the Mexican border to be sold into slavery.

John finished his report by praising Nathan and his scouts in their quick reaction on discovering the Comanche raiding party. Their defence of the Chandler farm very likely saved a number of other farms and homesteads further up the Ekwan River.

Steadman, as the local Militia Company Commander, also sent a similar report to Colonel Sturgis, thanking him for his swift response in dispatching his troop of cavalry, which resulted in a reply coming back that expressed his gratitude for Sky Owl’s scouting assistance and his wish for Tonkawa scouts to be permanently housed at Camp Wilson. Regrettably, a request John had to refuse, for he knew the Camp as yet had no suitable accommodation for Indian attachments.

This however, did not result in disassociation. Sky, accompanied by other scouts, made themselves available for Camp Wilson, scouting on a number of occasions throughout the autumn and winter.

As concerned as Steadman was of his Militia duties and the fragility of the Frontier he also had a family and ranch that needed his attention as well. With seven ranch hands on the payroll he was determined to make the ranch a paying concern and that would mean selling his cattle, which would entail first getting them to Fort Worth to join a drive that would see them up to a Kansas railhead. To ensure this to be done in a proper manner John asked Mel Peterson if he was willing to go to Fort Worth and base himself with the Greggs. Then find out as much as he could about Steadman having his stock attached to another herd, for a drive to Kansas.

Mel just grinned. Probably Steadman thought he was looking forward to impressing Dani with all the fancy dance steps he had been learning from his wife.

Life in the household was, thanks to Lorna, run to a simple routine. Every morning after breakfast five days a week Lorna would take Kathleen to school in Hutton, then if not staying to assist, would return to the ranch. Collecting her to return home was seen to by one of the ranch hands, normally young Jamie Pearson, on the back of his saddle.

Sunday dinner for everyone on the ranch required a larger table now but Lorna still enjoyed doing the cooking.

In mid-October when the tribe had returned once again to their winter home on the Maslak River, Steadman again found need to visit them. Of course, although five months pregnant now, Lorna insisted on joining him.

So once again, on a warm sunny afternoon she was sat beside her husband in the ranch buckboard, looking down from the river escarpment on an Indian village. As before, the children swarmed out to greet the wheeled wonder, Ben and Martina among them, and the dogs.

Thunder Light, Alin and Nathan’s son, was ten months old now and an active toddler.

Camila welcomed them warmly, more so when Lorna handed her another large bag of coffee beans. On paying his respects to Standing Elk, John returned to the teepee to find a number of his scouts awaiting him. All eventually came, mostly to express their liking of the Springfield. At supper, that included again Alin’s bean soup, she felt that Lorna was now familiar with village life enough to be told that the spoon she was using was made from a buffalo’s jaw and the bowl holding her soup was a bladder from the same animal.

The next morning Alin took Lorna for a long walk down the valley, accompanied by Cleopatra who kept nuzzling Alin’s cheek as she stroked her nose, an association that fascinated Lorna. The following morning she and John, as they had months earlier, paused on the escarpment’s rim for a farewell glance. For Lorna, a sight she would never see again.

 **CHAPTER 18**

 *Hold onto my hand even if*

 *I have gone away from you*

 Indian Blessing

They came in an early April Sunday morning, before the sun rose. Silently they surrounded the house, made entry then burst into the main bedroom, subduing the husband, dragging both him and his wife down the stairs. On the porch both their daughters, nine and eleven, were tied to the porch roof posts, silently whimpering.

“Mary! Alice! The wife screamed, “Never forget who you are. Never forget!”

As the husband and wife were dragged apart both screamed each other’s name.

“Daniel!” “Aggy!”

Then thrown to their tormentors:

Aggy, to the warrior who stripped her naked, pinned her arms to the ground with lances, then began to rape her.

Daniel was given to the women who also stripped him naked, bound his arms and legs, cut off his genitals, forced them into his mouth, then sewed his lips closed with a bone needle. A slit trench had been dug. They were quick with this for they had done this many times, then placed him in and refilled it with only his head showing. His eyelids were cut away so he could no longer shut out the horror in front of him, of his wife repeatedly being raped.

Observing all this a Comanche in a gray hat silently watched both actions, assuring himself that his vow of vengeance was going to plan.

Aggy died later that morning with only a few of the eighty or more savages unrelieved. Daniel lived for three days until found by a number of farmers from the north, who ventured to investigate the burning of the house and barn. He survived only an hour longer.

Daniel, at mid-day had watched in agony and grief as his two daughters were taken away. The kindest fate that could await them, purchased servitude in Mexico.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

“John! John!”

“Coming! Coming!” responded John Steadman, hurrying to his front door, “Hold your horses.”

It was mid-April 1868 and John and his family were not long finished supper, with Lorna nursing their two month old son and Kathleen reading a book in the parlor. He left them to answer the row at his front door.

As he pulled the door open the shouting and knocking ended, for John to find himself facing one of his Militia men from a ranch twenty miles north of Hutton.

“John!” he burst out, “They’re raiding; up on the Ekwan again.”

“How do you know this?” Steadman didn’t need to ask who.

“A ranch hand from up there got to us three or four hours ago. I’ve been riding most in the dark to get here.”

John asked no more, pushing past the man to snatch up a metal rod, using it to strike repeatedly at a triangular metal alarm, bringing most of his ranch hands from the bunkhouse.

The first to arrive, though, was Lorna.

“What is it John?” She asked, still holding their son.

“It’s a raid, same place as last summer. We’ll have to go. Most likely for a few days,” he answered, his mind spinning off in several directions at once.

“What’s the ruckus, John?”

It was Frank Winkler with most of his hands.

“Another attack up on the Ekwan, We’ll have to move fast,” Steadman then began to snap out orders to his men, who had all joined his Militia.

“Garth! You ride to the Howards, the Carsons and the Fontanes. Walt! You warn the Adamsons and Loyds. Tim, you go for the Browns, Fawcetts and Vanes. Tell them that the rendezvous is at the Murdoch Ranch.”

Then looking at another, in an apologetic tone:

“Stan! Your turn to watch the ranch.”

Stan, with a resigned look, nodded, “It’ll be here when you get back.”

“Frank!” Now turning to Winkler, “You and Jamie get the pack horses ready. We’ll leave when you’re mounted to go.”

Then turning his attention to his last two;

“Mel! Sky! When Frank’s ready the five of us will head straight for the Murdochs Ranch.”

Steadman’s last address was to the man who had arrived with the alarm.

“Austin, what shape’s your horse in?”

“Bit tuckered but can still run,” came the reply.

“Good! Look I’ll get Lorna to rustle you up a meal. Then I’d like you to warn the Lardners and Wakefields.

“Don’t bother with the meal, John, I’ll give the horse a drink then git along.”

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

They arrived at the Murdoch Ranch just as the dawn’s light was showing itself in the still dark eastern sky. A few of his men had arrived before them and were gathered on the ranch house veranda drinking coffee served by Beth Murdoch and her daughter Nessa. The son, Carter, a Militia member, would be coming with the Company. The ranch was chosen by Steadman as it was the closest to the Maslak River where he intended next to go, to collect Nathan and some of his scouts. Along with Sky, their need in tracking Comanches was invaluable.

With the time nearing eight o’clock and the number of arrivals approaching forty, John decided to leave with what he had. Telling Josh Murdoch, the ranch owner, to warn any late arrivals not to follow, he then gathered everyone around him. Each was bristling with arms and eager to get on the move. This was the Texas Frontier. The Comanches were a constant threat. A farm had been attacked and no doubt the occupants savagely killed or taken captive. Their home could be next and every man wanted the opportunity to meet these savages face-to-face. Many had bought or acquired a repeating rifle such as the Winchester or Spencer; Frank Winkler, a Henry lever-action which its accuracy he repeatedly boasted of. All carried two pistols and a knife; many, three pistols. In the middle of a shooting fight, stopping to reload would probably be fatal.

”We will leave now,” He began, “We will first ride to the Maslak River to collect Nathan and his scouts. Then we’ll head for the Ekwan. Get mounted now! We can’t afford to waste the daylight.”

They trotted their horses at a steady pace for an hour then walked them for fifteen minutes, then trotted them again. Before a second walk could take place a blue line of army cavalry were seen approaching from the north, crossing their path. On the column halting, the Militia Company rode to its head, there to find someone John had come to know well, Captain Neil Firbank.

“Neil,” called Steadman as he rode up, “What God-sent force has brought you here?”

“Hello John,” Firbank greeted, “We got word the Comanches raided a ranch on the Ekwan, I’ve been put in command of three troops to hunt them down, but we won’t do that without scouts. We’re trying to find Nathan on the Maslak but are unsure just where.”

“Not to worry, Neil,” assured Steadman. We’re both of the same mind. Just follow us. We should arrive there in about an hour.”

 **CHAPTER 19**

 *There is no death*

 *Only a change of worlds*

 Indian Proverb

It was the dogs that raised the alarm, lazing in the April mid-morning sun or meandering from one niche to another, sniffing smells they already knew were there. All rose to their feet or lifted their heads to stare south downriver. Then they began to bark, all of them.

Chief Standing Elk was one of the first to respond, racing from his teepee to also look southwards. Half a mile distant he could see a large body of pony-mounted Indian braves, Comanches.

After his attack on the Chandlers farm, Gray Hat did not react as the Comanches normally would have, fleeing to the safety of their vast prairie seclusion, they remained for another day making their presence known but attacking no one. It was all part of Gray Hat’s plan of deception to carry out his vow of revenge, which to a Comanche is a crusade to be wholly fulfilled; with the farm dealt with, ensuring any white response would be drawn to the Ekwan River, while he then embarked on the second half of his vow, destroy the Tonkawas at their Maslak River village.

He had no reason to hurry his attack. The evening before, he had spied out the village while concealed on the rim of the western bluff. He had watched the herd return from their day’s grazing, counted the braves but more important located where the villagers would hide when attacked. All Indian villages earmark an area, a ravine, a forest or such-like, for the women, young, old, to take shelter when their village is under threat. For the Tonkawas of the Maslak it was the area of scrubland between the village and the grazing plain. It was obvious to Gray Hat, they had nowhere else to hide.

At the downriver edge of the village, just above the depression where the ponies spent their nights, with Nathan and Tall Buffalo stood either side of him, Standing Elk watched the approaching force, all three silent. There had never been a rehearsal where the village was tested to face a crisis such as this, but all knew where best to hide, in the scrub, and the braves, where they needed to stand and fight to protect their young and old.

As the riders neared, all at a deliberate trot, Gray Hat had told them there was no hurry as the villagers would not be running away, the three men retreated through the village to separate to their three agreed commands; Tall Buffalo to the edge of the scrub below the escarpment; Standing Elk in the center, and Nathan, the woods by the river bank and the trail leading from the village to the herd’s grazing meadow. Each group was about seven braves. There were others who would be joining them shortly; the six oblivious to what was about to happen who attended the herd; they would come on hearing the first shot. There were also three others, a hunting party that had left the village at the day’s first light but would not be returning until the next morning. Against them, Gray Hat had three times their number, more if the eleven squaws who eagerly volunteered to join Gray Hat’s vengeful enterprise were included.

Halting and leaving their ponies in the depression, they were too valued to risk charging the Tonkawa rifle fire, the Comanches hurried through the abandoned village to the scrub bush beyond.

Within the scrub, the squaws, children and old ones were huddled in what they hoped was concealment. Alin, Camila, Martina and Thunder Light in Camila’s arms, were led by Ben to his secret hide just above the trail. Their only defense was Alin’s Naval Colt and a sheathed knife at her hip. Gray Hat’s orders to his savages that morning was that all Tonkawa men were to be killed, however some if captured or wounded could be secured for their and their squaws entertainment in the evening. The women were also to be killed.

As for the children, no matter what age, all were to be killed. Although not mentioned, it was clearly understood that every head, regardless of how young, was to be scalped. It was the Comanche way.

Occupying the central scrub area, Standing Elk’s warriors were the first to see the Comanches creeping warily through the village and it was to him fell the honor of opening the battle. Although nearing sixty summers his aim was true, but the return fire soon became withering thanks to the Comanches Comanchero-supplied repeating rifles.

Soon this spread along the Tonkawas’ full defending line. In the scrub, Standing Elk and Tall Buffalo kept low, firing only aimed shot, while Nathan and his warriors crouched behind trees firing at an enemy also behind trees, having crossed the trail from the village. Gray Hat, moving from one sector to the other behind his Comanches, decided the best advantage of a breakthrough would be the trees in Nathan’s area.

Hurrying a force of twenty braves into the line there, he exhorted them, with their rapid firing, to move forward and overwhelm the handful of Tonkawas confronting them. To combat this increase of firepower being thrown against them, Nathan shouted for his scouts to stay in cover and aim straight. In so doing the Comanche attack soon wilted. They had suffered dead and wounded and were now taking safer ground or crawling away.

Gray Hat, in a fit of temper, cursed them from a distance then left to search out another more accessible advantage of penetration. This, after half an hour, he believed he found at the base of the escarpment, Tall Buffalo’s extreme left. There, Gray Hat, on noticing a ledge some twenty feet above, ordered five of his braves to scramble up the face and occupy it. Four did. The fifth crashed back to the valley floor, shot. But this was the turning point of the Tonkawas’ defence. From the ledge four repeating rifles now dominated Tall Buffalo’s left flank. Three of his braves had to break their cover to retreat away from the fire being aimed at them from above. Only one succeeded.

Tall Buffalo, dashing from cover to cover to locate the new increase of firing, unknowingly presented himself as a target to the Comanches on the ledge. The first bullet struck his knee, the second his chest and the third through his head. Gray Hat, seeing this open gap, rushed his Comanches through it deep into the scrub, and then the slaughter began.

Once a Comanche discovered a hidden family he discarded his rifle to begin slashing and stabbing with his tomahawk or knife. As wailing, cries, weeping and screams became audible to Standing Elk, he realized that the defence in Tall Buffalo’s sector had been penetrated. Gathering four others they struck out into the scrub brush to their rear left which resulted in several brief encounters. In them, four Comanches perished but so did all five Tonkawas; Standing Elk, with John Steadman’s pistol in one hand, a war club in the other.

In Nathan’s sector his scouts were holding well. With a breach burst wide at the escarpment, Gray Hat was ignoring them. However, the cries and screams could be heard coming from the scrub, which signalled loudly that their defence of the tribe was in danger. Like Standing Elk, Nathan selected three scouts to accompany him across the trailway and into the jumbled bush. On crossing a small room-sized area of grass they were suddenly confronted by a band of blood-spattered Comanches, their belts dressed in fresh blooded scalps. With a cry they rushed the four.

Nathan, levelling his rifle, fired, causing one of the band to drop to the ground clutching his stomach. As he did so Nathan reversed his rifle to grasp the barrel and began swinging it as a club. As the butt struck one Comanche another plunged his knife into his waist. Releasing the rifle, Nathan snatched his own knife from its sheath, slashing with it at his attacker, driving him back, but fell to his knees from a tomahawk blow struck by a second attacker that embedded deep through a broken collar bone. The fatal blow came from the first attacker whose knife blade cut down into the Tonkawa’s throat. The band left the tiny glade three less in their number, but with four more scalps on their belts.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

At that moment John Steadman and his command, half a mile from the river, detected the muffled sound of gunfire. Not a word was spoken as horses were immediately put to the gallop. Sky reached the rim of the escarpment first. As Steadman reined in beside him the scout was screaming;

“They’re attacking the village.” Then dismounting his pony, ran along the rim edge for several yards before leaping over. John, aware of what Sky had just done, disregarded it, his visual searching of the ground below, more important. There was no sign of fighting but beyond in the scrubland shooting could be heard. It only needed, for him, a moment’s look to understand what had occurred and what had to be done to deal with it.

Glancing behind, he found the Company bunched up, some approaching the lip further to his right to examine the valley below. Frank Winkler and Jamie Pearson, with the pack horses, were only yards behind him. Looking back further he could see Neil Firbank coming hard. In a loud shout he addressed his men:

“Militia Company, when I give a yell follow me at the gallop. We’re going after Comanches.”

At that moment Firbank came to a halt beside him. Dispensing with who was in command of whom, Steadman began giving the regular army officer his assessment and his orders.

“Neil! The Comanches have attacked the village. The fighting is in the scrub on the other side of the village. I’ll take my men along the escarpment and strike them from the north. What you can best do is take your men down that cutting just to your left, spread yourselves across the ground this side of the river and provide a block as we drive them towards you. Agreed?”

The Captain, for only a moment, examined the river, the valley floor and the village before nodding;

“Agreed!”

Whereupon Steadman shouted over his shoulder;

“Frank! You and Jamie stay here with the pack animals.”

Then: “Militia! At the gallop!” and they were gone.

The distance was over a quarter of a mile but at a gallop that would only take a few minutes.

Frank Winkler climbed from his horse, picked a spot on the escarpment lip, then sat Indian fashion, legs crossed, his Henry rifle cradled in his left arm.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

“Alin we must go,” urged Camila in a quiet but firm voice.

For many minutes the screams and wailing had been advancing towards them.

“Where?” was the only answer Alin could think of in reply.

“The river, under the bank. There is no other,” the firmness of the voice unchanged.

 “Then follow me,” ordered Alin taking Martina’s hand. In her other she gripped the Colt. Camila followed still carrying Thunder Light, with Ben behind. At the trail, with the trees on the other side, they halted as Alin peered cautiously from the shelter of the bushes. There was still the screaming and shooting but the sound of firing, much reduced. On seeing the trail, in both directions empty, she said just one word:

 “Quickly.”

 Then, stepping onto the trail with Martina still by the hand, they hurried across.

 At that moment three Comanches burst from the scrub not more than fifty feet away.

 “Camila, take the children and run,” cried Alin pushing Martina towards the trees, then turning to face the three Indians she raised the Colt and cocked the hammer.

 As they rushed her she shot the nearest, then re-cocking she shot another. Before she could re-cock a third time the pistol was knocked from her hand to fall behind her, by a sweep of a tomahawk. In a rush of fury, Alin, drawing her knife, began to slash at her attacker. Gripping the knife arm he struck Alin on the side of her upper neck with a blow of his weapon. As she sank to her knees, the Comanche raised his tomahawk to strike again, when with the sound of a pistol shot he crumpled to the ground.

 As he did so he revealed two other Comanches hurrying towards the scene of the shooting. As they approached, Ben re-cocked his mother’s Colt and waited. He was not yet ten years old but already a Tonkawa warrior, and ready to die in defense of his mother. Looking over the pistol sights, as he pointed the weapon towards the oncoming Comanches, they suddenly stopped, then dashed off the trail into the scrub. Seeing this, Ben instantly dropped to his knees to clutch his mother to him;

 “Mama! Mama!”

 Barely aware of the horse and rider who sped past him.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 As John Steadman glanced down, what he had seen registered, but he could not stop. He and his men were among the Comanche now and at last in a position to deal them a serious blow.

 Reining his horse in, he made a signal to all those behind him to dismount and strike into the scrub bush. This they did with haste and drawing of pistols. On entering this close environment, the Texans were in a cold, determined mood, but this soon turned to raging fury as they came across the Comanches’ version of war, children and the old, butchered and scalped. For this the Militia men made their enemy pay. In the closeness of their encounters it was point blank and their pistols accounted for many. Understandably though, a price had to be paid. Steadman lost two of his men in that bush; one, Garth Roland when he, Mel Peterson and Garth clashed with four Comanches in a thicket.

 On approaching, the three men could hear wailing and moaning. Pushing through a low entrance, Garth was confronted with four Comanches scalping women and children. Firing at one with a pistol, a second lunged at him with his blood-smeared knife, striking it into Garth’s chest. Steadman, close behind Roland, fired his pistol into the knifeman’s face while driving his sword through his body. Withdrawing it he turned to face a third Comanche with knife raised, shooting him just feet away, as did Mel Peterson in the same instant, of the fourth Comanche.

 Quickly moving to Garth, crumpled on the ground, they found him lifeless, the knife buried deep.

 In a very short time, with pistol fire beginning to increase throughout the scrub area, the Comanches soon realized the ground around them was no longer an unopposed blood-feast. Suddenly a bugle call was heard south of the village. Each now knew it was time for them to withdraw. Following on their heels the Militia men soon broke out of the thicket to find the Comanche raiders had fled through the village.

 On regrouping on the ground between the scrubland and the village, Steadman left them to run down the trail, to remount his horse. Arriving where he had passed Ben, he hurriedly dismounted to find him still holding his mother, both smeared with blood, Camila, Martina and Thunder Light standing.

 “She is dead, John,” announced Camila as he knelt.

 Steadman didn’t reply. The wound in Alin’s neck was deep and from the angle her head sat, her neck was broken as well.

 Ben, in silent shock, his cheek stained with tears, struggled to find hope.

 “Father! Father! She’s not dead. She’s not dead is she?”

 “Ben….” John fought to reply. “Ben, your mother…. As long as we have her memory she will always be alive. She will always be alive. We will never forget her.”

 At that moment Mel Peterson rode up with three others of his men.

 “John, the village is clear of any Comanches, and we got Sky back but the men are all’a ponder’en what to do.”

 “I’ll see to them,” turning to indicate the others. “This is my son Ben and his family. His mother’s dead. Bring them to the village.”

 Returning to the village he was hailed by four of his men at its edge.

 “Capt’n, we got two prisoners here. Found ‘em hidden in the bush. What we gonna do with ‘em?”

 Steadman was off his horse in an instant, sword in hand. The two Comanches stood, hands tied behind their backs, waists bloodied, scalps obviously discarded. Taking several quick strides, one’s head was soon rolling on the ground. The other, still with his sword, he slashed and battered to death. He then mounted and rode on.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

 When Sky slipped over the lip of the escarpment, getting to the village was easy for him. He had played there for years as a child. Slipping stealthily between the teepees he reached the last, to find at the edge of the scrub three Comanches just standing. Slipping into one of the teepees he made a spyhole in the hide covering, to watch and wait an opportunity. He was alone and had no intention of throwing his life away foolishly.

 Several minutes later he heard loud talking and laughing. Two other Comanches had appeared from the scrub, where shooting and screaming were sounding. Between them they were dragging a half-limping prisoner. After a brief stop they continued towards another teepee. A few minutes later the Comanches reappeared to return to the scrub. Leaving his teepee, Sky, careful not to be seen, made his way to the other teepee. There, he cut an entrance at the back and slipped inside. On the floor, tied by both hands and feet, was a fellow scout, Shining Moon. He had been knocked unconscious in a close fight after being shot in a leg. With an arm around each other the two returned to Sky’s first teepee and again waited, but not long.

 First a bugle call was heard, on the far side of the village. Then in twos and threes, Comanches began hurrying out of the scrub. Now, bursts of heavy shooting began to occur, triggering an increase of numbers flowing away from the shooting.

 When this appeared to have ceased, Sky was about to follow them when a lone Comanche broke from the scrub and began hurrying towards the village. In one hand he held a rifle, in the other a tomahawk. What triggered Sky’s next action was not the Comanche as a sworn enemy; it was the scalps secured at his waist. Handing his rifle to Shining Moon, shooting the Comanche was not the death he was prepared to grant him. No, this Comanche would meet his end knowing he had died by the hand of a Tonkawa.

 Leaving the teepee, Sky, sure of the way the Comanche had to come, he positioned himself in the cover of another teepee, his knife in one hand, his stone-headed war club in the other. As the Comanche brave appeared around the teepee, Sky rushed straight towards him. He knew that bursting so suddenly and so close into his path the Comanche had only two choices of defending himself; drop the tomahawk and use both hands to bring his rifle to bear, or use his tomahawk. He chose the tomahawk, regrettably for him, for before he could begin to swing it, Sky’s war club had struck a crashing blow to his opposite shoulder, shattering bone, followed by a knife plunged into his side. As the Comanche sagged to the ground, Sky discarding his war club, stood with one foot on his chest, the other on an arm, then taking ahold of his hair, took the Comanche’s scalp.

 With a victory chant sounding from his lips, his enemy below him still alive and seeing, he raised his arms in salute of his triumph, a knife in one hand, scalp in the other.

 **CHAPTER 20**

 *Do what you know to be right*

 Native American Commandment

When Steadman left Captain Firbank on the rim of the escarpment, the cavalryman led his force of sixty down onto the valley floor and stationed his three troops so they blocked the Comanches’ withdrawal south from the village. Most were positioned on foot, where they could not be seen as the Indians rode up out of the depression where they had left their ponies. The regiment had fought with distinction during the Civil War three years and more earlier and still had a hard core of officers and men who had served then, who were now to be needed in the coming minutes to calm and guide the newer and younger soldiers. Some of these older soldiers were told to remain mounted as pursuit riders.

On hearing an increase of the shooting on the far side of the village, Neil Firbank ordered his bugler to blow the charge, inappropriate with most of his troops on foot but the call was not for them. It was to inform the Comanches of their presence, whose principal tactic in warfare was hit-and-run, but should they find themselves in face-to-face engagements the policy was, if you can’t win, withdraw. On hearing that bugle call Gray Hat knew it was time to leave the village.

On reaching their ponies the Comanches mounted and attempted to make their escape south, the way they had come earlier that morning. In ones and twos they burst out of the depression only to be shot from their ponies. As the escaping numbers increased the cry went up from the older seasoned troopers;

“Shoot the horse! Shoot the horse!”

Once tumbled to the ground, the rider was quickly disposed of.

Some pony riders did get through but, the pursuit soldiers were waiting and on overtaken, were shot by pistol. Some escaped, but not many.

One who did, who wore a gray hat, had wisely avoided the cavalry gauntlet and swam the river, climbing to the crest of the western escarpment to defiantly raise his rifle over his head, vowing to return once again and spill more blood of the whites and Tonkawa. With his rifle held high, a war cry sounding from his lips, the rifle suddenly slipped from his hand, the cry hushed as Gray Hat fell to the ground, a bullet through his throat.

Six hundred yards away, on the opposite escarpment, Jamie Pearson began leaping up and down.

“You got him, Frank! You got him!”

“Yup! I reckon,” agreed the ex-Texas Ranger sat cross-legged, as he had been for the last hour, as he levered a spent cartridge from his Henry rifle.

 -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x -------- x --------

Steadman had based himself in the village so as to supervise the recovery of all the dead of the tribe by his men. It was there that he received a request from Neil Firbank to join him in the depression where he was reorganizing his command.

There, he found Sky being blocked by a number of soldiers.

“Thanks for coming,” greeted Firbank. “It’s Sky. You best reason with him.”

Steadman, without replying, cocked his head towards his scout. He was frozen in a hate-filled glare at the soldiers, knife in hand.

“He wants to kill the squaws,” Firbank informed him.

Steadman, looking beyond the soldiers, saw six Comanche women sat on the ground.

“He has every right,” replied John, and meaning each word.

“They’re our prisoners now,” stated Firbank with a resolved but official tone.

“Sky!” began Steadman, “They’re not ours to deal with. The Army have them under their control.”

“Sky looked at Steadman for a long moment, then nodded his head, indicating behind himself. Turning, John found two young girls flanked between two cavalry sergeants, both in soiled night dresses.

“Alice! Mary!” he exclaimed, turning to approach them.

“We found them with the squaws, Captain,” informed one of the sergeants.

Kneeling on one knee, he asked, “Where is your Ma and Pa?”

“We left them at the farm,” answered Mary, the oldest.

“They weren’t allowed to come with you?”

Steadman, pained in asking the question but had to.

Mary shook her head.

“The Indians were laying on top of Mummy, and they put Daddy in the ground with his head out,” informed Alice in an innocent childish way.

“The Indians did that?” asked Steadman in confirming.

“No! THEY did!” Alice had raised an arm and was pointing over his shoulder. Leaping up, Steadman charged through the line of soldiers and plunged his sword, which had not been out of his right hand for three hours, into the nearest squaw, and would have continued if the soldiers hadn’t restrained him.

“Steadman! Have you gone completely mad?” stormed Firbank, “That woman was under our custody. That’s as near to murder as you can get out here,” wrenching the sword from Steadman’s hand.

“Murder?” raged Steadman, “Murder, Neil? Murder was what you and I were doing to each other at Gettysburg and Fairfield and god only knows how many other blood-soaked fields, for four years.

This is the Texas Frontier. What I just committed was vindicated slaying.”

“I think you had better leave, captain,” said Firbank, indicating to his soldiers to release their hold.

“I’ll take the two girls with me. They’ll join my own children,” stated Steadman, accepting his sword back; then to the soldiers around him;

“Those squaws. Bind their hands behind their backs. If they get ahold of a weapon, they’ll kill you.”

Then turning to Firbank, “Neil! My men are bringing the tribe’s dead into the village. If your men have the stomach for it, I’d like you to send them along to see what the Comanches enjoy doing.”

“Now,” he continued, “If you need me at all I’ll be down by the river, burying someone - someone who was once my wife.”

 **CHAPTER 21**

 *Next to a battle lost, the*

 *greatest misery is a battle gained*

 Duke of Wellington

For the remainder of the day John’s men searched through the scrub bringing in the dead. Hard-bitten frontiersmen carrying a scalped child, with tears marking their faces, the old ones gently placed across saddles, raped and scalped women being carried in arms. There were wounded who the Comanches had failed to kill. These were looked after by a medical Corporal who had accompanied Neil Firbank’s troops. He had set up a small hospital in the village.

In the late afternoon John carried Alin in his arms to her special place, while Frank brought Nathan on one of the pack horses. Then together they began digging a grave next to Alin’s two daughters, wider than normal, for Alin and Nathan were to be buried together. Buffalo robes were first laid in the grave, then Alin and Nathan, seen to by John, were placed on their sides facing each other with their arms embracing, then covered by more buffalo robes.

After the earth had been replaced, Camila carried out a service, both in English and Tonkawa. Those that heard this sat on Alin’s tree trunk or stood among the trees. The three hunters, Shining Moon, Sky, Neil Firbank and his officers, Militiamen and Tall Buffalo’s woman, who she and her children had survived the Comanche searches by hiding in a small cave in the escarpment. And of course Ben, Martina and in John’s arms, Thunder Light.

During the earlier part of the evening John and Frank collected stones from the river, to place on the grave. For John, a toil for a woman who he once loved, and she him. For Frank, for a man who had once saved his life.

Although John had not slept the night before, he craved none for this one either.

Touring the camp fires and teepees, sitting with Ben and Martina and the two Chandler sisters, then after most had gone to sleep, keeping the sentries company, both cavalry and Militia.

In the morning, after a breakfast of whatever could be had, a hard morning’s work was begun. First, the village dead were buried. Each body was taken across the river by canoe, graves dug, and the children, women, scouts and old ones put to rest. A Sergeant was given the task of shooting all the Indian ponies. The Comanche ones, he did, but on the plain with the Tonkawas’ he took a liberty. He was a cavalry man. Horses to him were as if family. After Sky and his scouts had selected all those they would need, he drove the rest of the herd to the far side of the large glen, then telling his men to forget what they had just done, returned to the village.

The scouts needed extra ponies because they were abandoning the village. Sky, the remaining villagers agreed, would be their chosen leader. Through good fortune, as well as Tall Buffalo’s family, three others also survived the Comanches’ searching. Realizing this was too small a band to protect itself, Sky would take them to settle near Camp Wilson, or as it had now become officially named, Fort Griffin. To move themselves and their teepees there, this required ponies and travois. By noon Sky’s pitiful remnants of a tribe of over a hundred, just a day past, were following behind Neil Firbank’s command. Colonel Sturgis was about to take under his charge a detachment of Tonkawa scouts that he had once requested.

Steadman and his Militia soon followed but in a south eastern direction to the cavalry’s. They too were taking ponies and travois. Ben rode Nathan’s with a travois that carried Camila and Thunder Light. John had asked Camila to return with him to live as part of his family at the ranch, pointing out that Lorna would need extra assistance on suddenly finding her household of four would now be eight. As John had hoped, she accepted. Alin’s children were Camila’s grandchildren and he did not want them to lose both over a period of just a few hours.

Martina rode Cleopatra, and would continue to do so for many years. She also pulled a travois which carried the two Chandler daughters, Mary and Alice. They were destined for the Sullivans household until their futures could be resolved. A third travois was also included for their return journey, carrying the bodies of the two dead Militiamen. This, insisted on by Steadman. Anyone dying under his command would not be returning draped over a saddle.

On the lip of the escarpment, having ridden up from the valley bottom, John looked down on a dispiriting sight, dead ponies, dead Comanches and a dead village. Six months earlier he and Lorna had sat here in their buckboard, looking down on a village alive with movement. Now, the teepees for as long as they stood, would only be the homes of ghosts, ghosts of a Tonkawa tribe that for over a hundred years, every spring and autumn, had migrated from river to lake, lake to river; a people gone. Never again will the women plant their crops, or the men hunt the buffalo, their devout desire to live in peace.

It was late morning of the following day that John and his ranch hands finally returned to Plum Tree. Lorna was standing on the veranda with her baby son in her arms. The sight worried her but on being told its reason she did not cry. That, she held back until awaking in the early hours of the next day. Then the tears came, tears for Alin, tears for Nathan and tears for a village she had fondly known.

On being helped down from Nathan’s pony by John, Ben, a Tonkawa youngster in a white skin, stared about him for several moments before asking;

“Father! Where are we?”

Before answering, Steadman placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Home, son. I’ve brought you home.”

 *The End*