

Chapter 1

Merriview, Texas 1866

The train rattled as if it were made of tin pot lids held together by bailing wire. Barty Shepard let his hat slink down further over his eyes and gave a little snore. The cowboy had learned many interesting things over the years by keeping his ears open and his eyes shut. Today was no different. The two dudes in the car with him started talking almost immediately.

The first man to speak was the tenderfoot Shep had spotted a mile off, back when he had boarded the train. That bowler hat might be just the thing for going to the opera in Baltimore, but it would bake a man's brains in Butler, Texas. And those soft gloves. What were they for? Picking up ladies' hankies when they dropped at his feet? Shep was sure that happened all the time to a dandy like this Bailey Branson fellow. He hadn't even shaken hands when Shep introduced himself. "I just hope this uncouth contraption will hold together long enough to transport us through this god-forsaken wilderness. How much further until we reach the town?"

The older gentleman of the same last name answered. Shep had pegged him for a lawyer as soon as he opened his mouth. "It will be about another hour before we reach Merriview. Our time would be wisely spent in beginning your introduction to the area. There, for example, is the turnoff to the Sloan estate. That will be important to you, since it is principally on their account that you are being brought into the firm."

"That and the fact that I am your nephew," Bailey answered laconically. "There's no need to mince words while we are in private."

Shep could hear the tension in the older man's voice. "I have no wish to admit to anything to which my partner Mr. Combs might object if he heard, so you will kindly recall that you are to be our business law consultant. Do I make myself clear? Nephew or no, you will pull your weight around this firm or you will be dismissed. I told my brother I would expect peak performance from you. The opportunity is the only thing you will be given. Respect must be earned."

Shep didn't have to see the tenderfoot's sneer. He could hear it in his voice as clearly as a foghorn. "I can't see how that will be much of a challenge. How complex can the business dealings around here be?"

"The Sloans themselves might present more intricacies than you might think," the older lawyer replied. "First and foremost are the arrangements for the trust fund for the children. I believe at the moment there are ten all together, though the number is prone to increase." He gave a slight cough as if he were slightly amused by the procreative activities of the Sloan brothers and trying to be discreet. "The fact that two brothers are joint owners in several ventures sounds benign enough, but it isn't just the logging and the equine business involved. Their wives are also of an entrepreneurial spirit and cooperate in stock raising as well as commercial pursuits in town."

"The Sloans allow their wives to run businesses?" the younger lawyer asked. Shep worked hard to keep his smile off his face. From what he recalled, Slingo Sloan would have had a tough enough job corralling his wife, but Vince would have found the task of stopping his wife, Pinkie, from doing anything she wanted to do next to, if not totally, impossible. Perhaps it had

been his extreme youth that had made her seem like such a force of nature in his eyes. After a decade of hard living, most of it in the Army serving as a scout and procurement specialist, Shep hoped he would be better able to hold his own against both of the females, but he had no intention of trying to bet against anything they were backing.

“They are part owners in a bakery, a tea shop, a hat shop and a lending library,” the older Mr. Branson responded. “To help with those endeavors they raise prize-winning hens and exotic fowl, such as peacocks, along with other livestock. The younger Sloan’s wife was associated at one time with a traveling circus, I believe, so her contacts continue to draw the ladies into unique opportunities that have often turned out quite lucrative, but present certain legal challenges. That would be Mrs. Drina Sloan, wife of Slingo. Then there is Mrs. Pinkie Sloan, wife of Vincent, who sees to the day to day affairs of the establishments in town. She’s the one you will probably have to deal with more. She can be, shall we say, a force to be reckoned with.”

“I look forward to bringing her into line with my way of thinking then,” Bailey Branson boasted. Shep had to stifle a snort of laughter. The prospect of watching this young popinjay trying to bring Mrs. Pinkie into line on anything had Shep wondering if it might be worth hanging around Merriview for a bit after all. He hadn’t seen a prize fight in a while and this sounded like the next best thing.

But Shep had a job to get back to. This delivery was just by way of being a side trip that the boss allowed because relations were still good between him and his old cowhands Vince and Slingo, but Mr. Bumford wouldn’t hold this job forever. He felt incredibly lucky to be going back to his same old job at all. Most of the men he knew who left the Army after their hitches had to start all over again from scratch. It was still worth it. He felt good about helping his country grow by bringing law and order to newly settled areas, but it was time for him to settle down along with the country and do some growing of his own.

A nice little house, a good horse, some stock to start out with would all come in time. The first thing was to find him a nice little gal to call his own. Somebody calm and cheerful, like Slingo’s wife, Drina, who loved to stay at home and take care of her man. Or even somebody like Vince’s wife, Pinkie, would be all right. He wouldn’t mind town life and seeing more of the crowds and bustle that he’d been missing in his life as a scout. So he was looking forward to seeing the Sloan brothers and getting a few more tips on how to find a good wife. He’d already followed their first bit of advice. They’d told him to go see Mr. Gabor, their friend who ran the traveling circus.

So that was how he had gotten the task of accompanying his exotic cargo from the warmer southern regions of Texas where the circus spent the winter back up to the isolated northern Texas town of Merriview. Mr. Gabor and his clan were much as he remembered them, the men tending toward swarthy strength and the ladies favoring bright dresses to accent their larger than life manners. Because of his connection with Drina, Shep was accepted as a welcome guest to be taken care of rather than an outsider to be relieved of as much of the coin in his pocket as might be legally extracted. Shep had always respected Mr. Gabor’s clan in that they were honestly providing much needed entertainment in out of the way places, but the unwary visitor to his camp might spend more on impulse than he had intended. Shep had stayed for a show and a meal, paying a fair price for both before conducting the Sloans’ business.

As if on cue, the exotic cargo, or at least part of it, was making itself heard from the next car. Shep sat up slowly and pushed his hat back into the correct position to allow him to see. “This isn’t what I usually mean when I say that I have to answer the call of nature,” he quipped, jerking a thumb toward the next train car.

“If you can’t shut that bird up, I know a good butcher who could do the job,” Bailey drawled in response.

“He’s never been on a train before.” Shep shrugged his broad shoulders and ducked his head as he went through the door. Before he could get out of earshot, one other exchange between the two lawyers held his attention to the extent of making him pause in his tracks for a moment.

The elder spoke first. “There is one more thing you should know about the Sloan situation. Mr. Vincent Sloan recently registered with me his desire to purchase the building his wife is now leasing for her café. This would be easily arranged except for the fact that ownership of the building is in something of a shady area.”

“So tracking down the ownership of the property will be one of my first tasks. Does he have the means to purchase what he wants?”

“Most certainly,” replied the elder man. “The ranch he and his brother inherited has become quite profitable. The owners of the building, whoever they turn out to be, are probably unaware of his financial standing. He takes great pains to keep his situation private.”

“A canny business man, this Vince Sloan? He knows that any property he is interested in will rise in price simply because he is interested?”

“Yes, but that isn’t the only reason he keeps his wealth more or less a secret. The Sloans have never been pretentious.”

“So much the better,” replied the younger lawyer with a sniff. “Acting on behalf of the uneducated masses is trying enough. Working with a glorified cowboy with delusions of grandeur would be intolerable.”

“That kind of attitude will win you no acclaim, Bailey. Neither in the town nor in my office.” The chill in the older lawyer’s voice warmed Shep’s heart as he moved on. If ever a man needed putting in his place, it was this Bailey character. Shep only hoped that he would be able to take a hand in the treatment of whatever it was that ailed the snobbish stranger.

He made his way carefully along the narrow aisle that led through to the freight car. By the time he reached the cages containing his charges, several of the other occupants of the car were responding to the calls that threatened to pierce Shep’s eardrums. Opening the cage door, he let the fractious bird out. “That’ll be about enough from you, young scoundrel,” Shep scolded mildly. “We all know you’re here. Are you feeling neglected? Don’t worry. You’ll be king of the valley in just a few more hours. Wait! Don’t do that in here! There’s no room!”

Too late. The bird had already spread his magnificent feathers out as wide as they would go. His plumage was not as broad as it would be when he reached full maturity, but it was still impressive enough to startle Shep back on his heels. He spat the edge of a feather out of his mouth. “Peacocks! I never thought I’d ever have to deal with the likes of you again! The day Vince took his wife’s old peacock King Solomon and his harem out of Mr. Bumford’s back yard was one of the happiest days of my life! Good thing nobody told me I’d be having to bring his replacement with me a decade later. I might have stayed in the Army.”

To give the bird a break from his confinement, Shep went to check on the other animals in his care. They all seemed to be doing fine, placidly waiting in their characteristically stoic manner. “You’ll be all right there, boy. Just a little while longer and you’ll get off this train and dive right into a pot of jam the likes of which you’ve never known. You can’t have any idea how lucky you are to be going to those Sloan ladies. Nobody loves critters like them. You’ll be spoiled to pieces inside a week unless they’ve changed, and somehow I doubt that. Now, all I have to do is ask their husbands how I can get a gal who’ll spoil me that way.”

Gabor had given him some good advice after their official negotiations had ended. Even his wife had gotten in on the act but since they didn't know him well, the best they could say was for him to get a move on. He wasn't getting any younger and having kids was definitely a young man's game.

Shep gathered up the young peacock and tempted him back into his crate by sprinkling a line of sweet feed into its far recesses. The rhythmic clacking and violent waggling of the train told him that they were crossing the final bridge over the chasm that had kept Merriview so isolated for so long. This same bridge was mostly responsible for the town's newfound wealth and growth spurt, but the Sloans were probably contributing to it as well, Shep figured. Maybe he should come work for the Sloans for a while.

When Shep resumed his seat in the car, the tenderfoot drew his legs up and wrinkled his nose. Now, he knew he wasn't as polished and pretty as that pedigreed show dog, but there was no call for him to be acting like Shep had the plague. Sometimes a fellow needed to be taken down a peg, but then again, what did it matter to him? He saw no need to call the man out and on a train, there was no way to 'take it outside' as he might like to. Instead, he thought he'd see a little more of what the man was made of. "So, ya'll are kin to each other? You don't exactly favor strongly," he began innocently enough, pointing vaguely toward his eyes to indicate that was where he noticed the strongest lack of resemblance.

The elder of the Branson's replied. "Yes, I am this young man's uncle." He took a card out of a carrying case and handed it to Shep. "This is our firm, Branson and Combs. If you ever find yourself in need of legal services, we provide the gold standard in the region."

Shep pocketed the card in his leather vest. "Thank you kindly. I'll keep that in mind. There is one way I know of already that you could help me, maybe. Have you got any female kinfolk by chance?" Waiting for the affronted look he knew would come, he continued placidly. "I'm looking for a woman-cooked meal and the sight of a pretty face wouldn't hurt either. I was hoping you might know of a lady who provides meals out of her kitchen who might do me some fried chicken and potato salad?"

The younger Branson gave a sneer that nearly shaved Shep's beard. "Uncle Alvin, aren't there any standards for admittance to the first class section of this train?"

The older lawyer settled back into his seat. Clearing his throat loudly, he scowled mildly at Shep. "My female relations do not cook for pay. And you might not know it, young man, but a gentleman doesn't usually discuss such matters with strangers."

Shep couldn't help admiring the man's diplomacy. "My mistake, sir. Still, that being the case, could you point me in the direction of somebody's ... uh, female relations who would?"

Bailey did perk up at this query. "An interesting point, Uncle. Are there eating establishments in this town? Any that might cater to this sort of person? I need to know so I can avoid them. And more importantly, are there any that we might find suitable?"

The elder Mr. Branson scowled at his nephew. "No need to be offensive, Bailey. I apologize for my young nephew's bad manners. He has not yet learned that out here in the West, it is even more important than usual to refrain from judging a book by its cover."

Shep grinned good-naturedly at the pair on the opposite bench. "No offense taken, sir." He even touched the brim of his hat in appreciation. "I can see you're sure no tenderfoot, no matter what clothes you wear. I'm glad for your nephew's sake that you'll be around to show him the ropes before he gets on the wrong side of somebody who isn't as congenial as myself." Shep shifted in his seat and his vest rode up slightly, revealing his six-shooter. Quickly covering

it again, he went on. "I was hoping for a home cooked meal but if there are restaurants, so much the better."

"There are several sorts of establishments in town you might find useful, young man. For example, the barber across from the railway station is considered to be the best and runs the cleanest shop. You'll want to stop off there first, of course."

"Of course," Shep agreed, stroking his long scruffy beard. He had meant to have a shave and a haircut before he called on the Sloans anyway, but the kindly worded advice demonstrated the speaker's friendly intent.

"Then the café down the street from my very own office provides a fine light repast at the time of day we will be arriving. No other restaurant in town is open save that in the railway station, but I happen to know that the cook there is a man. If you wish to have as you put it, a woman-cooked meal, you can go there. I don't know if they have fried chicken on the menu today, but I'm sure they will not disappoint you with whatever they do offer."

"You know the place well, do you?" Shep asked.

"The owner of the establishment is one of our clients. We've known the family for years. Since the present Sloan brothers were just boys, actually." The elder Branson smiled as if at the recollection of by-gone days.

Shep was beginning to like this man despite his profession and his traveling companion. "Is it their wives that cook?"

"Not on a daily basis, though they do sometimes work behind the counter. Presently, I believe it is a distant relation of Mrs. Drina Sloan's that is mostly responsible for the majority of the cooking. Miss Pann's culinary creations are as delightful as they are unique."

"Well, that sounds right up my alley." Shep smiled and started to look out the window, not wanting to make a nuisance of himself. He had got the measure of both men and even managed to bait the other into showing his true colors. No need to belabor the point.

The elder lawyer was apparently enjoying their conversation. "I will warn you, though. The café does cater more to female sensibilities."

"What do you mean?"

"The food is first rate, but the décor is decidedly feminine. I happen to know that one of the first things the brothers did upon buying a controlling interest in the café was to reinforce the furniture so that it would feel more substantial for customers like themselves."

Shep thought he understood. He had seen Slingo and Drina's house a few months after they had been married. Whatever hadn't been covered with crochet doilies and ruffles had been painted pink. "Substantial? Like me?" He straightened his vest and sat up taller. "So you're saying I can sit on the chairs without worrying I'll break them?"

"Precisely. And the serving sizes are more than generous despite the decidedly dainty ambiance."

At that point, the conductor came through calling, "Next stop, Merriview." Shep went with him to prepare his charges for leaving the train. When he returned, the carriage was empty, but Shep noticed a briefcase wedged under the seat opposite to where the older lawyer had been sitting. He considered turning it over to the conductor, but the lawyer had been nice enough, in his own way so he determined to return it to him personally. And in fact, once he had delivered the animals, he would have time to devote to having a little more fun.

As he left the train, however, he found that nature had other plans. A stiff breeze had blown up and a cold drizzle was rapidly turning into rain. He couldn't transport his charges in this weather, not without his slicker and a much trustier horse than he was likely to find for hire

at the local livery stable. He shouldn't have worried. Slingo Sloan was waiting for him as he disembarked. "There you are, you old son of a gun!" Slingo cried, claspng him firmly by the hand. "What do they feed you in the Army? Dr. Cureall's Grow Anything Anywhere Miracle Elixir? Last time I saw you, Barty, I could rest my elbow on your head." Slingo pantomimed leaning on a much shorter man and falling comically. "I wouldn't want to try that now!"

"Seems strange to hear you call me Barty, Mr. Sloan. I've been called Shep for so long, I forget Barty means me."

"Shep it is then. And you can call me Slingo now. And Vince is Vince. He's sorry he couldn't get up here to meet you. Can't wait to see you, but we've got a bit of trouble down in the valley. He had to stay to take care of things."

"Trouble? In the valley?"

"Our spread, the Frogleg is in a deep valley. It's part of the ravine you had to cross to get here. I keep forgetting you haven't been here before. Merriview isn't far from the Frogleg if you come by foot or a very sure-footed pony when the trails are dry, but in wet weather like this, or with a wagon any time, you have to take a road that makes a corkscrew look like an arrow. That can take a while."

"So I guess we'd better get started if we're going to make it before nightfall," Shep suggested as they walked toward the freight car.

Slingo shook his head. "Not tonight. We'll check the critters in at the livery stable for the night and come get them in the morning. They are all present and accounted for, aren't they?"

"Sure thing," Shep assured him proudly. "I kind of like chasing critters when they're in cages. Makes a darn sight easier to manage. If we could just do that with cattle..."

"Ugh! Can you just imagine the smell?" Slingo laughed.

"Hey, even with these little guys, it's no bed of posies in there." Shep indicated the freight car, the contents of which could be heard clucking and snorting restively. "Anyway, if cows could fit in cages, I guess I'd be out of a job and I'd miss my horse, so we'll stick with driving them."

What served as a livery stable was actually a solidly built enclosed sort of warehouse with plenty of storage for all kinds of hay, feed and other cargo as well as the horses and carriages for hire. With plenty of help from the stable hands, the smaller animals were soon stashed in their crates and the larger ones were loaded into stalls. Shep did this very carefully, since he wasn't exactly familiar with the habits of these interesting creatures. "All I know is that Mr. Gabor said to keep them together as much as possible without overcrowding them. They'll work out their own differences in a little while, but they don't like to be alone. I guess I really ought to stay with them here tonight."

"There's no call for you to do that," Slingo objected. "They'll be fine on their own. I'll put you up in the hotel where I'm staying. I've already got us rooms."

"I guess that'll be okay as long as I can get in to check on them. Right now, there's a barber's chair with my name on it."

An hour later, clean-shaven and neatly shorn of his shaggy winter hair as he thought of it, Shep strode down the street to the dry goods store. The only article of clothing he didn't replace was his leather vest. "Burn those old duds, will you?" he told the shopkeeper when he stepped out of the back room where he had changed.

"Good idea," the shopkeeper replied, holding the old clothes at arm's length. "You're doing the right thing, young man. Have you been out on the trail? And maybe decided to bring most of the trail with you?"

“I have been minding some of the most ornery critters ever created and put on this earth, and that’s the truth. They seemed to delight in rolling around in mud and then plastering it on anybody within fifty feet of them.”

“Well, I like critters as well as the next man. Could I come see?”

“Tomorrow would be better. I want to let them settle down tonight so they’re not so riled up for the last leg of the trip tomorrow. You can see them when we lead them out of the livery stable. Be sure to be out front of your store here by daybreak if you don’t want to miss them.” Shep could tell he had the man’s interest. By keeping a certain air of mystery, he hoped to build a little curiosity and good will for the Sloans’ unusual business venture.

By the time he bought a few other necessities and made his way to the café, half the town was buzzing about the critters. Shep was sure the workers who had helped with the offloading would be regaling their friends with stories about the animals but curiosity would still be at a fever pitch. Everyone would want to get a look at the creatures for themselves.

Feeling rather pleased with his day’s work, Shep took a seat near the counter of the café and set down the briefcase he had carefully kept near him. With gratifying alacrity, the bat-wing doors to the back of the shop opened and admitted, not a smiling waitress but an equally enticing vision. Long straight black hair fell over a pair of dainty shoulders and swung just at a trim waist. Beneath that waist was the loveliest backside he had ever seen on a woman. A faint, off key humming accompanied her mincing steps as she gave a quick twirl, as if she were daydreaming of being at a grand ball.

Just at the crucial moment, a clatter focused his attention even more sharply on this intriguing sight. The clatter was followed by a muffled curse of the type Shep knew women sometimes used when they thought no one could hear them. Then the young lady did something, which Shep had hardly dared to hope for. She bent over. And twisted. And wiggled backwards toward him.

Shep could hardly get his breath. It was such an incredible sight, with the skirts swaying and the hair rippling and the round nether parts curving out in all the right places.

The young lady continued to curse to herself as she backed up. “...and if I ever figure out who keeps polishing this floor so that it’s so slick, I’ll peel their bark and chop them up for kindling! How can a body be expected to hold a tray steady on this...oh, we have a customer.” In her shock, she straightened up too quickly and smacked her head on the underside of the counter that ran along the edge of the table space. This had her bent double again, the curses flying.

Shep was up in a flash. “Be still. Your apron is caught.” And so it was. He could see a nail sticking out from under the counter. She could have torn her skin, thrashing around like she was. Knowing no other way to stop her peril, Shep snatched at whatever parts of her he could reach and gathered them to him.

“Let go of me!” the young lady hissed. “I can take care of myself!”

“If you straighten up now you’ll—” Too late. Her pitching around had set to wobbling several large glass display vases filled with cookies and other confections. One of them tipped all the way over and came crashing down at their heads. Like lightning, Shep reached out and just in time blocked the vase. It fell harmlessly to the floor and shattered, mostly behind the cabinet.

“Now, look what you’ve done!” the girl cried petulantly. “All those candies ruined! Not to mention the vase in a thousand pieces.”

Shep drew her out toward the middle of the floor and released her. “Better the vase than your head.”

Her first act on straightening up was to push her hair back from her face. Shep felt as if he were being drawn into those brown eyes, their fiery depths calling to him with an undeniable voice of command. The set of her mouth, the line of her cheekbones, even the sassy little nose all served only to pull his gaze back up to those incredible eyes. Her voice did little to dispel the trance. "I wouldn't have upset the vase if you hadn't startled me so! What were you doing, sneaking into the shop like that?"

"Sneaking? I wasn't sneaking."

"You didn't set the bells jingling."

"There aren't any bells," he noted.

"Oh, so there aren't. Somebody must have taken them down to clean them and then forgotten to put them back up." The young lady harrumphed as if it hurt her to admit he might not be at fault. "So I suppose I owe you an apology. I'm sorry."

She sounded more petulant than sorry, but Shep could forgive her for that. She had just taken a nasty knock to the head and had to feel slightly foolish. She also would have quite a job cleaning up that glass. "Don't give it another thought. Is your head okay? You got quite a knock to the noggin there."

She scratched at her head, making the ripples of black hair dance and shine in the fading sunlight that streamed through the windows. "Yes, thank you, I'm fine. Now, what can I get you?"

Shep wanted to answer that whatever would take the longest to fix was what he'd have, but he thought that might be off-putting, so he merely said, "Whatever you have that has a bit of chicken in it. And cornbread, if you've got it."

"I have some fried chicken in the warming oven if that'll suit."

Shep's smile broadened until he thought the ends might meet at the back of his head. "You can't know how good that sounds, Miss Pann."

The waitress had already turned to head to the kitchen, but on hearing her name, she missed her footing. Shep had to catch her to keep her from falling. "How did you know my name?" she demanded.

He thought about giving her a direct answer, but then what would make her think of him later? Unless he gave her something to wonder about, she would probably forget him the moment he walked out of her shop. He knew he would never be able to forget her. Better to arouse her curiosity. He had heard that women were curious creatures by nature. Time to test if that were true. "Would you believe me if I told you that I learned that and a lot of other essential information from none other than Merriview's premier lawyer, Mr. Alvin Branson?"

"No, I would not," she returned tartly.

"I can prove it. That's his briefcase right there." He pointed to the case resting on the seat beside him.

The young lady came around and examined the case with its label clearly printed with the lawyer's name. "Why would Mr. Branson tell you about me?"

Shep just looked calmly at her. "Because I asked."

"But why did you... oh, never mind. I'll get your chicken." She disappeared behind those teasing bat-wing doors that swung distractingly, giving him little glimpses of her until they settled back into place. She came back a few moments later, carrying a tray loaded with plates, bowls and baskets of food that smelled like it came straight from heaven.

"Nasty weather we're having," she commented as she put the fried chicken down in front of him. "Is it this cold and wet where you came from?"

Ah, so he had caught her attention. She was trying to ask him where he was from without wanting to sound too interested. He had come from Dallas where the weather had been even more beastly. “Yes, indeed. I’m afraid I might have brought it with me.”

She seemed satisfied with that answer for a moment. Slipping behind the counter, she began to sweep up the broken pieces of the jar. “Well, I wish you’d take it back again when you go. And when might that be?”

Another net she was casting, hoping for information. “That’s a good question,” he hedged. “I’m not exactly sure myself. I do know where I’ll be tomorrow morning. Out in front of the livery stable.” It wouldn’t hurt to drum up a little more interest in his charges.

Apparently, he had already done that to a greater extent than he had anticipated. “So you heard about the critters as well?” she asked breathlessly. “I’m positively consumed with curiosity. I have to see what’s in that barn. I hear it’s a kind of cross between a horse and sheep. Completely impossible, I know, but that’s what folks are saying.”

“Really, now?” Shep commented as if he didn’t have much of an interest in the topic.

“They are indeed,” Miss Pann replied conspiratorially. “And I also heard that they scream like banshees wailing. And they’re ferocious as lions, hissing and spitting all over the place. I can’t wait to see them.”

“Ferocious? I don’t see how a cross between a sheep and anything could possibly be fierce, much less ferocious.”

“That’s what the men said who unloaded the critters from the train and moved them to the livery stable.”

“Well, you’ll be able to see for yourself tomorrow,” Shep suggested, hoping that she would show up. Slingo would introduce them properly and he could perhaps get to know her better.

“I suppose so,” she said with an air of smug satisfaction that raised all kinds of red flags in Shep’s mind.

He looked at her sharply. “Why do you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like a cat in a canary shop.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Look, whatever is in that livery is locked up for a reason. Whatever you might be planning, you should forget it right now.”

“Planning? Why would I be planning something?”

Shep thought about telling her that he was well acquainted with Drina and if they were anything alike, he could tell right now that she would be planning something that ought to be stopped before it got good and started. But that would be giving away more than he intended to at the moment. He wanted to see if he could catch her interest on his own, without any help because of his connection to the family. “Well, I just mean that if anyone were planning anything, she would be well advised to forget it. Anyone put in charge of such a cargo would be sure to check it frequently. It’s not going to be left all on its own for long. And anyone who got caught breaking in might get more trouble than he or she bargained for.”

“Well, if anyone did do something outlandish like break into the livery, that person would probably be clever enough to get away with it.” With a swish of her towel and a swoosh of her skirts, she was gone. He finished his meal and was just about to call for the check when he saw Mr. Branson exit the building across the street and turn to lock the door. If he wanted to return the briefcase to its owner personally before the man had time to worry about it too much, he

would need to move immediately. He fished a large coin out of his vest pocket and tossed it on the table. Snatching up the briefcase, he made tracks for the door.

The back entrance to the livery stable had been her secret since she had begun to work in Merriview four months earlier. She had discovered it quite by accident one day as she was throwing some wash water into the gutter and missed. Treli recalled that day with a grin. She had been daydreaming as usual. Her little flights of fancy helped tedious tasks go faster and kept her calm if she was nervous, but sometimes it led to difficulties, as it did that day. The noise of two of the planks falling had brought her back from her wool gathering to find that she had splashed water all over several piles of scrap wood leaning this way and that on the back wall of the alley. When she went to see if she had caused any damage to anything important, she found that the wood concealed a low door that had at one time been meant for coal delivery. No longer used every day, the door had been covered up and forgotten. That night, instead of coal, it admitted a silently stalking Treli.

From the moment she passed through the door and out of the stall, she found the smell familiar and somehow comforting. Soon enough she realized why. Striking a match, she lit the lantern hanging from a peg on the wall and looked around. "I should have known, that numbskull Eli would see this beautiful creature as a cross between a sheep and a horse, wouldn't he?" Treli recognized it for what it was. She had grown up in a wagon that had followed a traveling menagerie that had housed several of the gentle beasts.

She approached cautiously and after a few minutes the nearest stall full of animals allowed her to pet them. They were on the smallish side, but healthy and well cared for. Treli knew immediately for whom they must be destined. Only her cousin's ranch would deal in such exotic and exciting animals. Treli felt as if she had a right to be there, so she relaxed and worked her way around several stalls and even looked in a few of the crates. What memories came sluicing over her! Her parents. The circus. And who knew where these creatures had come from and what they might have seen. Far off countries. Exotic customs...

So absorbed had she become in her inner musings that she almost didn't notice when the large door at the front of the stable opened. And who should enter but the briefcase carrying, non-bell jangling, vase-smashing stranger from earlier that evening? What was he doing here? She dove head first under the nearest cover she could find. From the feel, the bags heaven had sent for her concealment were made of some sort of rough burlap. From the smell, they might have contained sweet feed, or perhaps apples. For her purposes, they were ideal. If there had only been a few more of them. She was able to wriggle under a single layer, but no more. She would have to lie very still or she would soon be facing a rather embarrassing situation. She had no wish for her secret entryway to be discovered by anyone but her.

"See? They're not a cross between a horse and anything. Well, I'll admit they do look a bit like camels, but they're not."

The next voice that spoke was easier for her to identify. It was Eli, the young man who worked at the livery stable. This in itself was good news and bad news. Treli liked Eli well enough. A hard worker, Eli had decided ideas about most things. The problems started because he took some of those ideas from the husbands of her cousin and her friend.

Those men tended to be stricter about rules than Treli thought was good for her or for fun in general. The advantage to Eli was that he could be talked round, given enough time and a sweet enough smile. The husbands, on the other hand, weren't so susceptible. Now, the question

was, would this stranger turn out to be more like Eli or the husbands? That was anybody's guess but Treli thought she might as well remain hidden if she could.

"But what are they then?" Eli asked doubtfully.

"They're called alpacas."

"And what are they good for? Can you eat them?" That was Eli all over, always thinking with his stomach.

"You can if you get hungry enough, or so I hear, but what the Sloan ladies want them for is their wool. You can spin it into a fancy yarn. And of course, circuses and menageries will pay a pretty penny for them. And nickels and dimes, too, I'll bet."

"Circuses and menageries would pay more for tigers and lions," Eli put in skeptically. "There can't be that much money in these hairy horses."

"Hey, I'm just the delivery man. I didn't buy them nor did I convince the Sloan ladies to go into the alpaca business. I don't see how they're worth the trouble either."

"Then why don't the Sloan brothers put their foot down and rein in their wives?"

"You're not a married man, are you, Eli?"

Eli gave a caustic laugh. "Not hardly."

"It shows. Saying no to a wife isn't as easy as all that. And the Sloans might just figure that if the alpacas serve to keep their wives happy and out of mischief, they're worth it."

"I know how I'd keep a wife out of mischief," Eli asserted confidently. "A trip to the woodshed does wonders for a girl's disposition, or so I've been told."

Both men chuckled at that, but Treli couldn't keep her hands from clenching at their laughter. Had the stranger heard her slight movement? He must have ears like a cat! He was coming her way. Could he tell where she was hidden? She'd know soon enough. Treli held her breath, expecting any moment to have the burlap sacks snatched away. Oh, how he would fuss. Treli knew how men hated to be ignored and their warnings disregarded.

"Did you hear something?" Eli asked.

"I think it was a mouse," the stranger replied. Suddenly, she felt a hard round edge like a broom handle poking lightly through the sacking. "In here maybe."

Treli held perfectly still, the heat rising in her cheeks till she knew they would see steam rising from them. How embarrassed she would be to be found in such a position. The stick poked here and there, first on one side of her, then the other, as if drawing an outline in polka dots. Despite this prelude, what happened next still surprised her, almost making her cry out.

Whomp went the broom, landing right on her derriere. It was as if he could tell where she was underneath all the empty burlap sacks. Whomp went the broom again, whomp, whomp. "Do you think you got it?" asked Eli.

"Better make sure," replied the stranger. "I'll give it a few more hearty whacks for good measure."

And he did, whacking away at her backside. Even through her skirts and the sacks, the sting built quickly. It was all she could do to keep from squirming, but she knew she would rather take a hundred swats than admit to Eli what was going on. This stranger might know, but he obviously wouldn't tell. If he meant to expose her, he would have already. If she could just endure in silence, she might get out of this with her dignity relatively intact. The stranger wouldn't be anyone she would see again. She might have to serve him in the café, but then again, he might be only visiting. So she held her tongue and took what he doled out without complaint.

“There, that ought to do it. That lesson should have gotten through to even the most stubborn mouse. These animals aren’t normally dangerous, but they’re out of their territory, so they’re skittish and unpredictable. You’ve got to show them proper respect.”

“So you plan to stay here all night and beat the mice away?” Eli asked. “If so, I’ll be moseying on home.”

“I’ll go with you,” the stranger said in a loud voice. “And then come back pretty soon to check on things. Hopefully, the mice will have cleared out by then.”

Treli, being smarter than a mouse, didn’t have to be told twice. As soon as the barn door shut, she slithered out from under the sacks and back through her little concealed hatchway, rubbing her backside as she went.