***BODIE GOLD***

Chapter 1

On a date in the late spring of 1873, three events occurred thousands of miles apart that were, at the time, completely unrelated. Several months later, in retrospect, one could see that each event was part of a series which would culminate in a fateful event in a locale no one could possibly have anticipated, that being Abilene, Kansas.

One of the events was the delivery of a letter to Byron Brennan in Dublin, Ireland, that had originated somewhere in California. The letter, from Thomas Brennan, Byron’s older brother, strongly implored Byron to come to America immediately to help with a mining find near Bodie, California.

“I have found the mother lode, brother, but I desperately need your help with the extraction and processing. There isn’t a single person around here I can trust and if word gets around about my discovery, my claim will be lost for sure, if not my life with it. There are claim jumpers all over the state, as well as dodgy lawyers, assayers and outright thieves. So far, I’ve been able to keep my find a secret as most prospectors are on the other side of the mountain where some bits of gold have been mined. I work the lode only in early morning and in the last of the sunlight to keep my movements as unnoticeable as possible. In this manner, I have managed to extract enough nuggets to make us both wealthy, but there is so much more to be had; plus, I haven’t figured out how to market the gold without risking my life and my claim.

“Here's what I have done: I’ve hidden the ore already mined and I’m going to leave some directions for finding it at my hotel with instructions to give them to you – and only you – should something happen to me before you arrive. In order to follow the directions to the ore, you will need to bring with you a reliable compass and a strong captain’s spyglass. You will also need to remember where the two of us used to hide things from our parents when we were young. Finally, you will need to conduct some research into the birthing practices of the Kehli Indian tribe indigenous to this area in California (this latter being something you will likely have to do once you get here).

“I’ve enclosed some money to pay for your passage to America; I can only pray that it makes it to you along with this letter. Do not take the route around Cape Horn to get to California. The straits there are still incredibly treacherous. Instead, you should travel to one of the ports in Panama. There is now a train which will take you across the narrow isthmus so you can catch another boat ride up the Pacific coast to get here. It’s much safer and quicker, though the insect problem in Panama is pretty awful.”

The letter went on to provide instructions for finding Thomas in California. And the money for passage was, in fact, enclosed in the envelope. Brimming with enthusiasm at the prospect of the adventure offered by his brother, Byron took some time to determine how best to approach his mother about the situation. Just having completed his second year at University, Byron was desperate to avoid returning for yet another year of overwhelming boredom. Mum would hear nothing of it, of course, because she still regularly berated Thomas for his whimsical efforts to strike it rich, rather than complete his education and engage in some worthy profession. Certainly, seeing her other son set off on a similar lark would send her over the edge. Still, Byron thought, he was approaching the age of 20 and could leave without her blessing. She would make multiple threats to keep him in Ireland, but, in the end, when Byron set off in spite of all that, her blessing would come, eventually and reluctantly. Just before watching him board his ship, she handed him a small pouch containing quite a few old coins, along with a parting message, “in case your venture doesn’t pan out.”

Within a week of receipt of the letter, Byron embarked on his journey, one that would take 3 months or so. He would have no way of finding out in advance of his arrival in California that his brother had met his death at the hands of thieves who caught him with a small sack of gold. Their efforts to torture him into revealing the source of the gold eventually led to his demise.

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The second event, occurring at roughly the same time as the arrival of Thomas Brennan’s letter in Ireland, took place without fanfare on the Texas side of Texarkana, a town just beginning to experience rapid growth in anticipation of the building of a major railroad terminal there. What happened was that John Wesley Hardin sold a string of 12 horses as the initial transaction in his new enterprise as a horse trader, having given up his prior occupation as a cattle herding cowboy. He had spent the previous two years herding cattle from various points in West Texas up to rail heads located in Abilene, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri. Hardin was the son of a Methodist minister in Bonham, Texas, who named his second son after the founder of the Methodist church. Throughout his early life, John Wesley mostly went by the name “Wes”, but that changed later when he became notorious as a gunfighter and the full name came back into use.

Hardin first became a fugitive from the law at age 15. Until that time, he had led a fairly normal and peaceful life, doing well in school, working at odd jobs and helping out at home during the Civil War years. After the war and during the early part of the Reconstruction Era in the southern states, Hardin found himself being harassed by a young black man to the point where he was eventually assaulted with a knife. Hardin managed to turn the fight around, stabbing and killing his assailant.

When Hardin approached his father, explaining what had happened, the advice he received was for John Wesley to run away from what the father perceived would be unfair treatment of his son under the law. While it may be difficult to understand today how a white boy killing a black man in Texas would result in prejudicial treatment of the white boy in the legal system, such was actually the case at the time. During the Reconstruction Era, local governments in the south were run by appointed northern bureaucrats -- so-called Carpetbaggers -- or freed slaves. In John Wesley’s circumstance, the judge who would have heard his case was a former slave and all other personnel in the court system at the time were the northern bureaucrats whose job was to “reconstruct’ the south. To enforce this form of “justice”, northern military units were deployed throughout the south with little direction as to how they were to achieve their reconstruction goals. As it turned out, the preferred methods of enforcement were force and violence. So, Hardin’s father was probably right when he advised his son to run from this particular form of “the law.”

For the next several years, Hardin hop-scotched his way across Texas, managing to avoid law officers, bounty hunters and potential assassins of all types. How he managed to land a job as a school teacher in a small town in Navarro County, Texas, is difficult to fathom, even though background checks and reference letters were likely not considered as important as finding someone who was willing and able to teach in rural areas in Texas at the time. There were 15 students in his class, ranging in age from 6 to 16 years. The fact he was offered a position for a second term is some indication that he was at least adequate as a teacher. He declined the offer and set out to make his way herding cattle.

During his two-plus years as a cattle-driving cowboy, Hardin continued to avoid being captured by the law, though he was not able to avoid completely several confrontations with others trying to kill him. They were all unsuccessful, though he once suffered a severe wound from a shotgun, requiring several months of recovery.

In a conversation with his trail boss after Hardin had dispatched one such would-be killer, the boss asked if he didn’t have any friends in the world at all.

Wes replied, “I quit trying to make friends because they all seemed to wind up getting killed for one reason or another.”

To which the boss commented, “I’ve noticed that your enemies don’t seem to fare that well either.”

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The third event occurring at about the same time as the arrival of the letter from Thomas Brennan in Ireland and the horse trade by Wes Hardin in Texas, was the receipt by Ilsa Ericsson of notification she had been accepted to become a full-time student at the state university located in Berkely, California. At the time, she was residing with her father in San Francisco, having just completed her senior year in high school. Her older brother by 2 years was already a student at Berkely and she had held out hope to join him at the university following her graduation. The Board of Regents for the university had passed a resolution in 1870 to admit female students on the same basis as male students and the first women began their studies there in 1872, one year prior to Ilsa’s expected start. She realized she would have to work to pay for this education, but older brother, Karl, was doing just that and making his way quite well. What was most significant about receiving the acceptance notice was that it provided something of a validation of her feelings of self-worth. She also felt a strong sense of relief and a joy of anticipation for the potential independence that university life, as she imagined it, would provide. All these emotions, combined with some strong determination and will power, prompted her to react to a confrontation with her father in a way that would otherwise have been considered unthinkable.

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A fourth event occurred simultaneously with he three referenced above, an event that would have long-term implications but, did not, as far as we know, have anything to do with the previously mentioned events; Levi Strauss was issued a patent for blue jeans.

Chapter 2

When Byron Brennan arrived at the hotel in Bodie, California\*, where he had hoped to meet up with his brother, he was met with the distressing news about his death. Despondent and aimless, Byron’s first thought was to leave his bags packed and head back to Ireland. Eventually, however, he remembered the instructions in his brother’s letter and returned to the hotel to inquire after his brother’s belongings. After a bit of difficulty convincing the hotel clerk of his identity as the deceased man’s next of kin, he was finally provided access to a storage room where a cedar chest containing Thomas’ meager personal possessions was found. Inside the chest and lying on top of some clothing was a note with no address line, which Byron quickly tucked into his own pocket before gathering up Thomas’ things from inside the chest. He left the chest behind, choosing to deal with that later, walked out of town for a short distance, found an agreeable spot under a large tree and sat down to read the note. Without an introduction or preamble of any sort, the note said:

If you are reading this, it means I failed in shipping this cedar chest to mum. It would be a huge favor to me and, I hope, a joy for her if you could attend to the shipping. The one she kept at the foot of her bed must be 25 years old by now and surely has lost its repellent properties. I made this one myself, a feat of which I am quite proud. As to the other matter:

Walk east from the hotel to the end of the street. There is a hitching post at the very end in front of the dry goods store. Stand with your hip against the far end of the rail and locate a 110 degree setting on the compass. Point your spyglass in that direction and scan upward until you spot a clearing with only a stand of three large live oaks. Go up the mountain and find the southernmost of the three trees and follow the direction you find there. Thereafter, you must remember and apply the knowledge gained from the research I asked you to conduct. Recalling our childhood hiding place will also be important. Good luck, brother, and mind how you go.

Footnote to Chapter 2

\*Before Thomas Brennan discovered his gold vein, there had been a number of other isolated strikes in the area near Bodie, California, mostly further south and west of Brennan’s location. But, a year or two later, there were quite a few strikes, some of great magnitude, resulting in the town experiencing rapid growth. At one point, the population of Bodie reached something in excess of 8,000, making it truly a mining “boom town”. When the gold mining ran its course and then played out completely, the town’s population began to shrink rather quickly. Eventually, it became completely uninhabited, a real “ghost town”. Some of the structures in the town have been preserved, while others have been replicated, so that the place is today a tourist attraction for those wishing to visit a true ghost town from the old west days. The town was located about 75 miles southeast of Lake Tahoe at an elevation of 8,379 feet.

Chapter 3

Ilsa Ericksson and her older brother, Karl, were on the run – from their father or whoever he may have hired to track them down. And track them down he would they had no doubt. So, they had to be smart and they had to deal with nature and her elements in a way they were ill-equipped to manage. They were plenty smart, to be sure; and they were both strong and had youth on their side. Karl had just turned 20 and Ilsa was herself all of 18 years. However, their educations had been obtained almost exclusively in classrooms or under the heavy hand of their father. Right now, they needed some real world savvy if they were to make their escape a successful one.

They had figured their father would assume they would head for the train station in San Francisco or in Sacramento so as to make their way back east, most likely aiming to get back to Chicago. Instead, the frightened siblings headed east into the unknown wilderness, riding double on their father’s horse which they had appropriated for the escape.

The father, Lars Ericksson, and his wife, Inger, had immigrated from Sweden to America and first settled in a small town on the eastern edge of Wisconsin where their two children were born. When Ilsa was four years old, the Erickssons moved to Chicago where Lars could more economically ply his trade as a carpenter and craftsman. Inger did not fare well in the city and fell ill soon after their arrival. She remained sickly for most of the early years of Ilsa’s and Karl’s growth and education. When she finally passed away, Lars became distraught and aimless, eventually falling into financial difficulty because his work suffered from lack of attention and diligence. At about this time, America was on the verge of civil war, with the North and South in a major struggle over issues about which Lars had no interest or opinion. Figuring California would be a safe refuge from the direct effects of the war and hoping to somehow get in on the get-rich-quick possibilities of a gold find, Lars and children headed west, him knowing full well that the gold rush was essentially over in California, at least in and around San Francisco, his chosen destination. He could find work out there for sure because of his skills; and, who knows, with the gold fever having died down, some opportunities in the after- market might present themselves. He was right about finding work because California was in a building mode at the time with a high demand for wood craftsmen. But, his hopes for gold soon faded in the light of reality.

Following his wife’s death, Lars assumed the role of disciplinarian for his children; and he took this responsibility quite seriously, with his razor strop being the main source for enforcement. In fact, he kept the leather strop handy long after he gave up shaving, which he did shortly after Inger’s passing. So, with a full beard and his large frame, Lars presented quite an imposing figure. Once in California, it seemed, at least to the children, his physical disciplinary measures trended toward the extreme. Still, while he was quick with the whip, such abuse as he dished out was never sexual in nature, that is until one eventful occasion.

It was shortly after Ilsa’s acceptance to Berkely that, during the course of a disciplinary session, for the first time ever, Ilsa resisted her father’s use of the leather strop, yelling at him that she was 18 years of age and an adult, that she would not take any more of his abuse and slapped him hard across the face. At this resistance, Lars went into a rage and began tearing off Ilsa’s clothes, holding her with one strong arm and eventually throwing her on the floor, attempting to impose himself on her sexually.

At this juncture, Karl walked in on the proceedings, having decided, providently it seemed, to take a short break from the work he was doing to pay for his university studies over at Berkely and visit his sister. Quickly assessing the sorry situation and reacting instinctively, Karl lunged at his father with fists flailing. Recovering from surprise and shock, Lars regained his feet, snapped his suspenders back in place over his shoulders, snarled at his son and his impudence and impertinence, not to mention his outright hostility, and went after him as he had done many times before with the intent to punish. However, Karl had himself grown into quite a physical specimen and instead of yielding to his father, continued an assault with his fists. It didn’t take long for the younger, stronger, adrenalin-pumping Karl to overwhelm his father and render him unconscious.

At that moment, Ilsa and Karl began planning their escape, such plan amounting to nothing more than grabbing some food and clothing, taking all the cash they could find in the house and on their father’s person, grabbing his Winchester rifle and ammo, then absconding on their dad’s horse, heading east, to some place yet to be determined.

Chapter 4

There was no money to be found among Thomas Brennan’s belongings (the hotel clerk explained that what little cash they found was used to satisfy the rather tidy sum charged by the town undertaker for a coffin and burial duties and the rest was applied against storage costs for the chest), but there was a pair of boots that seemed to fit Byron fairly well. He figured he would need them. It hadn’t taken him long to spot the three trees in the clearing that the note had mentioned, but it was clearly a difficult climb to get there on foot.

He set out on his journey up the mountain two days later, having decided to do some research about the area’s geography and the facilities available for dealing with gold ore, should he be successful in his pursuit of Thomas’ hidden treasure. He also managed to arrange for the shipment of the cedar chest to Ireland by having it carted to the train station in Sacramento. From there, it would be loaded onto one of the cars of the Central Pacific Railroad Company for travel on the trans-continental railroad, eventually making its way to an Atlantic port for the trip overseas. Byron had very little hope the chest would actually make it to its destination, given the many transfers required, each providing ample opportunities for mishap, but it was important to give it a try in satisfaction of his brother’s final request. (Despite its presumptuous name, the trans-continental railroad did not actually transcend the continent, running only from Sacramento to Council Bluffs, Iowa, quite a bit short of the Atlantic. However, from its terminus in Iowa, access could be had to the eastern railway network for travel on to various locations, including several Atlantic ports.)

Byron arrived at the clearing with the three trees exhausted from the climb. Looking for other clues to help in his search, he eventually noticed a small arrow figure carved into the trunk of the southern-most tree, well above normal eye level. The arrow followed the natural curvature of the tree trunk and thus could have been read as pointing only in the general direction of a rock cliff some 100 yards or so south of the tree at the end of a fairly gentle incline. From where he stood, there was nothing obvious on the face of the cliff to provide guidance. However, scanning with the spy glass, he was able to discern a rather small opening somewhat hidden behind a branch overhang. With nothing else to go on, he decided to climb up to check it out.

The small opening turned out to be several feet up the sheer rock face, but he found it an easy climb with convenient hand and foot holds. Byron crawled on all fours a few feet inside before his hands lost their purchase on some slick surface and he went sliding down into the hole at some speed due to the slippery coating on the rock surface. Somehow, his fall ended with him landing on his back, which was fortunate since he was wearing a rucksack that provided some cushion for the landing.

After gathering himself somewhat and taking stock of his condition, which seemed to be just fine, he looked up toward the light of the entrance and reckoned he must have fallen about 10 feet or so, though a good part of the descent was a slide rather than a free fall. He was able to retrieve a matches cylinder from the rucksack and lit one, knowing he would have about 15 seconds of light to survey his surroundings (at the time, matches were most often referred to as “friction light”, the name assigned by the inventor some 50 years earlier). The floor on which he stood was flat and relatively circular in shape, maybe 10 feet in diameter. The walls sloped upward and outward toward the entrance hole, creating a kind of teardrop-shaped enclosure.

Clearly, there were no gold treasures to be found, so Byron began to plan how he would work his way out of the hole, using a sort of stair step ramp that appeared on one wall leading up to the entrance hole. Before starting up, he decided to rest for a moment, take stock of his physical condition after the fall and, once again, go over the clues his brother had provided.

Remembering the hiding place he and his brother had used as children was easy. It was in their baby sister’s room, under the crib where a loose plank could be opened and closed with ease, providing a nice space for hiding. Since the loose board was directly under the crib, no one would be walking over it to, perhaps, discover the floor defect. Now, what this had to do with hidden treasures escaped Byron’s logic.

The difficult part of his brother’s clues came from having to research practices of the Kehli tribe. There were no ready manuals and finding human sources for this kind of information proved fruitless until he arrived in America. As he was making his way from San Francisco over to Bodie in California, he made inquiries wherever and whenever he could. Piecing together bits of information from several sources, he finally managed to develop a meaningful scenario that might possibly have something to do with finding his brother’s gold trove.

Apparently, it was the custom or practice in the Kehli tribe for expectant mothers to go into isolation to deliver their babies and then to nurse them through a short postpartum period before emerging to rejoin the tribe. No one, certainly not the father, or any male for that matter, was allowed to interrupt the isolation. Byron took another look around and considered that the enclosure he then occupied might provide just such isolation. With leaves, grass and feathers, the floor could be made soft enough for delivery and some degree of comfort for the mother after birth. Its elevated entrance point on the side of a sheer cliff would provide some protection against inquisitive critters. But, how was the newborn baby to be accommodated?

Examining the cave further, mostly by feeling his way around, Byron concluded it was man-made, for sure. Eventually, he came across a small hole on one wall that he guessed led to a narrow tunnel. Reaching inside to get a feel for the opening he discovered it was barely big enough to get his head and shoulders inside and was completely dark. At his point, Byron began to feel a sense of excitement, quickly deciding it was not a tunnel, finding the hole to be nothing more than a kind of shelf, maybe four feet deep and only about 2 feet high. Properly padded, this elevated hole in the wall could provide a kind of baby crib.

Daring to expend another of his precious “friction lights”, Byron used it to light up the inside of the small opening and was able to locate in one corner, barely within his arm’s reach, a leather pouch which appeared to be one-half of a set of saddle bags. Hauling the bag out and down onto the cave floor, Byron began to tremble with excitement, not so much from having found a trove of riches as from a sense of accomplishment for having solved the riddle his brother had presented him. Using the meager light from the cave opening, he unlatched the bag and found exactly what he had expected – a very large cache of carefully packed gold nuggets. He did not bother to take any sort of inventory, but noted that the nuggets appeared to be somewhat refined (in fact, Thomas had painstakingly “hand refined” each of the nuggets in the bag, meaning that he had employed rasps, chisels, files, and various other tools to remove as many of the other minerals attached to the gold as was possible. Further refining techniques would be required to achieve maximum purity for the gold, but Thomas’ work greatly enhanced the value of the nuggets). Byron replaced the flap covering on the bag, closed the clasp and commenced his climb out of the cave, never attempting to estimate the monetary worth of his discovery.

The bag holding the gold nuggets was, in fact, one-half of a set of saddle bags, the wide leather connector having been cut smoothly with something very sharp, most likely Thomas’ folding knife which he always kept handy. Perhaps he had filled the other bag with an equal amount of gold to be retained for his own purposes. In any event, the pouch was difficult to carry because of its weight and bulk, combined with the fact there were no straps or handles. Byron eventually determined to hold the bag with both hands, press it against his belly and waddle along in that fashion, cursing himself all the while for his stupidity for not having brought a pack animal up the mountain with him. He didn’t remember thinking about it really, so perhaps he was working under the assumption he was never going to find the treasure in the first place. Or maybe he just figured it would be something he could shove into his rucksack and easily carry down himself. The fact now was that he had to come up with a solution to a problem he should have foreseen, but didn’t.

Much later, when he reflected on his decision, he would undertake to convince himself that he had set out on foot for the purpose of deceiving those who would do him harm. For the evil doers who figured Byron would lead them to the rich vein they believed his brother had found, going up the slope of the mountain with no tools and only a small backpack would lead them to think he was going out on a reconnaissance mission, hoping to simply locate the lode, which might take several such trips. Once he had actually found it, he would need to return for tools, supplies and a pack animal. Then it would make sense to follow him and take care of their ignoble business.

As he slowly and uncertainly approached the now-familiar clearing with the three trees, intending to rest there and sort out a plan for handling his new-found riches, he was surprised to spot two people and a hobbled horse resting under one of the trees. His first reaction was to back up, retrace his steps and hide the gold back in the cave. Before he could begin his retreat, he was spotted by the lounging couple who then jumped to their feet, gathering themselves to confront the approaching stranger. It appeared to Byron that the couple were unarmed, or at least were not brandishing any weapons in his direction, so he continued waddling in their direction, eventually shouting out that he intended no harm. Had he been able to do so, he would have raised his arms to demonstrate his peaceful intent.

Chapter 5

In other circumstances, Ilsa and Karl Ericsson would have been amused by the somewhat comic scene of the approaching image: a man holding something quite heavy against his belly, leaning back to keep his balance, walking with splayed legs in a stumbling manner, professing in English, though with a strange accent, that he intended them no harm. But these were not humorous circumstances for the pair. They were fugitives from their authoritarian and vengeful father and, quite possibly by now, fugitives from the law as well.

“Stop right there or I’ll shoot,” Karl shouted.

Already fairly certain the pair were unarmed and believing the threat wasn’t delivered with much conviction, especially since the voice had a rather high pitch in an accent he didn’t recognize delivered in a manner that seemed to end with a question mark rather than as a demand, Byron continued to move forward. As he neared, he noted with some alarm the stock of a rifle, holstered and attached to a saddle on the ground, but well out of immediate reach. So again, he shouted that he meant no harm.

By this time, he was able to discern that the couple was male and female, quite young it seemed, perhaps even younger than himself. They clearly were not dressed for outdoor activities and what clothing they had on appeared tattered and dirty. They also appeared to be bone-tired and hopelessly lost.

Once within range to speak at a conversation level, Byron politely asked, “What in the world are you two doing out in this wilderness?”

Karl and Ilsa looked at each other for a moment as if deciding who should answer. Karl finally spoke, saying “We’re on our way east toward Chicago and I guess we got a little lost. We stopped here to figure out a few things and make a plan for what we need to do next. What are you doing out here on foot with more than you can possibly carry for any distance?”

Byron sighed and said, “Well it appears we all find ourselves quite unprepared for whatever happens next. It would suit me if we could all sit for a bit and see what we can make of our situations Would you mind?”

And so they sat, warily eyeing each other. Byron spoke first, suggesting they should give a fuller explanation of how they had arrived at this place. It was his intent to listen carefully to the couple’s story and come to some evaluation as to how truthful he could be in telling his own tale. As he heard their story about their domineering father and the altercation that led to their escape, Byron discerned the two siblings were smart, well-educated for their ages, essentially innocent and guileless and completely ill-equipped to deal with the hardships they would surely face should they continue their plan to travel across country to Chicago or any other destination east of the imposing Rocky Mountains.

But, there was something quite different about the two. It wasn’t their appearances, though they were both exceptionally attractive behind the dirt and grime. And it wasn’t the softness of their blue eyes or the way each of them seemed to move with the grace of dancers. Each of them, in their own way, exuded a gentleness of heart made vibrant because one had the company of the other. Their verbal exchanges were given with generosity and received with humility. It was obvious the two had developed a bond borne of joint suffering at the hands of a common and demanding, if not evil, force -- their father.

What the Ericsson siblings did not tell Byron -- because they didn’t know about it themselves at the time -- was that Lars Eriksson, the father, was dead. They didn’t kill him, at least not directly. Although Karl’s severe blows rendered the father unconscious, he eventually recovered, partially, probably about the time Karl and Ilsa were mounting their dad’s horse to head east. When Lars woke, he had trouble regaining his feet and stumbled around until he collapsed, striking his head on a heavy table as he fell and sustaining the blow that actually took his life. It would be several days before one of Lars’ subcontractors found his body and alerted the police. The scene certainly appeared to have been created by a burglary, given the missing horse, Lars’ empty wallet laying on the floor and the rest of the house being left in severe disarray by the hurriedly departing children. When it became evident that the Ericksson children were missing, there was some interest by the police in locating their whereabouts, but that interest quickly subsided since there was no one pressing them to solve the crime.

After hearing their story, Byron decided he could trust the Erickssons, at least to the point of not worrying they would kill him or steal his gold. He recognized that placing trust based on such flimsy evidence was dangerous, but he also recognized he had very limited choices otherwise. They clearly could use his help, though he was no great frontiersman himself; but, more importantly, he needed their help. So, he told them his story, emphasizing the facts of his brother’s death and his own fear that in the gold-crazed area they were in, he was most likely a target for some claim-jumpers, ore-trackers, simple thieves or other dodgy characters who may have figured out why he came to America to meet up with his brother.

When he finished his story, he paused for a moment to let the information settle in, then said, “I think we can help each other. I’m not sure exactly why you absolutely refused to use the rail services at all, but if you insist on traveling overland, you’re going to need a lot of help, some of which I can provide. On the other hand, I need to make my way east as well, because I simply cannot trust anyone here to assay my gold ore and protect it while trading it for cash or meaningful credit. Frankly, I don’t think the railroad will be safe for me either. I have been advised that the nearest bank that can be trusted with such matters is located in Kansas City. It has been set up and operated by a group of honest cattlemen to serve the needs of that growing beef industry there – the key word being ‘honest’. While that destination is not all that near Chicago, it should be somewhat on the way such that we can travel together for much of the difficult part of the trip.”

“So, what exactly is it that we can do for one another?” Ilsa wanted to know.

“I certainly haven’t got that all worked out, but here is a plan for the moment. Darkness is setting in and there won’t be much we can accomplish tonight in the way of travel. I have a little bread, cheese and an apple in my rucksack, so I suggest we share that while we still have a bit of light. I had a big breakfast before heading out today and you guys look as if you haven’t eaten anything for a while, so you can have the lion’s share of what little food there is. Afterwards, I’ll show you a spot I have found where we can spend the night safely, discuss our respective situations and, I hope, begin our journeys in the morning.”

After consuming all the food and downing the water remaining in Byron’s canteen, the trio marched up the hill to the cave, tied the horse to a nearby sapling and climbed into the security of the tribal birthing site. It was something of a tight fit for the three bodies, but they soon found suitable positions and slept, silently agreeing that their travel planning could wait until daybreak.

Upon re-grouping the next morning, the initial plan was for Karl to ride back into Bodie, making as little contact as possible with any people in town. The thought was that Karl would be a stranger to all and, travelling alone, he would not alert any hunters looking for a pair of wayward siblings. His mission was to acquire two horses and, resources permitting, a mule, along with a handgun, some food and other necessaries. Information about nearby water sources and directions east would be helpful, but not critical if time became an issue.

With the money Karl and Ilsa had taken from their father, combined with some cash Byron had left over from his travels as well as the gold coins his mum had provided, the hope was to complete these transactions without having to use any of the gold ore as barter. Byron gave Karl two of the nuggets to use only if absolutely necessary. Flashing any more than that would raise suspicions and put them all in danger. Byron and Ilsa would stay behind to guard the treasure and map out an initial travel course. They would move east away from the clearing and into the nearby woods, leaving trail markings for Karl to follow on his return.

Byron was not at all excited about turning all those responsibilities over to a young man he had only met the day before, But, it would have been unwise, probably even foolish, for him to return to the place where more and more questioning eyes had been turning his way. What did excite Byron was the prospect of spending the day with Ilsa. He had been attracted to her in the first moments of their meeting, at a time when she was not only disheveled, lost and in fear, but her hair was in tangles, her face was smeared with a combination of dust and tears and her manner was one of tired resignation. Beyond all that, Byron saw a basic beauty in the structure of her face, a strength of character and an aura of grace and dignity.

Further conversation revealed her intelligence and wit, but what really set her apart, in Byron’s eye, was her illegible smile, something that was not forthcoming until a certain level of comfort and confidence had been established among the trio. When it did come, Byron was clearly smitten to the point of doing everything in his power to elicit another such smile. But few were forthcoming under their peculiar and difficult circumstances. It was as if she felt she had a limited reservoir of smiles in her countenance and was not prepared to exhaust them on a stranger in a god-forsaken wilderness while on the run for her life. While Byron clearly understood her mostly stoic and reserved demeanor, he could not help but long for the time when her smile would be directed toward him in a free and easy manner.

Chapter 6

Herding cattle from the southern plains up to Kansas and Missouri in the early part of the 1870’s was big business with a variety of participants. There were the one-timers who had managed to string together small herds with the intention of driving them north, cashing in and moving on to a new life further north or west. Others were in the business on a much larger scale, in it for the long term, putting together herds of 1,000 head or so. And there were others who fell somewhere between the two extremes, operating as small-time entrepreneurs or simply trying to make a living somehow.

But, large or small, the herds all followed pretty much the same trails northward, sometimes creating conflicts of various kinds. Maybe one herd was moving along at a faster pace than the one in front, possibly causing anxiety and stress that today night be called road rage. Or perhaps one of the larger herds would encroach on the territory of one of the smaller herds, creating difficulties in identifying ownership and such. Many of these conflicts among herds resulted in gun battles between the cowboy herders. It was just such circumstances, as well as the constant efforts at rustling, which provided John Wesley Hardin the opportunities to use his skills with pistols to great advantage and, as his successes in these matters increased and his notoriety grew, to his personal monetary benefit. His services as a herder and security guard were much sought-after by trail bosses.

During his career, Hardin killed 43 men, according to his own count, though only 27 were verified independently. Whatever the actual number, Hardin always maintained he never killed anyone at his own instigation. (There was an oft- circulated story to the effect that Hardin once shot a man in a hotel room because he was snoring too loudly, a tale that was patently false but which gained popularity because of Hardin’s fame as a gunfighter). Hardin’s plea of multiple self-defense shootings carries a degree of credibility when all factors of his life are considered. It is undisputed that Hardin was not a bandit. He never robbed or cheated anyone. On one occasion when he was being chased by a lynching mob, he did take another man’s horse to make his getaway; but he argued that he did not “steal” the animal because the definition of theft includes a taking without intent to return. Actually, a few days later when the mob had dispersed, he returned the horse to the very spot where it was taken.

At least three of the men Hardin killed were shot in the name of the law. This peculiar circumstance came about when a group of Mexican cattle thieves had killed and robbed the close friend of a sheriff in a town near the cattle trail. Unable to pursue the bandits with a posse of his own, the sheriff turned to Hardin for help. Hardin was deputized, along with two other men, to track down the bandits who were clearly heading back to Mexico with a day’s head start. Hardin and his two fellow deputies rode hard on the trail of the bandits, attempting to overtake them before they reached the Indian territory. They eventually caught up with Bideno, the leader of the thieves and a notoriously ruthless murderer, just before entering the Oklahoma territory. Confronting the outlaw and his two friends, Hardin first identified himself as a deputy sheriff and then shouted out that they were under arrest, that they should put down their weapons and raise their hands. Instantly, Bideno whirled around, pistol in hand, firing in the direction of Hardin and the other two deputies. With one shot of his own, Hardin downed Bideno before turning to the Mexican’s accomplices who had by then drawn their own weapons and were firing in the general direction of the deputies. Hardin shot and killed them both. The other deputies did not fire a shot in the altercation, but were able to verify Hardin’s account of the proceedings, greatly enhancing Hardin’s already substantial reputation as a gunfighter.

Chapter 7

Following his trip into Bodie, when Karl caught up with Byron and Ilsa, he was leading two mustangs with full tack and a mule loaded down with supplies. One of the horses was a red roan mare and the other was a young gelding. Ilsa immediately claimed the mare as her own and assigned her the name “Dreamer.” Karl was happy to stick with his father’s horse, but demanded it be renamed. His father had called him by the name “Djavul,” which is Swedish for the devil. Karl decided that “Raddare,” which means “rescuer” in Swedish, would be more appropriate. Byron had no interest in coming up with a name for his gelding, so Ilsa stepped in and dubbed him “Lad,” remembering from somewhere in her schooling that “lad” was what the Irish called a young boy. The mule, it was decided, would earn his name over the course of the journey by his manner of performance. For the interim, he would be called “Stub” as short for stubborn, assuming a common characteristic for the animal which would later be proven grossly inappropriate.

Ecstatic with the success of the mission, the threesome feasted on the food and drink before settling down to discuss their travel plans. All three were well educated for their respective ages and so knew a bit about the geography they would have to traverse. They knew, for instance, that the Rocky Mountains would have to be crossed to reach their destinations. What they didn’t know, or have any concept about, was the distance that would have to be covered. Neither did they have any real appreciation for the treacherous land they would have to get through. Thus, when they started out on their venture, they did so with high spirits and a level of confidence that would not have existed had they fully understood what lay before them.

Before setting out, Byron admitted to himself some serious misgivings about Ilsa’s ability to keep up with the men. He need not have worried. Not only did she keep up, she very often had to prod the guys to pick up the pace or keep moving when they wanted to rest. While she knew nothing about overland travel, her upbringing by strict parents and, eventually, a cruel taskmaster in the form of her father had taught her a few things about resilience, determination and resolution, all qualities producing a strength of character that served her well on the rugged journey they were experiencing. She was tall and slender, without appearing weak. In fact, she was quite strong, with her strength coming from her sinewy structure, not from bulging muscles.

It didn’t take long for the difficulties and the drudgery to set in. Although they were already on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and, therefore, did not have to deal with what would have been a most difficult crossing, the land before them was sheer wilderness. There were no roads or even clear paths so that every step for the animals was over some form of difficult terrain. It turned out that the two instruments Byron brought with him from Ireland were a godsend. The compass was invaluable in keeping their course generally to the east, while the spy glass was a great aid in plotting their near approach to the lands that lay immediately ahead.

In the days and weeks that followed, Karl and Byron began to form a bond of friendship that would last a lifetime. It often happens, of course, that men who share, endure and survive terrible hardships together naturally form a kind of kinship. But Karl and Byron’s friendship went far beyond that sort of connection. They developed a mutual respect for the other’s character and view of life. At first approach, it would seem their individual backgrounds could not have been more diverse. Karl was born and raised in America, but the culture in which he developed was of strong Swedish bent. In Wisconsin and Chicago, the Erickssons lived in communities made up principally of Swedish immigrants. In California, there were precious few Swedish immigrants, but the few there tended to group together when possible. On the other hand, Byron was pure Irish and had been in America only since Spring. However, they both had been well educated and were each self-reliant by nature and believers of personal independence. They each had great respect for humanity in general and the human spirit in particular. Though neither man had any notable skills in creative arts, they each held those with such gifts in high regard. So, as they observed one another address the various hardships of their travel with mostly equal effort and effect, their bond became more than mere kinship.

Ilsa’s relationship with Byron was even more complicated. She found herself being attracted to him despite her commitment not to let a romantic relationship develop. After all, she would tell herself, he is the only man on earth in my life right now. We are not Adam and Eve, completely alone on the earth; there is a whole world out there that I have never seen or experienced. And I want to see as much of it as possible without limiting my chances of doing so by making a decision today that might make no sense in a different context and with further experience. How could it even be possible that the one and only man currently in my life could turn out to be The One.

She would regularly remind herself that she had just paid a huge price for her freedom, and the realization of the benefits of that freedom were still far in the distance. She had long dreamed of what a life of freedom would be like, one not controlled by her father. Her dreams didn’t have a precise direction. In fact, what her dream life would be like was not clear at all. But all her dreams included a common theme of a life of achievement in one way or the other. None of them involved racing off to find a husband who would support and care for her and help raise their children. She did not need caring for and she had no interest in reveling in the reflected light of a successful partner. She was the one who was a success in her dreams.

Following this reasoning, which clearly argued against an early-life romance, Ilsa would renew her commitment simply to endure this time of hardship and to avoid developing romantic notions toward Byron. Still, she did like him, in fact was quite fond of him and enjoyed his company, so their relationship while travelling was a good and healthy one.

Chapter 8

Of all the many difficulties encountered by the three wayfarers – the intense saddle sores, the twisted ankles, aching muscles, thirst, hunger and constant fear of the unknown before them – two incidents merit special mention. The first occurred when the three were on horseback, crossing some fairly level terrain, when Ilsa’s horse reacted to the sound of a rattlesnake by suddenly rearing up on its hind legs and tossing Ilsa to the ground. An experienced rider would have had great difficulty remaining in the saddle given the suddenness and power of the horse’s reaction, but Ilsa had no chance whatsoever. As she lay on the ground assessing her physical condition, the snake slithered quickly toward her, striking a fang bite through her pants leg and into her calf. Byron and Karl, who had been riding ahead, raced back to see what was happening. Ilsa assured the men she was OK from the fall, but that she had been bitten by a snake, pointing to her left calf.

Neither man had any meaningful knowledge of snakes in general or rattlesnakes in particular, if indeed, that was what had bitten Ilsa. Nonetheless, Byron stepped forward, taking charge of the situation and demanding that Ilsa roll up her pants leg so that he could view the bite marks. Knowing only that deadly venom from a snake bite needed to be removed immediately and assuming that this was, in fact, a venomous snake bite they were dealing with, Byron took out his folding knife, grabbed Ilsa’s foot and rested it on his bended knee. He advised Ilsa he was going to have to make a cut in her leg, that it would surely hurt, but that there was no alternative. Karl, feeling somewhat helpless, came over and grasped his sister’s hand. Byron cut the skin between the two fang marks to create a single wound and then bent over and began to suck out of Ilsa’s leg and into his mouth a combination of blood and venom, stopping only to spit out the horrible mixture as it accumulated in his mouth. He performed this maneuver several times before declaring he had done all that could be done.

Karl and Byron moved Ilsa to a flat surface where they had laid out a blanket and watched by her side as she spent an awful night of nausea and pain. Feeding her as much water as she could handle, the men eventually breathed a sigh of relief when Ilsa fell into a fitful sleep. It would take several days for her to recover completely, but on the second day she pronounced herself a little wobbly but otherwise fit enough to continue their travels. It was clear that Byron’s swift and decisive actions had saved Ilsa’s life, something she would never forget. His performance certainly did nothing to lessen her feelings of endearment towards him.

The second notable event was of a much gentler nature; it occurred about two weeks after the snake bite incident. The trio had decided to stop for the night, having found an enticing spot – a small cave-like indenture in the side of a small cliff face. Karl had noticed a small stream running in a direction that would not cross their eastern path, but which was only a mile or so out of their way. After starting a fire just in front of the cave entrance, he headed out with a mission to fill all their canteens and the water pouch used for the horses and mule.

The fire was not needed for warmth, as the day had been hot with the promise of a warm evening. However, the group was planning to cook some rabbit meat later, plus the fire would help discourage any critters or varmints that might be otherwise interested in occupying the cave for their own comfort.

Standing alone by the fire, Byron caught Ilsa’s gaze and smiled, a hint of vulnerability breaking through his usual pretense of disinterest. “Are you alright there”? he asked, his voice a gentler-than-normal lilt that Ilsa found appealing.

When she hesitated, he took a step closer, the warmth of the fire illuminating the space between them.

The weight of their shared struggles was pressing on her chest at the moment, but she managed to whisper, “I was just thinking about how far we have come... and how uncertain everything still is.”

Byron accepted her response as an opportunity to ask some personal questions. ”Would you mind telling me a bit more about what happened back in California that sent you and your brother off on this improbable escape?”

“I’m still not keen to discuss it in detail, but I believe, having spent so much time together, relying on and trusting one another, you probably are entitled to know most of the story.”

Ilsa, then set out to describe her life under the strictest of disciplinarians and his ready resort to violence as a form of punishment for even the most petty transgressions. She concluded by giving a rather complete description of the final confrontation.

Byron was surprised and astonished to hear of all the physical abuse Ilsa and Karl had suffered throughout their childhood. “Of course, I know nothing about your father, but I cannot understand how anybody could raise their hand against you. I think there is something about your beauty, your innocence and your strength of character that would outrage a certain type of mentality. Such a person’s experience with the world is bitter and cynical and they can’t stand to have it confounded and refuted by your existence. Your simple presence is some kind of an intolerable contradiction to their view of the world which does not include grace and beauty. It pains me grievously to think of you being punished for being who you are, a lasting and lovely treasure.”

Byron then took another step, closing the distance between them; and Ilsa felt the pull of something she couldn’t identify. She could see the firelight reflecting in his eyes, but it was another kind of fire she sensed that was making the world around them seemingly begin to fade away along with the uncertainties that were a constant worry for her.

“I have never met anyone quite like you, Ilsa”, Byron confessed, his voice failing just a bit. “You are so brave; and you have a character and a spirit that shine even in these darkest of times”.

Her heart swelled at his words, and before she could think, she reached out, her fingers brushing against his arm. The moment hung in the air, heavy with unspoken feelings.

“Byron,” she breathed, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and longing.

He took her hand, his touch gentle yet firm, and pulled her closer. “May I?” he asked, searching her eyes for permission.

Ilsa nodded, her breath hitching as he leaned in. Their foreheads touched, and she could feel the warmth radiating from him. Then, in a heartbeat, he closed the distance, capturing her lips with his.

The kiss was soft and tentative at first, a mingling of hope and desperation, but then it deepened, igniting a spark that caused Ilsa to melt into him, her worries and fears forgotten as they embraced, wrapped in a moment that felt both timeless and fleeting.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless and wide-eyed, the world around them seemed to come alive again and for just a moment in that hidden cave, everything felt possible.

And then Karl returned, shouldering some harsh reality into the cave, as well as some full canteens.

That tender moment shared by Ilsa and Byron would not be repeated throughout the remainder of their trip, at least not until they returned to the civilized world, assuming you could call Abilene, Kansas, “civilized” in 1873. That is not to say they went about pretending the intimate encounter never happened. To the contrary, they openly embraced and acknowledged the moment and recognized it had changed forever their relationship. So, thereafter, should their arms brush during the course of some travel related activity, instead of pulling away in embarrassment, they would prolong the touch and smile at each other. So too, should their eyes meet in a random moment, they would not quickly look away; instead, they would extend their stares for an extra moment, this, too, with a knowing smile. Still, Ilsa clung to her commitment not to fall in love. After all, she would tell herself, I’m only 19 years, old, acknowledging the passage of her birthday a week earlier.

Chapter 9

Karl and Ilsa had, of course, previously made a Rocky Mountain crossing on their move from Chicago to California. However, they were youngsters at the time and had very little recollection of what that crossing was like. Even if they could remember that trip, it would not have prepared them for the imposing task that lay before them when they finally reached a point where those mountains could be viewed on their horizon. Going west with their father, the Erickssons crossed the Rockies on the Oregon Trail, using a fairly easy passage in southern Wyoming called, quite simply and inappropriately it would seem, the South Pass. What now loomed before them as viewed through the spyglass was something entirely different and caused the trio some anxious moments as they plotted their approach.

Up to this point in their travels, the small group had encountered almost no other human beings. However, as they approached the mountains, they began to see a bit of human traffic headed west. In some brief conversations about their mountain crossings, everyone they met revealed they had come through Raton Pass, which they described as being a bit further south than their direct east path would have led them. When they made their way to the pass, located on what would today be the border between New Mexico and Colorado, they found it was blocked by a man demanding the payment of a sizeable toll to cross. When Karl challenged the man about his authority to demand such a payment, the toll guard simply patted his holstered sidearm and nodded in the direction of two other men leaning against the side of a small hut with rifles parked next to them. (In 1866, a man named Richens Wootton had built the toll road through the pass, using Ute Indians to perform the work, but there is no clear record as to what authority he may have had to construct and operate the toll road. Toward the end of the 19th century, Wootton sold the road to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. Interestingly, the name of the pass, Raton, is Spanish for “mouse”. Presumably, that name was used because one of the adjacent mountains was heavily infested with rodents.)

Fortunately, the tired trio had enough money between them to cover the toll and they passed through to join up with the Santa Fe Trail which would lead them up and into Kansas.

Chapter 10

By 1873, John Wesley Hardin had moved on from his jobs as a cow herder and in his new role as a horse trader, he covered large segments of Texas and along various routes up to Kansas and Missouri. He was still very much a fugitive from the law and bounty hunters, so he began using assumed names and tried his best to avoid trouble, something he proved to be very poor at doing. He continued to gamble whenever he could and, while he was not a true professional at it, he was very good and managed to supplement his income quite well with his winnings. He also was drinking quite heavily during this period of his career. Those two activities – drinking and gambling – tended to bring about the very trouble that Wes hoped to avoid.

On a trip from the Texas panhandle heading to Abilene, Kansas with a string of horses he was delivering for sale, he came across a scene involving four Comanche Indians on horseback attacking a small group on foot, but with horses and a mule nearby. Hardin never traveled on the established trails in his horse trading business, not wishing to risk running into someone looking to kill him; but he stayed reasonably close to those routes so he could take advantage of the river and stream crossings herders had long ago identified. The two men and one woman under attack had obviously been travelling on the Santa Fe Trail when they were attacked by the Comanche raiding party. They had moved off the trail and were backed up against a small mound, doing their best to keep safe behind some rocks and a couple of small trees, whereas the Comanches were whooping and yelling and riding back and forth in front of the trio. From his location on a slight rise in the terrain, Hardin had a clear view of the proceedings and could see that one horse had been downed by a lance through the throat, that only one of the Indians had a firearm – a rifle no doubt taken from a Union soldier – while the other three brandished hand weapons of various kinds. Although the individuals under attack would occasionally fire upon the Indians, they did so with little success other than to delay the inevitable assault charge by the marauders.

Hardin didn’t like what he was seeing. The Comanches were most likely quite experienced at this sort of raid, preying on small parties along the Santa Fe Trail, especially ones appearing to be trail novices, which these three young people clearly were. Securing the lead rope for his horses to a large rock, Harden decided to intervene.

As he rode toward the skirmish, the Comanche with the rifle fired a shot in his direction as if to say, “this is none of your business, so go away”. But, having been fired on, Hardin then considered the matter to be very much his business. So, when he was within the range of his own rifle, he stopped, took careful aim and shot down one of the raiders who had paused momentarily to change directions. Continuing on his course to break up the raid, Hardin downed another rider, causing the other two to whip their horses and ride away.

Once he was convinced the Indians had not simply pulled back before making another assault, Hardin approached Byron and the two Ericsson siblings who were themselves taking stock of the damage done. “Are you folks all right? Where you headed?”, Hardin asked.

Karl responded, “We are fine, I think, though they killed one of our horses. So, first, we have to thank you for saving our lives. I can’t believe our luck in having you come along when you did and be willing to risk your own life for ours. We will be forever grateful. And, in answer to the second of your polite questions, my sister and I are headed to Chicago and our friend is going to Kansas City.”

“Well, you’re on the right course, though you still have quite a ways to go. Looks like you’ve been at it for a while. Where’d you come from?”

Upon learning the group had come all the way from California, Hardin said, “Wow, that’s quite a journey. You might want to think about taking a short detour by going over to Abilene. It’s off the trail, but it isn’t that far and you can maybe refresh your animals and yourselves in a town that has become quite peaceful since most of the railhead activity there has moved away. The folks who stayed on after the cattle business dried up seem to be good people who are doing a fine job of making the town a place for law-abiding people to live and prosper. If you like, I’ll get you started in the right direction, though I’ll probably move on a bit faster than you.

“Is there a bank there? ”Byron inquired.

“There is. And it’s a good one, though rather small now since the booming cattle trade moved on; but it’s owned and run by a couple of local men who are determined to make it into a fine institution. Why do you ask?” Hardin was a bit curious that the travelers’ first concern after being in the wilderness for months would be about banking rather than food and other creature comforts.

Fabricating a response he hoped would be meaningless to the stranger, Byron said, “No real reason other than I have some unfinished business in Ireland that I think a bank might be able to help me with.”

When the parties got around to introducing themselves, Hardin said his name was Wesley Clemmons, an alias he had been using for a while. He went on to say he was going out to retrieve the two horses of the downed Comanches. When he returned, he proposed that, since the trio was down one horse, they should take one of the Indian horses and he would take the other as sort of compensation for his assistance. At first, Byron objected, saying that Clemmons should take both horses; but in the end it was agreed that splitting up the horses made the most sense for all concerned.

“Just so you know,” Hardin offered, “the real prize for the Comanches was your mule. I hope you don’t take offense at me saying that, but it’s true. The Comanches know what history has taught for years: most mules are bigger, stronger and, for sure, smarter than horses. They are also sure-footed and can manage their way along the narrowest of paths and can climb up and down hills and mountains with ease, carrying huge loads. Folks talk about how stubborn they are, but that is just because they are smart and won’t do anything they think is not reasonable. So yeah, the Comanches were really after the mule, which is not to say they wouldn’t have become interested in the young lady’s blonde hair once they got close enough to get a good look at her.”

Well wishes were exchanged and Hardin went back to secure his horses and add another to the string. No one in the group believed their paths would ever cross again, even though the young wayfarers were each separately considering the suggestion that they pay a visit to Abilene.

Chapter 11

Arriving in Abilene, the first order of business was to take the animals to the livery stables for some proper attention. Next, Byron took a few of his gold nuggets into the bank located in the center of the town. The accommodating banker there told Byron he would be pleased to buy a couple of the nuggets, but that they were not equipped to handle any more than that. He suggested to Byron that, if he had much more in the way of gold ore, he should take it to Kansas City, which had two sizeable banks, either one or both of which would surely be able to accept transfer of the nuggets. He also mentioned that an experienced jeweler had a store there that might also be interested in acquiring some gold.

As Byron was making his way to the front exit, the banker called after him. “By the way – and there is no reason you should know this – earlier this year, President Grant signed into federal law a rule adopting the gold standard for all monetary matters in the country. At the same time, the law completely demonetized silver. I mention this because the value of gold is surely going to go up greatly due to the increased demand, so if you have a significant amount of the ore, you might want to make sure you get the new value. The effects of the new law haven’t reached us here just yet, but they probably have in Kansas City by now.

Byron wasn’t sure exactly what was meant by “demonetized”, but he was pretty sure it was not going to be good for silver miners and others with extensive holdings in silver. Buoyed by the news about gold and flush with enough cash in his pocket to pay for the livery charges, hotel rooms for the night, a sit-down dinner with his friends and have a fair amount left over, Byron waved, said thank you to the banker and bounced out into the street, looking for Karl and Ilsa.

Footnote for chapter 11

\*The Coinage Act of 1873, which adopted the gold standard for America and demonetized silver was signed into law by President Ulysses S. Grant on February 12, 1873. It became effective on April 1 of that year.

Chapter 12

The following day, Ilsa was in the dry goods store in Abilene looking for some clothes that might be more appropriate than the tattered and trail-worn rags she was currently wearing when she overheard a conversation between a customer and the store-keeper, probably the owner, whose name was Edward Simmons.

“You’re not going to believe this”, the customer said. “I just saw Wild Bill Hickok\* and John Wesley Hardin sitting together at the bar in the Shorthorn Saloon looking all chummy and friendly with one another.”\*\*

“Are you sure it was Hardin? And what the hell are they doing in Abilene? We fired Hickok as town marshal a couple of years ago.\*\*\* So, what’s he even doing here?” The owner was very interested to know all this. “Because if it is Hardin, I’ve got a real problem with him that I need to settle.”

“Yea. I’m sure it’s him. I heard them talking and they were laughing about the time they first met here in Abilene a couple of years ago. Hardin has been going by the name Wesley Clemmons round here lately, but Hickok clearly knew him as Hardin and said so. Apparently, Hardin is in the horse-trading business and brought some up from Texas to sell here. Hickok is just here taking care of some personal business he started when he was the marshal.”

“Well, if it is Hardin, I’m going to pay that son-of-a-bitch a visit right now,” Simmons said as he hung his apron on a nail behind a counter.

“Wait a minute, man, you’re not going to get in a fight with a gunslinger like Hardin, are you?”

“There ain’t gonna be no fight. I’m just gonna take him down the same way he killed my brother and a cousin of mine. You remember that don’t you? Hardin shot them both dead over in Oester in an argument about a gambling play. They never had a chance against that outlaw. And I ain’t gonna give him a chance either.”

Turning to Ilsa, the store-keeper said, “Ma’am, you’re gonna have to leave now. I’ve got to close the store while I go take care of some business down the street.”

Footnotes to Chapter 12

\*Most people assume that Hickok was given the name of “Wild Bill” because of his unusual character or because of the way he carried out his duties as a lawman. Actually, he gave the name to himself, simply by regularly using that handle in all his first-person references. His first name wasn’t Bill, or even William. His real name was James Butler Hickok.

\*\* Wild Bill Hickok became marshal of Abilene in April of 1871, replacing Tom Smith who had been killed serving an arrest warrant. Hardin arrived in Abilene on a cattle drive shortly after Hickok became marshal. The two first met when Hickok confronted Hardin, asking him to surrender his guns. Marshal Smith had implemented a town ordinance forbidding the carrying of guns within town limits and Hickok had continued to enforce that rule. Hardin appeared to be complying with Hickok’s request by offering his two guns, handle first, to Wild Bill. However, when Hickok reached for the weapons, Hardin spun the guns around in his hands and pointed them at Hickok’s head, thus executing a maneuver called the “road agent spin.”

After an anxious moment, Hardin grinned and holstered his guns, thus refusing to surrender them but still ending the confrontation. Hardin never used the “road agent spin” terminology; that was coined later by others to describe the maneuver Hardin had employed. In his autobiography, Hardin described the event thusly:

“He [Hickok] pulled his pistol and said, ‘take those pistols off. I arrest you.’

I said all right and pulled them out of the scabbard, but while he was reaching for them, I reversed them and whirled them over on him with the muzzles in his face, springing back at the same time. I told him to put his pistols up, which he did. I cursed him for a long-haired scoundrel that would shoot a boy with his back to him (as I had been told he intended to do to me). He said, ‘Little Arkansas [a Hardin nickname], you have been wrongly informed…. You are the gamest and quickest boy I ever saw. Let us compromise this matter and I will be your friend. Let us go in here and take a drink, as I want to talk to you and give you some advice.’ At first, I thought he was trying to get the drop on me, but he finally convinced me of his good intentions, and we went in and took a drink. We went into a private room and I had a long talk with him and we came out friends.”

\*\*\* Hickok was, in fact, fired as marshal of Abilene after less than a full year in the position. The event that finally brought about the dismissal is of interest. The Bull’s Head Saloon was owned by Phil Coe (an acquaintance of Hardin’s) and Ben Thompson. They had painted a picture of a bull with a large erect penis on the side of the saloon as an ad. When citizens complained to Hickok, he went to Coe and Thompson and asked them to remove the painting. They refused, so Hickok altered it himself, presumably by painting over or erasing the offensive part of the rendering. Infuriated, Thompson tried to recruit Hardin to kill Hickok, saying Hickok was a “damn Yankee. Picks on rebels, especially Texans, to kill.” Hardin told Thompson, “If Bill needs killing, why don’t you do it yourself?”

Eventually, Coe and Hickok had a shootout wherein Coe was killed. There are multiple and varying accounts of how the shootout happened, but one point was clear. After shooting Coe, Hickok glimpsed another man running toward him and fired two more shots, fatally wounded his own deputy, Mike Williams, who was coming to Hickok’s aid.

The accidental shooting, being but one of a series of questionable shootings and claims of misconduct during his career, appeared to have simply been the final insult to the people of Abilene.

Chapter 13

Ilsa, having recognized the name of Wesley Clemmons, was already anxious to leave the store, so she rushed out. As she was doing so, she heard Simmons tell the other customer, who was also walking out, that he had “to run home to get what I need and will be heading to the saloon as soon as I get back, in case you want to see what’s gonna happen there.”

Ilsa hurried down the street to the livery stable where Byron was having some work done for the horses. When she told him what she had overheard, Byron said, “I don’t know anything about any John Wesley Hardin, but if that’s the real name of the man who saved our lives, I’m gonna run down there to warn him about what’s coming. I’ll know for sure when I see him if it’s the same man.”

Byron rushed down to the saloon, deciding to go in the back way so he could survey the patrons and identify Clemmons without himself being noticed. Once inside, it didn’t take him long to spot the man he knew as Wesley Clemmons sitting at the end of the bar engaged in a game of dice with a large man with a big mustache and long hair. As he started to walk toward Clemmons/Hardin, he noticed another man who had entered the bar through the swinging front doors and was making his way toward Hardin as well. The man was not making a spectacle of himself by racing around tables and chairs, knocking them over as he passed, but was striding quite purposefully in the direction of Hardin, whose back was to the approaching man, now brandishing a handgun as he neared Hardin.

There were several eye-witnesses to the events which transpired next, though the various accounts differed in important aspects. Everyone agreed they heard at least two shots, but that there very well may have been three shots, virtually simultaneous, it was hard to tell. Accounts also differed as to who fired the shots. Once the shooting was over, however, the store-keeper, Simmons, lay dead, face up on the floor, with a gunshot wound to his forehead, right between the eyes.

At first it was believed that, not only had Hardin fired on the assailant, but that Wild Bill Hickok must have fired a shot as well. However, Wild Bill never drew a gun. In fact, he was unarmed, having surrendered his pistols before entering the bar in compliance with a local ordinance. The shot by Hardin was quite remarkable. He had a pistol tucked into his trousers in the front, somewhat hidden to avoid being called out for entering the bar armed. Hearing, or maybe just sensing, the onrushing would-be assassin, he had pulled the gun with his right hand, reached across his waist and, under his left arm, fired a shot toward his rear with only the quickest of glances over his shoulder to spot the assailant. That was the shot, most all agreed, that hit the store-keeper in the head, sending the gunman flailing backwards, firing his own weapon harmlessly into the ceiling.

The town marshal arrived on the scene fairly quickly, having heard the gunshots from only a short distance away. He demanded that everyone remain where they were while he assessed the situation. Eventually, he determined that none of the other patrons in the saloon were armed, so whoever fired a third shot, if there was one, must have somehow escaped undetected. Hickok explained to the marshal that his friend, Wesley Clemmons, was unfamiliar with the town ordinance forbidding the carrying of weapons. Hickok argued that, in this case, it was very fortunate for him that he had his gun, which he used only in self-defense. Hickok suggested that no charges be assessed against his friend, who reacted appropriately to his life being threatened and with no knowledge he was violating a town ordinance. Under the circumstances, the marshal agreed, having no evidence or good reason to act otherwise.

Chapter 14

At the outset of their journey east, Byron had asked Karl to buy him a pistol and ammunition during his mission back into Bodie for supplies. He hadn’t specified a particular model of weapon he wanted because he had no knowledge of sidearms and no idea what might be available and within their budget. What Karl came back with was a Colt Model 1862 pocket police weapon, a five shot, .36 caliber, revolver. Byron had fired the weapon only a few times in their travels, having little success hitting his targets, though he did once hit a wild turkey which provided several meals for the constantly starving trio. He had also fired several shots at the attacking Comanche raiding party, hitting nothing. So, when he fired the shot in the Short Horn Bar, he had hoped only to frighten the potential assassin and to warn Hardin of the onrushing assailant. It was never his intent to hit anyone; he had aimed over the heads of everyone.

Byron did not wait around to see the results of the shootings, intuitively reacting to back away and quickly exit through the rear door of the saloon before anyone raised their heads to take in the aftermath of the shootout. When Byron rejoined Ilsa at the livery stable, he was unable to give her a full and accurate account of what had happened at the bar. He told her there had been three shots fired, one of which was from his own weapon, but assured her he could not possibly have hit anything with his warning gunshot. Because of his quick exit from the scene, he could not tell Ilsa if their friend Clemmons had been killed or hurt. Nor could he report on the fate of the store-keeper.

“We need to collect Karl, get our gear together and get out of here right now. We just need to move on to Kansas City before somebody figures out I was there and starts looking for me. I know I’m not responsible for what happened back there, but I did fire a gun and the lawmen here are going to be very interested to know about that,” Byron hurriedly and excitedly blurted out to Ilsa.

They soon found Karl, who was still in the hotel where they had all spent the night, luxuriating in the comforts of sleeping indoors on real mattresses. Byron gave Karl a short version of the recent events, telling him he would fill in all the details once they were moving, which they needed to be doing immediately but without appearing to be in any rush.

Although nothing had been decided for sure, the three had discussed the idea of selling their horses and the mule in Abilene and using the money to buy train tickets to Kansas City and Chicago, respectively. Events at the Shorthorn Saloon dictated other travel arrangements. They soon found themselves on horseback again on a trail leading to Kansas City.

Chapter 15

In 1873, ballistics science was not sufficiently advanced to determine definitively what specific gun had fired a recovered slug. However, basic characteristics, such as the caliber of the weapon could be identified from the slug. Detailed microscopic markings left on the bullet by a gun’s barrel, which are crucial for individual identification, were not yet understood or even examined in those days. So, in the case of the shooting in the Shorthorn Saloon, the bullet ultimately retrieved from the skull of the victim, Edward Simmons, was determined to have been fired from a .36 caliber weapon, or possibly, a .38 caliber pistol. Since John Wesley Hardin’s gun – the one he was carrying at the time of the shooting and which had been discharged in the altercation -- was a .44 caliber Colt revolver\*, it was clear he had not delivered the fatal shot.

This new information became relevant when the citizens of Abilene began to pressure the marshal to charge Hardin, a notorious outlaw, for the death of Simmons, a highly respected member of the Abilene community who had owned and operated the dry goods store there for many years. It also became relevant information to Hardin because, just before the shooting began in the saloon, he had noticed, momentarily, a young man walking into the bar from the rear. He had never tried to identify the man in his mind, since his presence was irrelevant to the ensuing events. But, realizing that someone else had fired the fatal shot at Simmons, Hardin began searching his memory, trying to place the face of the man coming through the back door of the saloon. Eventually, it came to him; the young man was one of the somewhat helpless trio he had rescued out on the trail during a Comanche raid. Interesting, he thought.

On the other hand, Byron never learned of the ballistics report, although he did discover, much later, that the storekeeper had been killed in the shootout and that Hardin had been unhurt. Interesting, he thought.

Footnote to Chapter 15

In that very same year, 1873, Colt would introduce its .45 caliber revolver, boastfully named the “Peacemaker”, which later gained the designation of “the gun that tamed the West.” At the time of the shooting in the Shorthorn Saloon, John Wesley Hardin was carrying the predecessor weapon to the Peacemaker, a Colt .44 caliber revolver. It would take some time before mass shipments from Colt’s manufacturing plant in Hartford, Connecticut, would reach towns like Abilene and Dodge City in Kansas and Tombstone in Arizona, but Hardin would be one of the first to own the then state-of-the-art weapon. Perhaps, “state-of-the-arms” would be more accurate phraseology.

Chapter 16

Once in Kansas City, Byron was able to dispose of a large portion of his gold nuggets, roughly half of what remained, at one of the banks there, receiving a significantly higher price than the Abilene bank had paid. The Ericlssons decided to sell their horses before moving on by train to Chicago, but Byron opted to hold onto his horse, at least for a while, and also asked if he could keep the mule as well, offering to pay the Erickssons for their interest in the animal. Ilsa and Karl would have nothing to do with his offer of payment, declaring the mule as Byron’s property from the outset.

Eventually, Byron and Ilsa had a few moments alone.

Ilsa started the conversation. “So, BB what’s next for you? Going back to Ireland? (BB was a moniker Ilsa had adopted for Byron somewhere along the way, not so much because she liked the nickname, but because she just didn’t like calling him Byron, a name she considered too regal and uppity-sounding for a scrubby Irish lad traveling through the untamed west on horseback, trailing a balky mule.)

Although the questions were posed in an off-hand and somewhat jocular manner, Byron’s response was quite serious. “You must know I would gladly go with you to Chicago if I thought there was a chance we could have a life there together because I really feel we belong together. I’m definitely not going back to Ireland, at least not any time soon, so what I would really like is for you to stay here with me. With the money I now have, we could buy some property and start a ranching operation – or some other business that would suit us – one that we could run together. We don’t have to get married or make any kind of commitments to one another until we have had some time together in a normal world. At least I would hope you would stay here for a while so that we can make decisions after time to deliberate. I hate having to decide right now what is to become of us for all time.”

Ilsa responded, now using a serious tone as well, “I love the time we have shared – not the trials and hardships, of course – but just having you as a friend and companion is something I will remember and cherish all my life. You have impacted my life and my outlook in so many positive ways I can’t even begin to explain or understand. And I agree with you that we could have a good life together. But, what you must understand is that I have my personal dreams to pursue, dreams I have to chase on my own.

“I know there is a university near Chicago that admits women and I have every intention of starting there as the beginning of whatever I can make of the rest of my life. I was ready to start my university education in California, but that became impossible; so, I’m going to start it as soon as I know it’s safe for me to do so. Please don’t make me feel sorrowful about my decision. My feelings for you are dear ones and I truly want to always remember you so. I don’t want to make any promises to meet you in a year or two to decide whether we made the right choices or not; and I don’t want you to make any such promise either. No promises, OK?”

Ilsa and Byron did not meet again for six years, nor did they correspond during that time. Through Karl, the two managed to keep somewhat up to date on the activities of the other, but they were each busy pursuing their respective careers. So, despite their apparent compatibility and fond feelings for one another, each believed that their decision to lead separate lives was final and complete. There was no impetus at work to bring them back together.

Chapter 17

Ilsa’s application for admission to Northwestern University was accepted, but because the school term had already started, her enrollment was scheduled to commence in the fall of 1874. At the time of her application, an alternative course of study was available for female applicants, but was of absolutely no interest to Ilsa, if for no other reason than the name of the institution and what that name implied – The Evanston College for Ladies. Northwestern University first began admitting female students on the same basis as males in 1869, making it one of the first co-educational universities in America. Interestingly, the Evanston College for Ladies was eventually merged into Northwestern University in 1874.

Ilsa never made it to college. During the time she waited for entrance in 1874, she was able to land a job with the Chicago Tribune, a newspaper growing rapidly in size and reputation, partly for its extensive coverage of the Civil War, but moreso for the quality of its reporting and production. When the fall term came around, Ilsa was very much wrapped up in her learning of, and training for, the newspaper business. She did not want to interrupt that process and so stayed on at the Tribune, intending to do so for just one year, but actually remaining there for many years to come. She eventually became a reporter and then an editor.

Karl also gained admission to Northwestern University, where he completed two additional years of study, graduating with a degree in liberal arts. His first job was with the Chicago Board of Trade, where his liberal arts degree provided absolutely no help, other than to get him the interview which led to his hiring at a level just above that of building custodian. With his intelligence and industrious nature, Karl worked his way up the non-professional hierarchy fairly quickly. It took a little longer, but he eventually moved into the role of trader, working primarily with farm products.

His sister, with whom he always kept in close contact, introduced Karl to a girl friend; they quickly fell in love and set a date to be married after a short courtship. Byron was invited to the wedding and determined to attend even though he was deeply involved at the time with a potential crop disaster threatening much of the Midwest. He convinced himself that his reason for going was to display his respect and love for a dear friend with whom he had shared countless days of hardship. The opportunity to see Ilsa again – who would surely be in attendance – was simply an added benefit.

Karl and Byron had been able to keep in touch with each other over the years, sometimes in a business context relating to farm production and other times when it just suited them to get together; and when they did meet, they invariably began their conversation discussing their times crossing the untamed Southwest on the way to Kansas City. All three of the survivors of that difficult journey had begun referring to it as “The Bodie Run,” so when Byron and Karl met, their normal greeting, whether times were good or bad, went something like this:  
Byron: “So how are things with you?”  
Karl: “Well, they’re pretty bad right now.”  
Byron: “As bad as the Bodie Run?”  
Karl: “Naw, man. Not that bad.”

After parting ways with the Ericksson siblings, Byron decided to remain in Kansas City for a while to ponder his plans for the future. He ultimately decided not to return to Ireland; instead, he purchased two contiguous 160-acre plots of land in Kansas and undertook to engage in the cattle ranching business. He later started to do a bit of farming and soon thereafter decided to give up the cattle business altogether and devote his efforts toward farming, which he considered to be a more positive and meaningful vocation.

Chapter 18

Karl’s wedding was a small, civil affair, attended by the parents and a few friends of the bride, a couple of Karl’s associates from work and Ilsa. Byron arrived late and was clearly an outsider, so he remained near the back during the proceedings and did not speak to Karl or Ilsa until the reception. The greeting from Karl was warm and genuine, although the two did not engage in their usual routine referencing the Bodie Run. Karl could not wait to introduce Byron to his bride.

When Byron finally turned to greet Ilsa, he did so timorously and with uncertainty, even though he had rehearsed this very moment many times in his head. He needn’t have practiced so much, because everything he had planned to do and say was forgotten when he faced her, absorbing her huge smile and overall inviting countenance. He simply reacted, grabbing her arms and pulling her into a bear-like hug, following which they each backed away a little and, still holding each other at arm’s length, stared into the other’s eyes for a long while. Then they broke into an easy, knowing laughter. Another hug quickly followed, but this time it was more of an embrace, one they held for a much longer time than propriety might have suggested. Still, no words had been exchanged between them.

It was Karl who pulled on his sister’s shoulders and said, “Come on you two. Break it up. The new Mrs. Ericksson and I are headed to the train station soon. Why don’t you guys come along and see us off on our honeymoon trip?”

“No, no, no,” Ilsa interjected. BB and I have a lot to talk about and we don’t won’t you interfering. And we don’t want to interfere with you two lovers’ first moments together as husband and wife. So, go.”

Ilsa and Byron did finally talk – for hours -- in the tiny kitchen area of Karl’s new home which he had purchased recently and had offered up to Byron as a place to stay while in Chicago. At last, in the early morning hours, Ilsa stood up as if to leave, so Byron quickly shoved back his chair and rose as well. But Ilsa was not leaving. Instead, she reached out, felt for Byron’s hand and drew him close. The kiss that ensued was soft, but strong and deep, reminiscent of the kiss they had shared years ago. This time, however, there was no one around to thrust them back into reality – at least for now. Slowly, tenderly, they began the process of un-buttoning, un-clasping, unlacing and untieing, which left them toe-to-toe with only inches separating them. And then they became as one as they consummated their mutual desires on a very small bed, which might just as well have been a bed of needles because all their senses were directed toward each other.

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The soft glow of the morning sun peeked through the sheer curtains, filling Karl’s bedroom with a warm, golden light. Ilsa lay there, tangled in the sheets, her heart racing as the memories of the night played out in her mind. Laughter, shared glances, and the intoxicating warmth of Byron’s embrace -- everything felt both familiar and foreign after all those years apart.

She turned to her side and saw him, still asleep, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. A pang of nostalgia hit her hard, reminding her of the endless days and nights they had spent together when all their energies had been directed toward the same goal – survival. Byron looked peaceful, a boyish charm still evident despite the few lines that had formed around his eyes. Unable to resist, Ilsa reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead. The tender gesture stirred him, and he slowly opened his eyes, blinking against the morning light. A sleepy smile spread across his face, and her heart fluttered at the sight. “Good morning,” he murmured, his voice a low, raspy melody that delivered stirrings throughout her body.

“Good morning,” Ilsa replied, her voice soft and hesitant. She felt a whirlwind of emotions—happiness, confusion, and an undeniable ache that came with the realization of what they had shared – but would not share again.

Byron propped himself up on one elbow, mirroring her position. “Last night... it felt as if we just picked up where we left off. Like no time has passed and nothing has changed.” He reached out, his fingers gently brushing against hers, transmitting to her a spark of joy.

“But we have changed,” Ilsa said softly, pulling her hand away, the warmth of his touch lingering on her skin. “Last night when we talked, you spoke of how you would be able to acquire a piece of land that would join up two other pieces you owned, creating opportunities for increased efficiency in your farm production. I sensed, from the way you told it, that you were passionate about your work and that you felt it was important. And it is important; you and others like you are feeding our country. It doesn’t get much more important or basic than that. Believe me, I have nothing but total respect and admiration for what you are doing. At the same time, because we have talked about this before, I think you realize I am also passionate about what I’m doing and what I hope to accomplish. Right now, I want to keep learning everything I can about the newspaper business. But, someday, I want to own and operate my own paper, knowing full well there will be barriers to overcome simply because I am a woman. Nonetheless, I am determined to do it. It will be tough, but,” and she had to grin as she continued, “I hope not as tough as the Bodie Run.”

Ilsa paused for a moment, took a deep breath and tried to continue. “What happened last night….”

“Doesn’t have to mean anything if you don’t want it to,” Byron interrupted, a hint of sadness in his eyes. “But I can’t pretend I didn’t feel something enduring.”

Silence enveloped them for a moment, both lost in thought, grappling with the realities that awaited them. Finally, Ilsa broke the stillness, her voice trembling. “We have to go back to our lives, don’t we?”

Byron nodded slowly, his expression pained. “Yeah, we do. But... I don’t think I can just walk away from this. From you. And pretend it never happened.”  
  
 Choosing not to respond, Ilsa instead glanced at Byron’s pocket watch on the nightstand. The cover was closed, so she could not actually determine the hour, but the reality of time came crashing back into her consciousness. “We should probably get moving,” she said reluctantly, forcing herself to sit up and swing her legs over the side of the bed.

Byron sighed, running a hand through his tasseled hair. He sat up beside her, the distance between them feeling suddenly monumental as they prepared to face their separate worlds.

Chapter 19

When Ilsa felt she had achieved everything she wanted at the Tribune, she decided to start her own newspaper in a small town in eastern Wisconsin – not the town where she was born, but not far from it. When that venture proved successful, she started an additional newspaper in another small town and continued repeating that process until she owned and was operating 15 newspapers in small towns all across Wisconsin.

Ilsa never married, though she had several other men in her life, two of which resulted in serious relationships. However, on each occasion, there came a point when she was called upon to make a choice between her career and a form of commitment that was inconsistent with the furtherance of her work and the pursuit of her dreams. She simply could not submit to that kind of restriction, with the result being the end of the relationship.

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On the rare occasions when Ilsa took the time to ruminate about how her life might have unfolded had she made different decisions, those reflections always began with her re-living the kiss with Byron in a small cave in the middle of nowhere, and her resolution afterwards that it should have no long-term meaning in her life. Such reminiscences always ended with thoughts of her night with Byron following Karl’s wedding. None of those memories ever turned into regret for her; she simply would try to imagine how different her life would have been. And it would not have been bad, she decided, probably even very good; it just would not be the wonderful life she was actually experiencing.

Chapter 20

Over time, Byron’s farm acreage grew substantially and he became one of the largest producers of wheat and other grains in the state. Returning to his farm in Kansas following the meeting with Ilsa in Chicago, Byron spent several, mostly lonely, years of work to develop and grow his farming business. He eventually met and married a bright young high school teacher who resembled Ilsa not at all. They had two children, a boy and a girl, and carved out a lovely family life for themselves on their farm in central Kansas.

Chapter 21

John Wesley Hardin eventually served six years in prison for one of his shootings. He was not captured; he turned himself in to a local sheriff he had come to trust. Actually, Hardin had tried to turn himself in to the law on two prior occasions. On one such attempt, he discovered that the two lawmen who were supposedly escorting him to a local jail, intended instead to find a remote location and shoot and kill him for the reward and the fame such would bring. Although tied to his saddle horn, Hardin managed to escape from the lawmen, basically by out-riding them. On the other occasion when Hardin turned himself in to the law, a hanging mob formed, demanding the sheriff turn over Hardin to them. Instead, the sheriff allowed Hardin out the back of the jail, where he hopped on a nearby horse and made his escape.

During his time in prison, Hardin studied law and, upon his release, passed the Texas bar exam and spent the remainder of his life practicing law in Texas. In August of 1895, at the age of 42, he was shot in the back of the head in a bar in El Paso, Texas, by a relative of a legal client of Hardin’s. Apparently, the assassin was disgruntled over the handling of a case by Hardin.

After his release from prison, Hardin wrote an autobiography which is still available through the University of Oklahoma Press. When the manuscript was first presented for publication, there was deep skepticism about its authenticity, the general belief being that an outlaw like Hardin could not possibly have written such a product. After quite a bit of research, including a comparison of the manuscript with a large number of letters Hardin had written to his wife while imprisoned, the manuscript’s authenticity was firmly verified.

At some point, Karl Ericksson learned of the incarceration of Hardin and shared the information with Byron and Ilsa. He then drafted a letter, briefly describing the events regarding the attack on the three of them by killer bandit Indians while they were travelling together. He showed the letter to Byron and Ilsa, secured their signatures and forwarded the signed document to Hardin, in prison in Huntsville, Texas, suggesting to Hardin that he use such letter in any way he felt appropriate or helpful. The letter said:

“TO WHOMSOEVER’S ATTENTION THIS MAY COME:

We write this letter not to vouch for the character of John Wesley Hardin because we don’t know him well enough to make an objective assessment on that point one way or the other. However, we were first-hand witnesses to an event which we think might provide some helpful illumination for those attempting to judge his ethical disposition.

The three of us, the undersigned, were set upon by a band of marauding Comanche Indians while traveling on the Santa Fe Trail in 1873. Mr. Hardin happened upon the scene and took up our defense, successfully driving away the would-be killers, thereby saving our lives. Mr. Hardin thus risked his own life by interjecting himself into a fight, not his own, because he believed it was the right thing to do under the circumstances. He never asked for, or received, any benefit for his valiant effort; in fact, rather than retaining an Indian horse that had been rendered riderless due to his efforts, he surrendered it to us as a replacement for one of our own that had been slain by the attackers.

We owe our lives to Mr. Hardin. We believe his actions on our behalf were evidence of high moral rectitude on his part. We feel this information should be made available to anyone attempting to render a judgment with regard to his personal character.”

Whether or not the letter ever made its way to anyone in the governor’s office is unknown. What is known is that Texas Governor, James Hogg, eventually granted a full pardon for John Wesley Hardin.

Chapter 22

Surprisingly, the cedar chest Thomas Brennan had built for his mother finally arrived in Dublin. The shipping crate was pretty battered, but the chest was in fairly good shape. Mrs. Brennan had been expecting it, because at the time Byron had shipped it, he had also posted a letter to his mum advising of Thomas’ death, with a postscript explaining the possible arrival of the hand-crafted chest. As expected, the letter arrived well ahead of the chest.

On first inspection, Mrs. Brennan was impressed with the construction of her gift. However, when she opened the chest, she was dismayed to see that the inside had been lined with some sheer wood she didn’t recognize. She was truly disappointed that Thomas would be idiotic enough to line the inside of a cedar chest, surely knowing that the whole purpose of a cedar chest was to allow the natural oils produced by cedar to give off its resinous, camphor-like, scent that moths and other harmful insects don’t like. Why in the world, she thought, would Thomas do such a foolish thing.

But then she gave the matter further thought; Thomas was neither an idiot nor was he foolish. Thomas would have known his mother would have nothing to do with a cedar chest with interior lining. She then began to rip the lining out of the chest, exposing a huge trove of gold nuggets that had been carefully wrapped and tightly packed inside the lining.

THE END