



I.

*Kate*

*Labette County, Kansas, 1871*

When we departed the train on that January morning, all I could see was a bleak sky stretching out in every direction. It was freezing cold with not so much as a draft in the air. Dust coated everything around us, making it seem lifeless and dull.

This was a cursed land for sure.

In the bustle at the train station, I saw men with hard faces, baked and set by a scorching sun that had now sadly departed for the winter season; several of them chewed tobacco and wore wide-brimmed hats caked with dust. They were bowlegged from riding and filthy from the barn; their eyes reminded me of specks of glass set upon the skin of wrinkled old fruits. The women, too, looked haggard, all wrapped up like little presents in dresses of calico, their faces swallowed by voluptuous bonnets whose strings trailed under their chins like wattles. Children's hands were clutching at their skirts; the toddlers' faces were stained with grime and snot and their eyes were soft with pleading. The station smelled strongly of horseshit and smoke. A few scrawny stray dogs sniffed along the rails.

Of course, there was no one there to help us with the trunk. We had to carry it between us through the throng. Both Ma and I were huffing and puffing. Not one single gentleman stepped in to lighten our load. I looked around for a boy eager for a coin or someone from the railway company but could not see any

of them either. There were only those weatherworn men, chewing their tobacco, their eyes as dead and docile as those of cows. Perhaps they spent more time with such creatures than their fellow men and had taken on some of their traits. I knew longhorns from Texas were shipped north from Kansas, so that was certainly something to look forward to as well: stray wild beasts and the occasional stampede – as if the prospect of the wolves and coyotes roaming the prairie was not horrible enough.

It *was* a cursed land, and no one could convince me otherwise, least of all Ma, whose judgement was entirely in question at this point.

We were both close to exhaustion by the time we had escaped the crowd and entered calmer seas. The hem of my new dress was caked with dust, and underneath the fabric I was drenched in perspiration despite the cold. I wondered when I would have the opportunity to bathe again. How could Ma ever believe that this would be our salvation?

I had been opposed to Kansas from the start, but Ma had been adamant. It was better, she said, to lie low for a while, and what better place to disappear than out on the prairie? The landscape was vast and empty, with only lonesome travellers passing through. We could keep to ourselves there, she said, as if that were a glorious, miraculous thing. Keep to ourselves until all was forgotten, and then we could emerge again, as new and fresh as lambs in spring.

She did not seem to grasp the implications: I could hardly fulfill my aspirations in hiding. The foolish plan that she and her husband had cooked up did nothing but slow me down, and I was not thrilled about it. But then, she always knew how to have her way, holding guilt above my head like a sharpened blade. It did not much matter that I was a woman grown, twenty years last spring. She would hold me enthralled until my

debt was settled, and should I fail to satisfy, she would surely feed me to the wolves.

Finally, we caught sight of them. Pa and John had opted to stay with the wagon rather than come to our aid. Not even when they saw us come around the station building with our heavy load did they move into action, but remained there, watching. William, in his black hat, leaned against the weather-beaten side of the vehicle, while John sat at the reins. His shoulders were hunched and his head bowed. A stupid little smile played on his lips. His straw hat was new and made him look like a fruit farmer.

Neither of them smiled or even greeted us properly. There were no signs of relief on their drab features. Nor did Ma express any gratitude for the reunion, but set the trunk down and scurried at once to get up on the wagon's dusty deck. A few barrels were there, and some rope, but nothing but some burlap to sit on, which had me fretting for the dress again. It was a pretty thing of silk, striped in a lovely raspberry hue and a deep, clear blue.

William had noticed my new attire. 'You're on the prairie now, Kate,' he said as he helped Ma onto the wagon. 'Nothing will do but some plain calico.'

'She dresses like those whores she befriended,' Ma said, huffing as she sank down on a sack of potatoes. 'It's all so shiny on the outside with them, while on the inside there's nothing but rot.'

I rolled my eyes at her silly statement – we were hardly ones to pass judgement – and then I climbed onto the wagon as well, needing no help, though my skirt snagged on splinters in the rough wood. I winced when I felt it happening, but I would not show it.

I was not about to prove William right.

Our journey thus far had been long and trying, and the rest

of it promised to be just as bad. Ma and I had suffered hours upon hours in a cramped, hot train carriage, surrounded by gaunt and tired faces. The air had reeked of smoke, sweat and a hint of manure, and not even the sweetness of the apples Ma had brought for us had been able to chase the foul taste of defeat from my mouth.

‘Stop sulking, Kate,’ Ma had said when I put my fruit away. ‘You’ll feel better once we are settled in our new home.’

‘I know what to expect,’ I replied, speaking in German like her. ‘More *toil*; that is what.’ I refused to be anything but honest. ‘More delays and regret –’

‘Well, we would not be in this predicament if it hadn’t been for you.’ She spoke in a cool and even voice, even as her gaze wandered restlessly around us, taking in every face. She meant to shame me by saying such things, but it never worked.

‘I had nothing to do with *them*,’ I said, thinking of the Vandles, of course. ‘My *God*, woman, I was outside in the wagon with you!’

‘Oh, be quiet, Kate,’ she snapped at me. She huffed and sat back in her seat, holding the basket of fruit and beer close to her chest. Her travelling hat was a tattered thing: old when bought and rarely used. The brown ribbon at the pull was unravelling, as the silken butterfly pinned there had lost a wing. ‘If it hadn’t been for you, we would never have met them in the first place.’

I could hardly argue with that, and neither did I care to. Instead, I leaned back on the tattered seat and continued devouring my apple, wrinkled and winter sweet, tasting faintly of the barrel.

‘What is it you used to say?’ I asked after a while. ‘*We take care of our own, and the rest can fend for themselves.*’ I did my best impression of her, making my voice sound sharp and shrill. ‘I honestly don’t see why you’re so concerned with what happened to the Vandles.’

Ma sighed. 'No, you wouldn't, would you? It's all so easy to you.'

It was my turn to sigh. 'You're hardly blameless, Ma.'

'I know,' she replied and sent me a cold look. 'I raised *you*, for one, which has surely bought me a ticket to hell.'

The train had continued at a steady pace, swallowing the miles to Ottawa, where Pa and John were waiting for our arrival. From time to time, the whistle burst out hoarse signals, and sooty clouds of smoke passed by the windows. No one in our carriage seemed inclined to talk much. It was not first class, so they were a ragtag bunch. I saw a couple of young boys in similar hats and coats, who looked about them fearfully, and so were most likely travelling alone. There were pale-faced men with well-trimmed moustaches, vests and pocket watches, whose financial strains still showed in the worn patches of fabric in their clothing. Their ink-stained fingers made them out as clerks. A few farmers were there as well, in sturdy but unfashionable wear; their wives, too, in colourful calico dresses and unbecoming bonnets. There was also a reverend, all dressed in black.

The carriage was built to be impressive, with green velvet upholstery and dark wood, but it had all become tired and old. Brown spittle and pieces of food marred the carpeted aisle, and someone had spilled beer there, too, leaving a sticky puddle.

I sighed deeply when I noticed how Ma, once again, squinted at the passengers with suspicion written all over her features, raising a few eyebrows among our fellow travellers.

'Stop looking around,' I scolded her. 'The law is *not* on our heels, Ma. They have no idea where we went. Besides, I've sewn the holy letters into my dress like you said.' I did not feel ashamed to lie.

'You have not.' She spoke tersely and rolled her eyes. 'You're a terrible seamstress.'

'Nevertheless, I *did*,' I insisted, if only to ease her nerves.

'As if you'd ever take a needle to that dress you're so proud of.' She snorted and did not even look at me; her gaze travelled from the boys to the reverend and, finally, to a tired clerk.

She did have a point, however. I had bartered the dress from a prostitute in Louisville in exchange for a cure to restore lost love, and it was at present the prettiest thing I owned.

Not for long, though. I would make sure of that. To hell with lying low! No one looked too closely if only you put on a confident facade. Ma could fret all she wanted, but I still meant to have my due: the stage and the acclaim that came with it.

It was what I was meant to do.

*Elvira*

The house the men had built was an ugly thing, erected in haste; nothing more than a wooden structure. There were windows – more than one – but that was the only good thing about it.

Inside, the single room had a stove to the left and an assembly of table and chairs in the middle. There was a brass bed, too, further inside, next to a counter with cupboards for storing. The place was cold, though, and the floor covered in dust. It was not what I had been hoping for when they picked us up at the train station. I had been hoping for a hot stove and a meal – had foolishly been hoping for something other than disappointment.

William was mightily proud of his handiwork, though, overly so, if I was to be the judge. He kept showing us the abode's various features like a tawdry magician trying to dazzle a crowd. I, however, had never been fooled by tricks that relied on diverting attention and was offended that my husband thought me so gullible. All while he was showing off, I bit my tongue and curbed my anger, though I knew I would not be able to keep it inside for long. William had clearly betrayed me.

Kate must have seen it on my face, as she looked at me and chuckled while rolling her pretty eyes. 'Won't this be a lovely home, Ma,' she teased. 'Just as good as the one we left behind –'

'Oh, quiet, Kate, please,' I snapped. I had enough concerns without her gloating. We would not have been in Kansas in the



first place if it had not been for her, and she'd better remember that fact. Kate, though, only laughed at my anger.

My stepson, John, made up the rear of our little group. He, for one, looked stung by her words. He had probably put both sweat and blood into the house's erection, and maybe a little bit of tears as well.

'Here's the cellar for storage.' William lifted the trapdoor in the floor by a leather strap with such flair that one might think he was revealing God's eighth wonder. 'And look, here's a back door. It will be very useful when we have vegetables growing out there, and to empty out the night pot.' He spoke of the barn, too, which was at the time little more than scaffolding. 'We were thinking it should be able to hold at least six horses,' he said.

'We only have the two,' I remarked in a very curt voice.

'Oh, maybe we'll get more,' he said in a puzzling way that made me believe that he was holding something back. I looked around me again, at the plain walls, and the Osage Trail, which snaked by right outside the window. It was impossible to think that William had not been aware that he was making a terrible mistake.

'It is *very* close to the road.' I gave him a pointed look. 'How are we supposed to hide when we are dwelling in plain view? Were there no other claims to be had?' I did not even mention how it was situated disturbingly close to the town of Cherryvale.

William's face paled a little beneath the froth of grey beard. His gaze landed on the floor and stayed there as he stood before me like an abashed schoolboy. 'I've been thinking we should take in travellers.' He all but stumbled on his words, so eager was he to get them off his chest. 'Nothing fancy! We could just offer them a meal and a safe place to sleep indoors. It seems stupid not to, with the road running so close by.' When he finally lifted his gaze and saw my expression, he hastened to add, 'They

will be stopping here anyway, asking for directions. It seems foolish not to make some money off it – and your stew is so good that it would be a shame not to share it with others –’

‘You foolish, foolish man!’ I bellowed. ‘How is that to *lie low*? You planned this from the start, didn’t you? That is why you built so close to the road! You have fooled me, William!’ Spittle flew from my lips and landed on his hands, which he held up as if in surrender.

‘Elvira! Please, listen to me – *no one* will look for us here! They wouldn’t even recognize us if they did! I have grown out my beard and John has a new moustache, and we go by the name of Bender now!’

‘Oh, you and your *greed*!’ I cried, more angry than I remembered being in a while. ‘It will be the undoing of us all! We came here to hide, not to line our pockets, but you always were a weak man! So very, very weak!’

‘No, no, Elvira, no.’ He still held his hands in the air. ‘There could be a good living in this! Mr Brockman at the trading station asked if I’d take some of his stock on commission. We could build a store counter over here.’ He gestured to one side of the room, next to the iron stove. ‘We could put up shelving on the wall, and we would never run out of coffee,’ he said, feebly trying for a joke.

I would not have it, though. ‘It’s not what we agreed on, William!’ My breathing had become laboured. ‘Why would we invite strangers into our home? It is a foolish plan! Stews and groceries . . .’ I shook my head. ‘I think you must have lost your mind! Have you forgotten what we’re running from?’

‘No!’ He looked much like a dancer as he stood there, wriggling his hands in the air. ‘Don’t you see that we are different people now? The past is all forgotten, Elvira! This is a new life for us – a *prosperous* one!’

‘The past doesn’t go away just because you want it to!’ I juttled

an angry finger in the air, sliced it between us like a blade. 'There is no "new beginning" for us – not yet! We have to hide and keep our heads down. *That* is what we agreed on . . . It's what we said before you left. Why did you change your mind all of a sudden?'

'He finds it tiresome to farm.' Kate's voice sounded slow and lazy. 'He does not much care to break the ground.'

'No!' he cried, trying to defend himself, but it was far too late by then. My faith in him had vanished. I grabbed the nearest chair by the back and swung it hard and fast. It made impact atop William's thighs. He bellowed. I screamed and swung the chair again. It felt so good – so glorious – to let my anger out in that way. To hurt him just like he had hurt me. To punish him for fooling me. The next blow hit his back as he fled. Then the chair went high, high up in the air, before coming crashing down again, hitting his back once more.

I could have kept at it all day.

'You are mad, woman! Mad!' William bellowed before slipping out the front door with John in tow. Gnashing my teeth, I saw him leave, and then I dropped the chair to the floor. My breathing came fast and shallow. Tears burned in my eyes. Kate silently picked up the chair at my feet, dusted it off and placed it at the table.

'It doesn't seem to be broken.' She tested its mettle by sitting down and moving around a little on the seat.

'A roadside inn?' I groaned, still standing. 'It'll be our very undoing!' I shuffled to the table, suddenly feeling both worn and weary. 'I suppose *you* are pleased, though. You won't be rotting in hiding after all.' I slumped down in an empty chair.

'I don't think we are very well suited for hiding,' my daughter mused with her elbows planted on the table. She looked, if anything, calmly amused. 'You know I won't thrive here, Ma. How could I? *None of us* will get what we want if you

insist on keeping me out of view.’ Her mouth twisted up with annoyance.

I gave her a dark look across the table. ‘We have been over this how many times, Kate? None of us *would have been here* if it hadn’t been for you – all I try to do is protect your precious neck, and all you ever give me in return is this endless *disdain*.’ I spoke fast and angry and concluded with a sigh.

‘You could have left me behind in Louisville, Ma, but you didn’t, and the only reason why is because you want to settle scores. You *know* I’m the only one who can give you back what you lost. William will never be able to.’ She sent the closed door a cold smirk. ‘You mean to hold me captive by your side until I pay up, and that has nothing to do with *protecting* me.’

I did not reply at first. I did not want to go there again. We had done little more than argue ever since the men left us in order to purchase the claim, and nothing good had come of it. She distrusted me as I distrusted her, and the Vandles were just as dead.

She was not entirely wrong, though.

‘You know how you are, Kate,’ I said at last. ‘It is not your fault – merely a quirk of nature; a lick of the devil, perhaps –’

‘Say *you*?’ Kate laughed. Her pretty face lit up with mirth. ‘You just chased your husband out the door with a *chair*!’ She pointed a long, straight finger in said door’s direction. ‘Maybe it’s not *I* who’s touched by the devil.’

‘Well,’ I said, straightening up on the seat. ‘It’s not *my* hands that are red.’

Kate pursed her lips and tossed her head. ‘I won’t regret what I did, Ma, no matter what you say.’

‘Be as that might.’ I shrugged. ‘But the truth of it is that you would’ve hanged if we hadn’t fled, and I assure you this piss-poor piece of land is better than the noose by far.’

She pretended not to hear me. ‘Pa seems to have had a

change of heart and won't hide at all. Why else would he build so close to the road?' Her chin tilted upwards in a challenging manner.

'Well, Pa is a fool,' said I. 'He always will be, too. You, of all, know very well how easily he's blinded by dreams of prosperity –'

'It was an *accident*, Ma,' she snapped, 'with the Vandles.'

I did not reply. We both knew well that it was a lie.

William came slinking back before nightfall, like a dog with its tail between its legs. John, too, came shuffling in from the unfinished barn. The young man wore his guilt upon his face and kept his gaze glued to the ground. He knew they had done wrong. I did not blame him, though. He would be hard-pressed to oppose his pa.

'I should like to have my back tended to,' William complained as he sat down at the table. Kate and I had spent the rest of the day making the hovel habitable and had fried up some eggs and made hot, sweet tea. The men both relished the meal.

Kate had retired to the bed, where she lay upon the blankets, reading one of her spiritualist pamphlets. Next to her lay her best friend, the whisky bottle, a quarter empty already. She was as shameless with the liquor as with everything else, and I shuddered just to see it.

I shoved more food onto the men's empty plates. 'Do you think you *deserve* treatment for your back?' I asked William.

'You cannot be angry forever, Elvira,' he mewled. 'The house is built – it's done.'

'It was not what we agreed on,' I muttered.

'No,' he admitted with a sly look on his face, 'but it's what you got.'

'I should give you a taste of the frying pan next.' I was so angry inside that I shook.

'No one will look for us,' he said, though he had been nervous enough himself before they left. It had to be the prairie getting to him, the endless plains and the vast blue sky. It gave him a false sense of freedom.

'You betrayed me, William.' I stated the fact.

'No.' He shook his head. 'I'm merely saving you from wasting your time on useless worries. We have left Pennsylvania behind, and Indiana, too. This time it'll be different – you'll see.' He scooped some eggs onto his fork.

I glanced at my daughter upon the bed, eagerly turning the page. 'You cannot outrun the devil, William.'

The best you could hope for was to make her pay.



*Hanson*

I remember well when the Benders first arrived in their misshapen wagon, rattling and swaying up the road to the trading station. It was a fine day in late autumn, and I sat outside, busy with cleaning Mr Brockman's rifle. Mr Ern and Mr Brockman were inside just then, but when they heard the rattle of the wagon, they both stepped outside, eager for business.

Mr Brockman had grown a fine, dark moustache that year, which he often fondled and twisted between his fingers when eager to make an impression. He did that then, while standing outside the door and appraising the newcomers. He wore a leather vest over his shirt, and his trousers were only a little dusty, which surely was a feat on the prairie. Mr Ern looked old beside him, though the two of them were of the same age. His curly beard had some grey in it, and where Mr Brockman had a ruddy complexion and was broad across the chest, Mr Ern was of the scrawny sort and had a wizened look to his face. Mr Brockman said that was just because Mr Ern had had ague as a child.

The wagon rattled to a halt, and I looked up from my polishing to see a burly old man with a bit of white beard sitting next to a fine-looking younger man, whose lustrous moustache rivalled even Mr Brockman's. The younger man held the reins, and a stiff little smile was plastered to his lips. The older man had a black felt hat perched upon his head, while the younger one sported one of straw. They both wore heavy checked coats



powdered with prairie dust. The open deck of their wagon was filled with crates and trunks; there were some items wrapped in canvas, and a barrel of salted fish. The old man removed his hat when he saw Mr Ern and Mr Brockman.

To my great dismay, the old man rose to his feet and greeted my employers in German. The conversation continued in that language, too, rapid as a wildfire, which made it impossible for me to follow, even if I had picked up quite a few words over the years. Therefore, instead of listening in, I could only sit on the log with Mr Brockman's rifle, minding my own business, while Mr Ern and Mr Brockman spoke to the men for quite some time. I noted how the older man was the most talkative by far.

When they were all done talking, the strangers left without buying as much as a sardine, which I found a little curious. We kept a trading station, after all.

'Who were they?' I asked Mr Brockman when they had travelled a fair bit down the road and the wagon's rattle had died down.

'Father and son,' Mr Brockman said and wiped his hands on his thighs. 'They said their name was Bender, and that they've taken the claim next to ours.' He sat down beside me; the rifle rested on the wood between us. 'They're thinking of setting up a homestead there. Maybe an inn, the old man said. His wife is supposedly quite the cook.' Mr Brockman's brow creased with worry. 'I just hope their business won't interfere with ours.'

My head at once flooded with images of an unruly flock of children my age, trampling across the prairie like a herd of longhorns. The thought sent a delightful shiver down my spine. 'Will there be children there?'

Mr Brockman shrugged. 'They both have wives, that's for sure – or at least they spoke of the *women* arriving as soon as there's a house.'

'They did not mention children, though?' The disappointment erupted as a sigh.

'No.' He shook his head. 'They only spoke of the women, and about the inn.'

'We could probably do with some neighbours,' I said, mostly to console Mr Brockman, who seemed less than thrilled by the prospect of the inn, envisioning perhaps how the old man's wife would serve a stew that far outshone the jerked beef that we sold.

'Of course.' His thin lips curled into a smile under the fine moustache. 'I am sure it'll be good to have more people nearby. *If they stay, that is. We'll see . . .*' It was not so uncommon for people to stake a claim and then change their minds once the hardships began. We had seen that happen many times before, and especially with city people.

The Benders seemed to know what they were doing, though. It did not take many days before Mr Ern and Mr Brockman were talking about how a large shipment of timber had arrived and was presently stacked on their land, just a stone's throw from the trail.

'It makes sense if you want to keep an inn for weary travelers,' Mr Brockman said to me. 'The closer to the road, the better.'

When I climbed onto the barn roof, as was my habit, especially at night when the stars were out, I could soon see the beginnings of a structure, a skeletal framework, growing sturdier by the day. The two men already lived on the plot, sleeping in their wagon and cooking on an open fire. Many a time, I would see the smoke rising in the morning as the two of them brewed their coffee. I found them to be very diligent.

As the weeks passed by, I grew bolder and often walked over there in my few idle hours. At first, I would stand a little on the side, close to the trail, while watching the two men work. The

old man was very spry and easily wielded the heavy hammer as he nailed sturdy boards to the wooden frame of what looked to become a sizable cabin – though not quite large enough to match the image of the inn that I had conjured in my mind. I had been picturing something akin to the hotel in Cherryvale, with its elegant salon and three storeys, but this was clearly nothing like that, just a humble building on the prairie, like ours. I knew that such places were not uncommon; travellers were more than happy to pay a little to sleep under a roof, even if the accommodation was sparse. Lots of settlers along the road earned a little extra by opening their houses and renting out floor space, and I figured that the Benders meant to do just that.

The younger Bender was slower with the hammer than his father, but more precise. He would often squint and measure with his eyes before nailing a board in place. He sometimes fumbled with the nails, though, dropping them to the ground, and then he spent ages looking for them down in the dust, while the old man told him off in German.

That was how I ended up working for them.

Though they had doubtlessly seen me hanging around before, neither of them had ever paid me any attention. They were too intent on their work to care if a scrawny boy showed up as a spectator. On this day, however, the two of them both paused and looked at me before speaking to each other for a while. When they were done discussing, the older man went back to work, but the younger one turned to me.

‘Hey, boy,’ he called. ‘Would you like some money?’ He spoke in a very heavy accent. I thought this was a peculiar request but slowly nodded, as I would, in fact, like some money.

‘What do I have to do?’ I called back, taking a few steps towards them while still eyeing them with some suspicion.

'It is these . . .' The younger Bender held up one of the rough iron nails they used on the boards. 'They fall on the ground. You can pick them up.' He nodded with vigour as if to underline the request.

That certainly sounded easy enough, and I shrugged to say that I would do it.

It was not much, this job, but to me it was thrilling. I liked seeing how the house came about; how the walls were erected and the floor came in place, complete with a trapdoor for the cellar. In time, I helped with stirring the mortar for the chimney and carried bricks, moved boards twice my length and hoisted wooden shingles onto the roof, where John Bender waited with the hammer. Though I could not speak with them much, I still found the men good company, and I always liked being useful. In quiet moments by the fire, under the open sky, old William would read his Bible while John and I played silent games of cards. If I won, he often gave me a treat: a piece of dried fruit or brown sugar.

Then, after Christmas, came the women.

By the time they arrived, I had given up the hope of other children, as Mr Brockman had figured out they had none. I was still curious about the women, though, as I saw mostly men, and would not mind to have a little soft kindness around to brighten my days. I did not remember my ma, but I always imagined that she had been like that: soft and kind – and just as funny as Pa had been. I was curious to see if I could understand them, as John spoke little English and Mr Bender even less.

Mr Brockman had struck a deal with them to stock their shelves with goods from the trading station, so the Benders could do a little shopkeeping as well as serving travellers stew. Mr Ern had not been thrilled to learn that Mr Brockman had made such a deal, and without consulting him at all. They had yelled and screamed at each other in German for half a night,

but since the deal was already done, Mr Ern could do little but accept it.

It was because of those shelves of groceries that I first met the other half of the Bender family. Having won the argument with Mr Ern, Mr Brockman called for me just a few days later and told me to take some sacks of coffee and dried apples down to the Benders to stock their shelves. John Bender had been there before for beef and tinned goods, but now they were to expand their range.

Mr William Bender was sitting outside when I arrived, which seemed very cold to me. He had brought out a wooden chair and was sharpening a set of knives laid out on a piece of hide on the frozen ground before him. He had the whetstone in one hand, a knife in the other, and a small basin of water at his feet. The knives he had already done lay to the left and the dull and rusted ones to the right. He wore his black hat as always, but had traded his coat for a leather shirt. His beard was so long that it reached almost to his stomach; it was tangled, too, so had not seen a comb for some time. I wondered how his wife felt about that.

Mr Bender nodded and smiled at me from deep within his beard; his hands never ceased working, but kept dragging the stone across the blade, even as he looked away. I was mightily impressed by that. Mr Bender then nodded to the house in a way that let me know I was to go in. I could tell there were makeshift curtains in the windows, and someone had made flowers from newspaper pages and placed them in a blue vase on the windowsill. Being very fond of such printings myself, I thought that to be an encouraging sign.

‘Kate!’ the old man hollered from behind me as I hitched the mule to the post by the door. ‘Kate!’ he hollered again, as if to warn her of my coming. I wondered if Kate was the old man’s wife, or if she was his daughter-in-law.

The door flew open before me and revealed that at least she was young. She was also tall, fair-skinned and with grey eyes so pale that they almost seemed to look through you. Red hair tumbled like a nest of auburn snakes around her shoulders, so she must just have removed the pins that held it in place. I was not used to seeing women with their hair down and found myself quite mesmerized by the sight. Her dress, I noticed, was of a fine material, striped in blue and pink. It did not look much like prairie attire, but more like city garb.

The woman – Kate – laughed when she saw me. ‘It’s just a boy!’ she let out, as if amused by the fact, which led me to believe that she had been expecting, or hoping for, something else. Her pale eyes fell on me; her grin was still wide and her lips very red, so likely painted on. ‘We’ve seen less customers than we like.’ Her hands were at the back of her neck, twisting all the hair back in place. ‘I was hoping you were a travelling man, but you are not, are you?’ Her gaze shifted to the mule. ‘You’re just the boy from the trading station.’

Before I had time to be offended that I was so little in her eyes, her lips split wide in a fresh smile. ‘John has told me all about you. He thinks you are quite the devil at cards.’ This, of course, had me blushing something fiercely, and it did not let up when she said, ‘Your name is Hanson, isn’t it? I’m your new neighbour, Kate.’ She held out a plump, pale hand for me to shake. ‘Come inside and meet Ma,’ she continued when we had properly met. She swung open the door I had helped put in place.

I had meant to go back to the mule for the groceries before going inside, but Kate got ahold of my shirt and pulled me across the threshold. ‘We can get those parcels later,’ she said. ‘There’s water in the bucket, so your mule won’t dry out.’ As soon as the door had closed behind me, she spun on her heels and spoke to an elderly woman in a rocking chair. She had a

skein of brown yarn in her lap and knitted very rapidly. It was a sock, from the looks of it.

‘This fine young man has come with groceries for us, Ma,’ Kate said by way of introduction. ‘His name is Hanson, and John speaks very well of him. He helped them, you know, with the house.’ She then repeated, I assumed, all that she had just said in German.

‘How do you do, ma’am,’ I croaked. I was surprised, I think, by the unexpected commotion my arrival had caused. Then I suddenly remembered my manners and had my frazzled straw hat off in no time at all. I strode across the floor with my hand outstretched. The old woman looked up at me with dark eyes and paused her knitting long enough to give my hand a light squeeze. Her thin lips curved in a slight smile, which made me realize that she was not as old as I had first thought.

‘The card player, huh?’ she said with a heavy German accent, and looked to Kate for confirmation. The latter nodded.

‘The very one. John was *so* grateful for your help.’ Kate placed a hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. ‘It’s a good thing that you’re here,’ she continued. ‘We do need to stock our shelves.’ She motioned to the rough-hewn shelving that now sprawled on the wall to the left of the entrance. The tins Mr Bender had picked up were there – lots of tobacco and beans – but the boards were far from crammed at that point. They had built a store counter of sorts, simple and unpainted, but it would do, and on the floor lay a piece of board that was surely destined to be a sign, spelling out *Groceries* in neat black writing.

I saw that other improvements had been made to the house as well. The room was cut in half, for one, by a large piece of canvas nailed to a roof beam, so you could no longer see the bed. I figured it had been done to keep the business part of their establishment apart from the private quarters, although

the room was so small in the first place that one had to wonder about the efficiency of the act. The table and chairs stood on the business side of the stiff curtain, and I figured that was where the stew was to be eaten, once the customers arrived.

Mrs Bender, in the rocking chair, motioned to the table with one hand. 'Will you have something to eat?' she asked me.

I shook my head, too embarrassed to say much, but Kate shooed me in the table's direction anyway. 'Sit for a while,' she urged me. 'We go stir-crazy in here with only each other for company.' As I found my seat, she went about rummaging on the shelves and put a half-empty tin can of crackers down before me. The lid clattered and spun on the tabletop. She followed up the offering with half a cup of thin coffee; the surface of the brew was riddled with grounds. I, of course, drank it anyway. I was nothing if not polite. My gaze darted to the paper flowers on the windowsill again as I chewed the gritty coffee grounds, and Kate, plopping down on the chair beside me, followed my gaze to the unruly bouquet.

'Well, there's not many wildflowers to find around here,' she complained. 'I had to liven the place up somehow.'

'We do have some flowers in summer.' I did not want her to think that these were barren lands. 'I like the paper ones, though. I think they are beautiful. You must be very clever with your hands.'

'Oh, thank you, sweet Hanson.' Kate beamed at me. 'Maybe you can show me those flowers sometime. The real ones, I mean.'

I promptly blushed again and set about eating a cracker. Mrs Bender chuckled at my expense.

'Tell me,' said Kate, 'are they all churchgoing folks around here?'

'Sure.' I nodded. 'Or if they don't go, it's not because they don't want to, but the road is too long or they have crops that



need tending. They are God-fearing, though. We all are.’ Now that I had started talking, I was gathering steam and found the prospect of being the young Mrs Bender’s guide delightful.

‘Say, are there people who talk to the spirits around here?’ She promptly ruined my confidence again.

‘What? No – I don’t think so?’ I sputtered.

‘No? Like a medium, I mean. At a séance. Nothing like that?’ Her grey eyes were hopeful when she looked at me.

I threw my gaze down at the floor, where, to my dismay, I could see several crumbs from my half-eaten cracker. I was a terrible eater. I could also see how the hem of Kate’s pretty dress was grey with filth and yellow with dust. She ought to wear something simpler.

‘You’re thinking about spiritualists?’ I asked her at last. When she gave an eager nod, I shook my head in turn. ‘Not that I know of,’ I said. ‘Are you in need of one?’ I had of course read plenty about the spiritualists in the newspapers I collected in the barn. Some called them frauds and charlatans, while others were convinced that they did indeed communicate with the dead. I myself had not formed an opinion.

Kate laughed at my question. It did not seem sincere, though, but more like a performance. ‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘I speak with the spirits just fine myself and have no need of another conduit. I heal the sick, too, and at a lower cost than any medical doctor. I was thinking of taking on clients, you see; that’s why I asked.’ She had lowered her voice and sent Mrs Bender a furtive glance. ‘I just wanted to know about the competition.’ She winked with her left eye and fingered a cracker. ‘The inn is not booming with business at present, and we do need to earn if we want to keep living.’

Kate’s grey eyes bore into mine and made me feel a little dizzy. ‘One ought to share such gifts as mine, don’t you think, Hanson?’ Her gaze did not waver even a little.

'Sure,' I agreed. I saw no reason why she should not.

'Ma disagrees with me at present, but I think she's foolish to do so.' She sent the older woman another furtive glance. 'You yourself have quite a few with you who would dearly want to speak.' She raised her head and fixed her gaze somewhere above my right shoulder. 'I see a woman there, yes . . . and a man, too. They must be your parents, don't you think?' I went cold, even though I knew she could have learned of my circumstances from Mr Brockman. It still felt so strange that she was saying that, as if my parents were indeed standing there just behind my back, although I knew *I* would see nothing if I turned my head to look.

'Thank you so much, Mrs Bender, but I have no money to talk to spirits,' I muttered, feeling that I ought to make her aware of this predicament.

'Mrs Bender?' She laughed again, in that same way as before that made me believe she was not truly laughing at all. 'Oh, but I'm not my mother yet, Hanson – and surely not married.'

'Oh,' I uttered in surprise. 'I thought John was your husband.' To my own great dismay, I was blushing again.

'Oh no.' Kate rolled her eyes. 'John is my *brother*, not my husband.'

'He is?' I had been so sure that Mr Brockman had said that John was waiting for his wife.

'Yes. He is my brother through and through.' Kate laughed again. She lowered her voice as if telling me a secret. 'I would *never* marry the likes of him.' In the rocking chair, Mrs Bender snorted, so she did understand a little of what was being said. 'If we cannot speak to the spirits, what *can* we do?' she mused next. 'Oh, I have it!' Her eyes were at once wide open, and her hands were little birds again, dancing in the air. 'Wait here,' she said to me before rising from her chair and slipping behind the canvas curtain.

Mrs Bender looked at me with a grim sort of smile, while her knitting needles still moved in her lap.

A moment later, Kate was back, carrying a bundle of cloth in her hand. When she plunked it down on the table, I could see that it was a blue scarf or shawl with countless silken tassels, wrapped around something small and rectangular. 'Shall we see what your future holds, Hanson?' New stars seemed to have been lit in her eyes.

'Kate,' warned the old woman.

'It's harmless,' she shot back over her shoulder, and then added with a frown, 'How am I to get better if I never get to practise?'

I did not much want to know what the future held, as I was too afraid of bad news. I knew all my dreams were in peril of remaining just that, as I was a poor boy with very few prospects, but I also found it hard to refuse Kate Bender as she sat there before me, all sunshine again. 'Please,' she said. 'Let me see your left hand.'

I was a bit ashamed of showing it to her, as it was filthy, calloused and damp with perspiration, but when she cupped her own hands and held them out like a cradle, I nevertheless placed it in hers and watched as a frown formed upon her brow. She looked at my hand from every angle, it seemed, and her lips moved silently, as if she was speaking to herself. When she was all through, she wanted to see my other hand.

'The left is what you are born with,' she explained. 'The right is what you do with it.'

I all but held my breath when she lifted her gaze and was ready to give me the verdict. 'You are a reading man,' she said with some surprise; it sounded a bit like a question. I nodded with vigour, somewhat impressed, all the while trying to remember if I had mentioned my reading skills to John.

'You have great ambitions, too,' she continued. Again, it

sounded a bit like a question. 'I did not expect to find that in a farm boy.' She gave me a flash of a smile. 'I think it must be . . .' She murmured to herself as she got to her feet and moved a bit closer to my chair. 'Yes, it must be . . .' Her fingers were suddenly in my matted, dusty hair, working across my scalp. Whenever she found something interesting, her fingers dwelled there, kneading and touching. I dearly hoped she found no lice up there. 'You are *very* bright,' she said at last, 'and that, my friend, will be your salvation.'

Kate slumped down in the chair again and pulled the bundle of cloth closer. 'Now we just have to see how your gifts can help you achieve those grand ambitions,' she muttered.

When she opened the bundle by untying the knot I saw that there was a deck of cards in there, immensely fine and with gilded edges, though a little faded and frayed with use.

I wondered for a moment if she meant we were to play, but then she said, 'These are special cards, Hanson. They are meant for telling the future, not to play for sugar with.'

When she turned them over on top of the scarf, I could tell that all the picture cards were like beautiful paintings awash in colours. The ladies' white hair was piled high on top of their heads and set with pretty flowers, while the men wore theirs in neat ponytails.

Since I felt – or *hoped* – that Kate was right about my brightness and ambition, I was now most curious to see how my dreams could possibly come true and waited with baited breath as Kate first shuffled the cards herself, and then handed them to me and motioned for me to do the same. It was a little tricky, as they were smooth with use and threatened to jump out of my hands, but I did manage, somehow.

When the cards were back with her, Kate placed the deck facedown on the tasselled scarf and had me cut the stack twice. Then she gathered the cards back up again and started placing

them, one by one, into a pattern that reminded me of a rose. That done, she took a deep breath, and then her hands flew across the tabletop, turning all the cards faceup.

I could tell that there were two queens down there on the table, and a lot of hearts – which I figured was good – but spades, too, which I knew to be unlucky.

‘All right,’ she said at last. ‘This is what I see: the losses you have suffered early in your life will be made up by what you gain later. I see a very happy marriage for you, and at least five children, though one may be sickly.’

I was a little stunned by this revelation, as I had not up until that point thought much of having a family at all.

‘I can tell that letters are your first love, though, not your wife, and that it’s by those that you will make your fortune.’ She glanced up at me, and I reddened, but not from embarrassment at all. In my chest, my heart had started thumping out a wild rhythm – could it be that I would become a newspaperman? It was what I wanted more than anything else.

‘Yes,’ Kate said, as if having come to a decision or answering my thoughts. ‘Your ambitions will come to fruition – not this year, and maybe not the next one either – but early in your life, and it’s by the pen and the pen alone that you shall thrive.’

‘But . . . how do I do that?’ I whispered, as my voice had suddenly failed me.

‘I suppose you must go to the city,’ said Kate. ‘There’s poor soil for words out here. Pa says we’ll have to grow corn.’

I laughed a little at that, faint and shivering.

‘Your wife is light of hair,’ Kate added as an afterthought, ‘and your first child will be a son.’

I let out my breath in a deep sigh. Mrs Bender in the rocking chair chortled.

‘How did I do?’ Kate beamed at me, eager for praise, it seemed.

'Not so bad,' I blurted out, my pulse still thumping in my throat.

'Wonderful.' She gave a satisfied smile and rose to her feet. 'I have a gift for you to remember your wondrous future by.' I watched as she crossed the floor to the windowsill and picked one of the newspaper flowers out of the vase. 'Here,' she said when she came back, holding the flower out to me. 'Keep it close to you always, Hanson,' she instructed. 'This little thing is your lucky charm!'

