



The wind caught the stranger's hat. Maggie watched it fly through the air as if invisible hands had grabbed it and wouldn't let go. At last the dark-colored Stetson caught on the branch of a tree at the edge of the clearing, dangling in a way that added to the unsettled feeling in the middle of her stomach.

She forced herself to look back at the cowboy. Blood oozed from his shoulder and upper arm and from a big cut on his head. The man wore a brown shirt, dark brown trousers, and cowboy boots. As far as she could tell, he might already be dead.

Maggie wanted to turn around and walk away, but her moral upbringing wouldn't let her. She forced her attention to the unmoving man.

He lay in the middle of the plowed field, his face turned to one side and caked with dirt. Steeling herself, she bent down and searched for a pulse. She found one, but it was weak.

The large bump on the back of his head might have been caused by the plow. It was right next to him, partially buried in deep sand along with two other pieces of farm equipment. Whatever had happened, it was obvious she needed to do

something to stop his bleeding before his weak pulse gave out altogether.

Her white blouse wasn't dirty, but she had put it on before daylight. She needed clean cloth for bandages. She lifted her riding skirt. Her divided petticoat would have to do. She ripped white fabric from the hem and bandaged his shoulder and head wounds as best she could.

Maggie expected to see a horse in the plowed field. She didn't, but horse tracks caught her attention. The stranger must have been riding a horse when he entered the field. But where was the animal now?

She imagined his horse might have bucked at the sound of a gunshot. Deep hoof prints marked a small area nearby. The man must have fought to control his horse until his wounds got the best of him. Without a rider's skill in restraining animals, the horse no doubt raced off somewhere, leaving the injured man behind.

She studied his wounds again. The bullet hit his left shoulder, and he must have hit his head on the sharp edge of the plow. Neither of these facts explained who shot him.

Somebody was still out there, probably on foot and walking a horse. Who could it be? And why did he or she shoot this man? Maggie paused to consider, but the questions themselves sent a stab of fear straight to her heart.

The wounded cowboy could be an outlaw. The possibility sent a shiver down her spine. Still, as a human being he deserved medical attention. In fact he needed to see a doctor, but in his condition he might not survive a trip all the way to town in the back of a wagon.

Maggie intended to help the stranger if she possibly could. At the same time she wanted to make sure her little sister was safe.

"Come here, Sarah."

The child sat on her pony. She didn't move.

“I said, get over here, Sarah. Right now.”

Slowly Sarah nudged her pony forward, pulling Maggie’s mare behind her, but she didn’t dismount. Her cheeks were colorless, and her shoulders shook. The flowers tumbled to the ground.

“Is he still...alive?” Sarah asked.

“So far.”

Before she died, their mother had taught Maggie some basic nursing skills, but she didn’t feel prepared for the task ahead. She’d applied the bandages in an attempt to stop the bleeding, and she prayed she’d done it right. There was nothing else she could do where they were; she needed to get him home.

“Listen to me very carefully, Sarah, because I want you away from here. Now ride as fast as you can back to the house, and as soon as you get there, ring the bell.”

She frowned. “Real loud, or...?”

“Loud.” Maggie hooked her reins to the limb of a tree, reminding herself that Sarah was still a child. “The men won’t hear the bell because all of them are out in cow-camp except Big Lupe.” Maggie did her best to speak calmly and gently. “But their wives and families will hear the bell if you ring it hard enough. Tell them what happened here, and they’ll come running.” She paused so Sarah could absorb her words. “Any questions?”

“I guess not.”

“Then get going.”

Maggie turned to check the man’s bandages and thanked God when she discovered the blood had stopped flowing. She stood and pulled her blouse loose from the waistband of her skirt. She wiped her hands on the long shirttail hem and let out another deep breath. When she glanced back to check on her sister, she realized Sarah still hadn’t moved.

“I thought I told you to go.”

Sarah sat like a stone statue astride her pony. The frozen

look in her eyes reminded Maggie of a rabbit an instant before being struck by a rattlesnake. Maggie started to insist that Sarah go on then remembered a few more instructions she'd forgotten.

"When the ranch families get up to the house and you've told them what happened here, tell them to get the wagon."

"Which wagon?"

"The only one that's there, for heaven's sake." Normally patient, Maggie rolled her eyes upward and shook her head. "The other wagon is out in cow-camp with the men."

"I forgot."

"Well pay attention now because this is real important. I want you to tell the folks back at ranch headquarters to hitch up the mules to the wagon and drive out here as fast as they can. Bring blankets, sheets for bandages, Mama's medicine kit, and... and a gun and plenty of bullets." Maggie studied the quiver in her little sister's lower lip. "Can you remember all that?"

Sarah nodded slowly, though her expression was anything but confident.

Maggie unhooked her reins from the tree. "Now get off that pony of yours and ride my horse. She's faster."

Sarah's eyes went wide again. "But I've never gone that far on horseback by myself before, and—"

"Then today you'll do it for the first time. This man could die if you don't."

Maggie hated putting such pressure on a ten-year-old, but she had to do something to get Sarah to move.

She reached up and took the pony's reins out of her sister's hands. "If you really want a full-size horse like you've been begging for, you'll get off that pony and ride mine." She slipped the narrow strips of leather over Short Leg's head and held them. "Come down, Sarah. Now."

The child did as she was told. When Sarah had mounted the sorrel and taken hold of the reins, Maggie handed her the quirt.

“Take this, and use it.”

Sarah frowned.

“My mare will run if you make her. So get going, and don’t look back.”

Sarah’s green eyes radiated fear. Yet she pulled the mare’s head around in the direction of the house as if she’d done it a million times.

Maggie had coasted on a sudden burst of energy since hearing the gunshot. Her sister’s riding success seemed to dissolve that energy. She tied the pony to a bush nearby and sat down by the cowboy. Her heavy breathing came more from the uncertainty of the situation than exhaustion.

She looked back at the injured man. When she saw no change in him, she diverted her gaze toward her sister. Sarah was galloping the mare back to the house, surrounded by a thick cloud of dust and blowing sand.

*At least Sarah got away from here.*

The cowboy lay on his stomach, looking lean and about Roger’s age. A gun belt circled his waist. She felt a little better when she saw his gun still in the holster.

From what little she knew of gunshot wounds, he’d been shot in the back of his shoulder. The bullet must have gone all the way through and out the front. Obviously, he’d lost a lot of blood, and he still wasn’t moving. But since he was breathing, maybe he had a chance.

It could be quite a while before the wagon arrived. Until then there was nothing more she could do for him.

She couldn’t help but notice his slim body, and his legs were long like a young colt. Under all the blood and dirt, his skin looked dark probably from the Texas sun. Then she noticed something else. A bit of white paper protruded from the back pocket of his trousers.

Maggie reached down and pulled out a weathered envelope.

The printing looked dim. At first she declared it unreadable but finally managed to make out the faded script.

The letter was addressed to a Mr. Alexander P. Lancaster in care of Juan Villa, Vasite, Mexico. Maggie wondered if the cowboy was Mr. Lancaster and why he lived in a small Mexican village like Vasite. Maggie had visited Vasite once with her father when he went there to buy horses. At the time she was about nine years old. She remembered the ranch owner had a son perhaps eight or ten years older than Maggie. She recalled vividly the smell of burning firewood in the kitchen hearth and the desolate surroundings just beyond the grounds of the big ranch house.

She shoved away the memory to concentrate on the envelope she held in her hands. Printed in small letters in the upper left-hand corner was another name and address: Mrs. Willard Parson, 211 Elm Street, San Antonio, Texas.

Maggie wasn't accustomed to reading mail addressed to someone else, but she needed to learn the cowboy's identity. He certainly wasn't talking, and he could have a family somewhere. She convinced herself it was in his best interest that she learn all she could, so she opened the letter. A three-year-old date was printed in one corner of the page: February 15, 1877. She began to read.

*Dear Alex,*

*You may be surprised to hear from me again so soon, but you did not answer my last letter. I am glad you are enjoying living and working for Mr. Villa on his ranch in Mexico, but I cannot help but be concerned about you. After all, you are my only brother, and I am anxious to learn what happened with Dee. I would also like to hear about your trips to Brownsville. I have always wanted to visit there. Maybe now I can. My husband sends his regards. Did I mention that I am in the family way? In September Will and I are looking forward to the birth of your first niece or nephew. Write when you can.*

*Love,*

*Ruth*

Maggie gazed off toward the pasture, not really seeing anything. Her mind was too caught up with thinking about Brownsville, for it was there her late sister, Sadie, had lived and taught school before she died. Maggie had always loved Sadie and still did. She'd tried not to judge her, but it hadn't been easy.

The repercussions of what happened in Brownsville would be with Maggie and her family for the rest of their lives. She needed to put her grief out to pasture and concentrate on helping the injured man, but sometimes the past pounced on her when she least expected it.

Maggie started to put the letter back in the cowboy's pocket then decided against it. The thought of reading and keeping somebody else's letter went against her moral code even when she had a good reason for doing it; it was like peeking into a window while the curtains were only partly drawn. Still she sensed it might be important to hang on to it. And at least now she knew where the stranger came from and the name and address of his sister.

Or did she? How could Maggie be sure the wounded man was Alexander Lancaster? Just because the cowboy had a letter with that name printed on it didn't mean a thing.

The thought bothered her as she glanced down at the injured man again. He hadn't moved; he looked so still and helpless. A lump formed in her throat. If this man was the Mr. Lancaster mentioned in the letter, he had kinfolk in San Antonio who cared about him. It was her duty to let them know he'd been shot.

Her gaze settled on the blood again. A wave of what her mother had called a "weak spell" swept over her. She couldn't give in to it. She had too much to do.

A shooting hadn't turned up on the Gallagher Ranch in years, and Roger had said the sheriff went on a fishing trip and

wouldn't be back for a week or more. What a time for the sheriff to be miles away.

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. If she'd ever needed to pray, it was now. When she finished she opened her eyes.

Maggie stiffened, sensing someone watching. She'd been so caught up in nursing the man, worrying about Sarah, and then praying, she hadn't had time to think much about her own safety. The person who took a shot at the stranger could be waiting for the opportunity to strike again.

Maggie pulled his gun from the scabbard. Then she stood, scanning the area. Nothing moved for miles but the wind in the grass and the branches of a few scrubby trees.