



Molly stared at her mother. Her throat ached.
“Well,” Ma said.

“What do we do?” Molly whispered.

“We can’t storm the cabin, that’s for sure. Let’s head back to that first house and see what we can learn.”

Molly painstakingly turned the horse and wagon in the cramped yard and flicked the reins. Headed toward home, the horse set out at a jog. Uneasily, she eyed the lowering sun.

“We can’t get back to Austin before dark.”

“That much is true. Let’s just find out if we’ve mistaken the location.” Ma gave a little chuckle. “It might actually be a blessing to find out we were wrong.”

Molly nodded. Anything would be better than learning that really was Andrew’s land and he wasn’t there.

“Maybe we didn’t go far enough, and someone else built that cabin recently,” she ventured.

Ma shook her head. “It’s not a new dwelling.”

Molly drove on toward Austin, her lips pressed tightly together. She slapped the reins and yelled at the horse, and he actually trotted faster. They approached the ranch they’d seen earlier. Ma nudged her with an elbow, and Molly followed her

gaze. A man dressed in a cotton shirt, a wide-brimmed hat, and boots, with leather chaps over his pants, rode across the open land where the cattle grazed.

“Whoa.” She hauled back on the reins.

Their horse stopped, and Molly gazed with unrestrained envy at the compact, muscular bay horse the man rode. That animal could outrun their hired horse easily, and its glossy coat and rounded hindquarters bespoke good care.

Ma stood up, removed her shawl, and waved it over her head. “Yoo-hoo!”

After a moment, the horseman changed direction and jogged toward them. When he reached the edge of the roadway, he halted, surveying them with pensive brown eyes.

“Howdy, ma’am.”

“Hello,” Ma said in her most gracious tone. “I wonder if you could tell us who owns the next ranch to the east—the one with the little cabin.”

He grinned. “Sure. That’s Andrew Weaver’s place.”

Molly drew a quick breath and looked at Ma, who seemed speechless.

“That’s what we thought,” Molly said quickly. “But he’s not there. Two men came to the door and said they don’t know Andrew and that they own the place.”

The man’s whole face crumpled into a troubled frown. “That’s downright odd. Andrew’s away, and I’ve been riding over there every now and then just to keep an eye on things.”

“When was the last time you went?” Ma asked.

He sighed. “About three days ago. I was planning on taking a look-see tomorrow morning.”

Molly exchanged another look with her mother, and Emma faced the man.

“I’m Andrew’s mother, Emma Weaver, and this is my daughter, Molly—Andrew’s sister.”

“How do you do, ma’am?” He rode a bit closer and leaned

down to offer his hand. "Joe Noyes. I've known Andrew since he came to these parts last year."

Ma shook his hand, but Molly just gave him a nod.

"I believe Andrew mentioned you in some of his letters home," Ma said.

"To Ohio?" Joe asked.

"That's right."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you." Joe hesitated and glanced toward the rapidly dropping sun.

"Do you know where Andrew is?"

"He's gone to buy some cattle. I admit, I expected him back before this." Noyes pushed back his hat, frowning. "Listen, why don't I ride over there with you and see if we can sort this out. I've heard there's been some trouble with squatters lately."

"Squatters?" Molly asked, a bolt of alarm shooting through her.

Joe nodded with a reluctant air. "Since the war ended, there's a lot of drifters and such."

He wore a revolver in a holster on his hip. Molly wondered if she ought to dig her guns out of the luggage.

Joe smiled. "I expect we can clear things up."

"What if we can't?" Molly asked.

He shrugged. "You can sleep at my place if necessary. I'll sleep in my barn, and we'll go for the sheriff in the morning."

"We couldn't ask you to do that," Ma said.

"And you didn't ask me, ma'am. I offered. Andrew's a friend of mine."

Molly liked him, but she wouldn't admit it if asked. She wanted to trust him. Still, in this wild country where strangers took over your house when you weren't looking, could they really trust anyone?

"Well, thank you," Ma said. "I trust it won't come to that. Molly, can you turn the wagon around in Mr. Noyes's farm lane?"

She made no move to set the horse in motion. Not yet. "Do you know where my brother went to buy these cattle?"

“I know where he intended to buy them.” Noyes’s brow wrinkled. “He must have hit a snag and had to go farther than he planned. I offered to go with him, but he said one of us should stay here. I guess I should have kept a closer eye on his place.”

“We appreciate your help in the matter,” Ma said and gave Molly a meaningful nod.

She slapped the reins on the horse’s rump. “Up.”

The horse dragged his feet as they headed back toward Andrew’s ranch. Molly studied her mother’s profile. Emma rode with her eyes shut tight. Molly felt a surge of protectiveness for her. She’d lost her husband. She couldn’t lose her only son. If they couldn’t find Andrew, Molly would be all the family she had. A lump formed in her throat, and tears scalded her eyes.

Joe Noyes rode ahead of them, keeping to a steady jog. The livery’s horse seemed willing to follow, but Joe had to pause several times, allowing the wagon to catch up. They should have hired a team, but that would have cost more.

He turned when he was nearly to Andrew’s lane and waited for them.

“Are you all right, Ma?” Molly asked.

Her mother nodded. “I’m praying, that’s all.” She opened her eyes. “The Lord will sort it out.”

Molly hoped she was right. Were they wrong to put their trust in Joe, a complete stranger?

He rode his bay back to them, and Molly stopped their horse when she came even with the rancher.

“Stay back here,” Joe said. “I’ll see what’s what.”

Molly had a million questions. What if they thought Joe was Andrew? Would they give way to him, or would they attack him?

Another, bleaker thought immediately crossed her mind. What if Andrew had returned from his trip and found them there? Those men could have killed her brother already, in which case they wouldn’t welcome further inquiries.

She leaned toward him. “I have two guns in my trunk. Should I get them out?”

"You know how to use them?"

Molly nodded.

He hesitated and looked toward Andrew's place. "Get them. I'll keep watch while you do."

Her mother caught her breath but said nothing. Molly climbed over the back of the seat, into the wagon bed, where she opened her trunk. After rummaging under her clothing and other personal items, she pulled out the shotgun, the revolver, and two boxes of cartridges. She loaded the shotgun first.

"Ma," she said.

Emma looked at her, and Molly handed the shotgun to her over the seat. Then she loaded the revolver. Carrying the handgun and extra ammunition, she climbed back into the driver's seat, careful to lift her legs in Ma's direction, not Joe's. She managed it quite modestly, but even so, Ma reached out and tucked a fold of her skirt around her leg.

Molly placed the revolver on the seat, between her and Ma. The cartridge boxes went on the floor at her feet. Picking up the reins, she looked over at Joe. "Ready."

"We're going to do this peacefully if we can," Joe said.

"Right," Molly replied. "I hate to have you go down there alone, though."

"I guess you can come, but not too close."

Her mother carefully stowed the shotgun out of sight at her feet.

Joe nodded and pivoted his horse. As he rode toward the cabin alone, Molly looked around. If Andrew had come back, the cattle he'd bought would be somewhere close by. She didn't see any livestock except the two horses in the pen. She swallowed hard and flicked the reins.

They were still a good way from the house when Ma touched her arm. "Let Mr. Noyes do the talking."

"Yes, Ma."

Molly stopped the wagon where the lane to the house started and let Joe ride closer to the door without them. She could see

the wisdom of not taking the wagon down there where it would be hard to turn around quickly. He glanced over his shoulder and nodded to her.

“Hello the house,” he yelled. He sat on his horse not two yards from the stoop—one rough wooden step.

Would he get down out of the saddle? Molly held her breath.

After several tense seconds, the cabin’s door opened. The big man who’d talked to them before held a shotgun in his hands.

“Whatchoo want?”

“This is my house.”

The bearded man’s eyes narrowed.

Molly swallowed hard. She hadn’t expected an outright lie. Would the squatter know Joe wasn’t Andrew? If Joe could toss out a falsehood that quickly, was he a man they could trust? A wave of fear swept over her. That man wouldn’t shoot Joe, would he? What would she and Ma do if that happened? She reached down and fingered her revolver’s grip.

The man cast a glance toward the wagon and lowered his shotgun a little. He said something to Joe that Molly couldn’t hear, but she noticed Joe’s hand hovered near the butt of his revolver.

A moment later, the bearded man cursed, and Joe drew his gun.

“You get out of my house now.”

“Make me!” The big man leveled the shotgun.

Joe hauled back on his reins, and the bay backed up so fast Molly thought it would sit down on its haunches.

The shotgun blasted, the horse jumped and squealed, and Joe let off a round. He pivoted his horse and galloped toward the wagon.

“Go,” he yelled. “Get out of range.”

In the cabin’s doorway, the bearded man fumbled with his shotgun, probably reloading. Then the second squatter yanked him out of the way and stuck a handgun out the door and fired.

“Go,” Joe shouted again as his horse pounded toward them.

Ma had already dived over the side of the wagon and was crouched below the sideboards. Molly couldn't drive off and leave her. But if she stayed put, the horse would present a large target. She wavered, then dropped the reins and jumped off the far side of the wagon, sinking to her knees beside her mother.