



Molly listened carefully as her mother inquired of the conductor how they could continue their journey.

“Well, ma’am, we’re coming up on the last stop on this line. They’re planning to add on, but that probably won’t be in operation until next year. Now, there is a local railroad that can take you twenty miles or so farther south, and I’m told you can get a stagecoach from there.” The gray-haired man shook his head. “I’m afraid there’s just no direct way to get to Texas these days.”

“Perhaps we should have traveled south sooner.” A frown etched lines on Ma’s brow.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. A lot of rail lines were torn up during the war, and east of the Mississippi River it’s hard to go very far without delays. No, I think you did the right thing. But short of joining a wagon train, this is probably best.”

“A wagon train?” Ma said. “Wouldn’t that take months?”

“Yes, ma’am. A lot of hassle too. Stagecoaches are definitely faster. You just never know how reliable it will be once you get off the main lines. They’ll be taking you out around the Indian Territory.”

“I see.”

Molly had never considered that they might encounter Indians on the journey. She hoped not. Maybe they'd see a buffalo. That would be interesting. And Andrew had written about the strange birds and creatures in Texas. She wanted to see an armadillo, but not too close.

She leaned against the window and closed her eyes while Ma continued to chat with the conductor. They'd been nearly a week on the road already, changing trains often and waiting overnight to be ferried across the huge river that separated the civilized world from the vast, unpredictable West.

Changes had slowly emerged in her mother. Pa had always cushioned his womenfolk from the worst in life, she realized. Yes, Ma had uprooted with him to move to Ohio, and she'd helped at the mercantile. But she'd never had to make all the arrangements or endure an undertaking like this. While Ma seemed ready now to break out of her placid routine and set out for a new life on the frontier, Molly had concerns.

*Ma's not as young as me. Lord, help me carry the worst of the burden on this trip. Please get us there safely, and let Ma still have some vim left at the other end.*

Molly was tired, but she'd expected that. More than once, Ma had cautioned her about how rough and difficult the journey might be. Molly was afraid she would give up on the plan to join Andrew on the ranch after Pa died, but Ma had clung to the dream too. She was probably worried that Molly would go off alone unless she accompanied her. Finding Andrew was of utmost importance, but Molly would never go off and leave her mother alone.

And she'd heard tales of how dangerous traveling was for a woman alone. Although she considered herself adventurous, she didn't want to experience a long trip without her mother's companionship. The trip was safer and more pleasant together.

She opened her eyes and scrutinized her ma. True, she looked tired, but not any more than she used to after a long day at the store. Her somber clothing made her face look pale. She must

think about Pa constantly and how they'd planned this journey together.

Molly sat up straight, more determined than ever to look after her mother. Andrew had given her shooting lessons before he left last year, and she was thankful. On his advice, she'd reserved a revolver, a shotgun, and ammunition for both from the inventory when they sold the mercantile. Those were all safely packed in the bottom of her trunk. Perhaps she should get out the revolver before they boarded a stagecoach.

The conductor ambled off down the aisle, swaying with the train's rhythm. Ma turned toward her, brushing her skirt into place as she shifted. The black fabric nestled against the lavender of Molly's skirt, and she suppressed a smile. Ma had let her give up her mourning dress the second day of the trip, once they were away from the chance of meeting anyone they knew.

"Wearing mourning on the trip will make us appear more empathetic," she'd said, trying one last time to reason with her daughter.

"It would make us appear more vulnerable," was Molly's reply, and Ma had said no more except that Molly should eschew bright hues for at least three months. She could do that.

Now Ma gazed at her with a wary smile. "We're in for another big change, it seems."

"It won't be as comfortable as the train." If one could call the train comfortable.

"No, but it may be as fast, from what that gentleman said. If all goes well, we'll keep moving day and night, except for when they change out the teams. No more sitting in railroad stations, waiting for the next train."

"How far will we go in a day?" Molly asked.

"Perhaps as much as a hundred and fifty miles."

Molly thought about that. They were already more than halfway to the Texas border. Of course, Texas was very large, and Andrew's ranch was a long way into its vast territory. And they wouldn't be going in a straight line.

“We must pray for wisdom and safety,” Ma said.

Molly nodded. Ma would never think they deserved to pray for comfort. If one had to choose, she supposed safety was more important. Wisdom would be welcome too. She closed her eyes, determined to sleep through the last hour on the train. Sleep might be a scarce commodity once they got to the stagecoach line.

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RYLAND STEPPED DOWN from the local stagecoach in a small town just outside Columbus.

The driver waved down the street. “The mercantile’s yonder.”

“Thank you.” Ryland could see the sign from where he stood. One of the stage tenders tossed down his bag. He retrieved it and trudged down the block.

He walked into the store and looked around. It seemed well stocked, and several customers were browsing. A man whose clothing declared him a farmer stood talking to the one presiding behind the counter. When he turned away, Ryland stepped up and smiled.

“Hello, I’m looking for the Weaver family.”

The man’s smile slipped. “Uh, did you know Simeon?”

“Not personally, no.” Ryland tried to add a mournful air to his smile. “I understand Mr. Weaver passed away recently. I’d like to find the family.”

“Well, as I understand it, Mrs. Weaver and her daughter have left the area. Maybe her neighbors would have more information.”

Too late. He would have to start all over. Ryland tried to keep his voice steady.

“If you could tell me where they lived?”

The man told him where the house was, and he started out on foot, lugging his leather satchel and cane, glad he’d packed

light. He kept watch along the way for a hotel but didn't spot one before he found the snug little house. It looked well kept, and a sprightly woman opened the door to his knock.

"Hello, my name is Atkins, and I'm looking for the Weaver family. I understand they used to live here?"

"That's right. I'm Mrs. Endicott. My husband bought the place last week."

Ryland's hope rose a notch. "Last week? Then the family hasn't been gone long?" She hesitated, and he added quickly, "I heard Mr. Weaver passed away. It's important that I find his family."

Her eyes narrowed. "May I ask why?"

"Of course. I'm employed by an attorney in New England. It's a family matter. Nothing sinister, I assure you."

"Hmm." She looked him up and down. "I have to ask, since you're not the first to inquire."

"I'm not?" Ryland swallowed hard. "Someone else has been asking for the Weavers?"

"Yesterday. A man not as stylish as you. A bit down at heel, I'd say."

"Did he give his name?"

"Cooper."

A shock of anxiety zinged through Ryland. "May I ask what you told him?"

"Is he a bad one?"

"I fear he might be, Mrs. Endicott. It's vital that I find the Weavers quickly."

She pursed her lips for a moment. "As I told him, they've moved away. Perhaps you can learn more from the minister at their church on the main street, or from the folks who bought the mercantile from Mr. Weaver."

Ryland nodded. "I've been there. The new owner directed me here."

"I see."

"Let me show you my credentials." He could tell she would

not be an easy nut to crack, so he set down his bag and cane and took his wallet from his inside jacket pocket. “This is a letter from my employer, Mr. Jeremiah Turner, Esquire.”

She took the paper and peered at it. “In Maine. You’re a long way from home.”

“Indeed. But I assure you, my mission is honorable, and I mean only the best for the Weavers.”

Again, she scrutinized him. “Bit of an inheritance, eh?”

Ryland opened his mouth and closed it.

She chuckled. “Why else would a lawyer be so keen on finding a body? Well, I like you, Mr. Atkins, and I hope my instincts are right about you. Emma Weaver and her daughter took the train a few days ago. They planned to go to Texas, to the Weavers’ son Andrew’s place.”

Ryland caught his breath. Texas. A new destination, and no doubt new adventures were in store.

The next stagecoach into Columbus wouldn’t come through until the next day, so he rented a horse, arranging to leave it at a stable in the city, and set out for the ride. Less than an hour later, he left his mount at a livery near the depot and went to the ticket window.

“Can you advise me on the quickest way to get to Texas?”

“Well, as I told the gentleman yesterday, unless you want to ride horseback all the way, I’d take the train either south to Arkansas—I believe you can get through that far now—or west to Kansas City. After that, you’ll have to arrange your transportation to Texas.” He shook his head. “It’s not the easiest journey, I fear.”

Ryland’s jaw clenched when he heard that another man had inquired about trains to Texas the day before. Cooper, no doubt.

“And which way did the other gentleman choose?”

“I believe he headed for Kansas City, Missouri.”

Ryland nodded and decided to stretch the truth. “Well, I’m a friend of the Weaver family. The widow and her daughter Molly bought tickets a few days ago, but they neglected to leave me

word on which route they were taking. Since I hope to reunite with them, I'd like the same itinerary they chose.

The man hesitated. "I'm not sure—"

"It's very important that I overtake them as soon as possible." Ryland took out his credential letter. "I've been sent by the family's attorney to find them. I have important news for them, but it must be delivered in person. I assure you I have the Weavers' best interests at heart."

The clerk scanned the letter and eyed him pensively then turned away with it in his hand.

"Oh—" Ryland reached toward the opening at the bottom of the grille, but the clerk was lost in the busy office behind the window. He sighed. He would have to wait for his letter, if nothing else. A train whistle blew, and a locomotive's departure, loud enough to awaken everyone from Columbus to Cincinnati, shook the station. Ryland winced and put his fingers in his ears.

After about five minutes, during which a line of sour-faced people formed behind him, the clerk returned with another man.

"Mr. Atkins, this is my supervisor. He will speak to you by the door to your left."

Since the supervisor began moving that way with Ryland's letter in hand, he had no choice. He looked along the station wall. Spotting the door in question a few yards away, he picked up his luggage and hurried to it.

The door opened, and a man in a business suit stepped out carrying the letter.

"Mr. Atkins?"

"Yes, sir."

The gentleman frowned at him. "You understand, sir, that the railroad tries to protect its passengers, particularly its female passengers."

"I would expect no less."

"And this is a legal matter?"

"Yes, sir. A family matter of some importance. I would

appreciate your assistance, and I can assure you of my discretion and my desire for the family's wellbeing."

"I'm told there was another man yesterday ..."

"So I've heard, sir, and I'm doubtful his intentions are as honorable as mine." Ryland straightened his shoulders. "This knowledge makes me even more anxious to find Mrs. Weaver and her daughter."

"You would accompany them to Texas?"

He hesitated. "Well, if that was their wish after they hear what I have to say, but I suspect they would want to consult my employer first, if only through telegrams."

"I see. Well, I've been assured—" The supervisor paused as another train roared in on the closest track and screeched to a stop. He gave a tight smile. "I'm assured our ticket agent did not release the ladies' exact destination. But for you, sir ..." He handed Ryland the letter and reached into his pocket. "You must hurry. That is your train to Kansas City, and it leaves in ten minutes. The cost of the ticket ..."

He named the price, which seemed enormous to Ryland, but he whipped out his wallet and counted out the sum then put Mr. Turner's letter away.

"Very good," the supervisor said, pocketing the money and holding out a ticket. "I assumed you'd want this."

Ryland looked down at it.

"Mrs. Weaver mentioned Austin, Texas," the supervisor said. "She was told there were no railroads going there at this time, but she and her daughter were determined to go as far as they could by rail and then make their way to that area. It would perhaps have been better for her to head for New Orleans and go from there, but ..." He shrugged. "I'm told Austin has telegraph service through New Orleans."

"Well, that's something. Thank you very much, sir." Ryland grabbed the ticket, his cane, and his bag and hurried to the platform. No time to send a telegram now, but perhaps if he was quick, he could write a brief message and entrust it to a porter.



With a handsome tip, of course. He would have time to write letters on the train.

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MOLLY JERKED upright on the wagon seat. She was supposed to be driving, but she was so fatigued she nodded off several times when she should have paid attention. The journey had worn out both her and Ma, but she was determined to see her mother safely to Andrew's. Today.

The horse they'd hired in Austin knew nothing of their grueling trip and plodded along the dusty road without much guidance. If she'd had the energy, Molly would have urged him into a trot, but she sat, drained and listless, watching his hind feet trudge along.

"We're a sight," Ma said with a little chuckle.

Molly adjusted the slack reins that had slid through her fingers. Both their skirts and their hats were layered with dust. "I don't know about you, but the first thing I want when we find the ranch is a bath."

"If your brother has a bathtub."

Her wry comment surprised Molly. Andrew had always been fastidious, but that was under his mother's eyes. Perhaps Ma was right. They'd seen some very unkempt characters along the way. She didn't want to remember the reeking cattleman she'd been forced to sit next to in a stagecoach, or the leers from foul-smelling men they'd endured.

She'd lost count of the stage stops. Some were fairly comfortable houses with decent facilities and meals to rival Ma's cooking. Others were shacks in the wilderness with nothing but a rickety outhouse a few yards behind the station and a poor excuse for a dinner.

"I'm trying not to get my expectations up," she admitted.

"We should have splurged and stayed overnight in Austin."

Ma gazed ahead, her eyes crinkling at the corners against the merciless sun.

“No, we were right to save the money.” Molly put the reins together in one hand and reached over to pat her mother’s arm.

“I do worry about road agents,” Ma confessed.

“The banker said we ought to be safe, as long as we get there before dark.”

“Ought to be.” Ma sounded uncertain. At least they’d left half their money at the bank in Austin. The town was within a day’s drive of Andrew’s ranch, and they’d agreed it might be best to split up their assets. An encounter with a pickpocket along the way had made them extremely wary, and Ma’s relief when they banked half their funds safely had shown Molly how very worried she’d been.

Off to their right, water trickled. “That must be the stream the man mentioned.” Molly stood for a moment, fighting for balance. “He said that one usually runs all summer.”

“Yes, and there’s only one ranch between here and Andrew’s place.” Ma smiled at her. “We’re almost there.”

“Hallelujah.” Molly sat and smacked the horse’s rump with the reins. He extended his stride a bit, but never broke out of a walk.

“Come on,” she wheedled. “We’ve been on the road nearly a month, and we want to finish this journey today. I’ll give you a nice feed when we get there, I promise.”

Ma chuckled. “I guess you don’t speak horse.”

“You’re right. This is the first time I’ve driven one for half a day.”

“At least you know how to hitch him up again if we need to in the morning.”

Molly shook her head emphatically. “Andrew will hitch up for us when we need to go somewhere, but I intend to stay put for a while.”

A trail led off the dirt track, and she could make out a roofline at the bottom of a slope.

"That's got to be the other ranch."

Ma nodded. "Andrew's nearest neighbor, I'd say. Didn't he mention someone in one of his letters?"

"He did, but I'm not sure it was the fellow who owns that place."

A handful of thin cattle were grazing fifty yards off the road. One raised its head and looked balefully at the creaking wagon.

"You stay put," Molly said firmly, though probably not loud enough for the bovine to hear.

"It seems odd how they let their livestock run loose out here," Ma said. "Wouldn't you think they'd lose a lot?"

"I don't know. Andrew said it takes a lot of land to raise cattle out here, because the grass is so poor."

"I hope he hasn't chosen a spot where he can't make a living."

Molly pulled in a deep breath. "I'm sure he talked to people and looked around before he bought the ranch." Still, the grass all around them looked brownish, and there weren't many true trees nearby, just scrubby bushes.

"There were trees near that stream." Ma peered off to the side. "I wonder if it runs through his land. That would be an asset."

"There!" Molly pointed to a cabin set back from the road. A rail fence enclosed a small corral nearby. "That's got to be it."

She guided the horse into the lane and stared at the house as the wagon rolled toward it.

"It's awfully small."

"We'll have to make do," Ma said.

"If it *is* his place." Molly swallowed hard, hoping this wasn't Andrew's cabin. He'd told them the house was small, but he hoped when Pa came they could add on.

Movement caught her eye. "Ma, look. There's horses in the corral."

Her mother seized her forearm, grinning. "He must be here."

Molly's heart jumped as she stared at the two dusty horses. "Then why didn't he pick up his mail?"

They'd inquired in Austin but were disappointed to learn Andrew hadn't claimed his mail for more than a month. Their last three letters, including the black-edged one, rested in a pigeonhole at the post office. After she'd shown him her new bank book, the postmaster had allowed Emma to take her son's mail.

Neither of them had wanted to talk about the possible reasons why Andrew hadn't picked it up. Anxiety had festered between them unspoken all day as they rode toward his home.

Molly urged the horse to within ten yards of the front door then pulled back on the reins. "Whoa."

The little cabin was a motley composition of stone, brick, and logs. The roof, on this side at least, was shingled. Andrew had told about replacing the roof in one of his early letters. They'd all laughed when they read how his bedding had been leaked on during the first rainstorm.

The door swung open, and a large, bearded man filled the opening.

"State yer business."

Molly gulped.

"I'm Mrs. Weaver," her mother said firmly. "I'm looking for my son Andrew. Is he here?"

"Don't know anyone named Weaver."

"I understand he owns this property."

"First I heard of it," the man said. Behind him, another figure loomed, as tall as the first and even broader. "We're the owners," the first one said. He shut the door with a thud.