

Honeymoon Vengeance

By

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CHAPTER 1

If you were watching the patch of ground just as the sun began its early morning caress, you would have seen him. He was working his way down the mountain along the south face, heading in the direction of the river leading two horses, one saddled, the other carrying a skimpy pack. He was not a trapper. Both of his horses were having a rough time of it, gaunt and beat to a frazzle.

It was the beginning of spring in the lowlands, but here in the high country a winter snap had taken hold, and but for a few random bare spots, the slopes were snow covered. Morning time meant snow crusted with ice and it crackled beneath the man and his horses as they worked their way down the slope.

Two deer bolted from some aspen. He swiftly brought his rifle to his shoulder and tracked them, the fluid movement a measure of his manhood. His deep voice drifted through the early morning stillness. "Be good to have some venison, but best wait 'till we get to the river, deer are probably plentiful down there, Old Hoss. I know you're too tired to pack it, and I'm shore not gonna drag it."

Both horses and man looked underfed, ragged and long on the trail. There wasn't any town or settlement in the direction from which they came, just a great expanse of high-country

wilderness where they were welcomed by warmer winds from an early spring thaw. It had been a harsh, cold winter with snows heavy and deep in the mountain passes. Evidence of privation was stark, shared by man and beasts.

He halted and pulled some dry grass from the exposed root of a fallen tree. "Here you old son of a gun, chew on this," he remarked as he passed it back to the horse nuzzling at his shoulder.

Scott Mckendree was not a big man, standing just five-feet eight-inches tall in his moccasins. But even in his present condition he didn't look like a man to be taken lightly. His guns were not for show; enduring toughness was evident in the easy way he moved.

A spatter of snow fell as the wind gently whipped it from the trees, leafless brush and wild rose. "We're gonna get cold. Might as well be movin' as loafin' here," muttered Mckendree, as he pulled more dried grass, feeding it to the horses. Searching out what appeared to be a game trail, marked now by traces of the bolting deer, he began his slow descent of the slope. The sun set and darkness enveloped them. Up above the high country became lost in whirling clouds. Violent shades of gray and black darkened the sky, the falling snow thickened, sticking to the horses and Mckendree's heavy sheepskin coat.

With the sound of thunder, Mckendree looked skyward, halted to study the downslope, then glanced up above again at the swirling clouds. "Old Hoss," he announced, "those sure don't look like thunderheads." The mountain magic was again broken by the likes of thunder, only this time there was no mistaking it was the sound of gunfire.

In one fluid movement Mckendree was astride his saddle horse while leading the packhorse in a wild charge down the mountain. He continued his reckless pace before breaking out of the trees and into a small clearing overlooking a rampaging river. Spring runoff had filled its banks, the river now a raging barrier.

His wild charge temporarily halted, Mckendree studied the river. A woman's scream broke the background rush of the water, followed by another. Mckendree leaped from his horse

and looped the lead rope over the pack, instructing his two horses to “keep each other company until I get back.”

Mckendree wasted no time shedding his heavy sheepskin coat, gun, and moccasins. Clothed only in long johns, he grabbed his saddle rope, looped it over his shoulder, and with his knife clutched in his hand, dove into the raging river.

The shock of icy waters was nearly paralyzing as Mckendree fought against the current. Progress was slow, for with each step directed across the river, he was dragged another five feet downstream. Tumbling and rolling, he lost his sense of direction, his strokes directed at any light he could find. Just when it felt as though his lungs would burst he broke the surface. The pull of the current had eased off and he found himself in a protected backwater.

Knowing he had but seconds before the current would pull him back into the river’s main channel, he drew upon the last of his energy, vigorously swimming to a rocky overhang where he could pull himself out. Gasping for air and chilled to the bone, Mckendree stared at his rope and knife, surprised by his good fortune yet dreadful at the idea of crossin’ back.

There was no sound but for the wind in the trees and the rush of the river. Mckendree listened for a minute, then began to climb up and out of the river bottom. Angling through the woods that lined the river, he steered himself in the direction of the screams.

The sound of galloping horses spurred Mckendree to move faster. He broke out of the trees onto a little-used wagon road and moved rapidly in the direction of the now fading hoofbeats. The road continued, winding its way among large boulders before opening onto a tree-bordered meadow.

The sound of the passing horses faded, leaving behind in the mud and snow only traces of their recent passing. Their trail descended from the timber and crossed the meadow onto the roadway where it merged with that of a buggy.

Smoke hung heavy over the meadow. A heavy stand of Douglas fir and tamarack screened and muffled the sight and

sounds of the river. A small buggy, tipped over, was visible at the far side of the meadow and nearby a horse lay dead at the end of its picket line, shot twice and bleeding from its gut and head.

As Mckendree moved toward the buggy he spotted a small tent tucked into the woods at the edge of the meadow. Clothing and utensils were scattered and trampled in a mix of mud and snow. A curl of smoke drifted from the still-burning campfire and a coffee pot lay on its side, its fresh contents spewed across burning coals adding steam to the smoke.

Righting the coffee pot, Mckendree moved reluctantly toward the military-style pup tent, one of its poles askew leaving it only partially erect. Mckendree was expecting the worst when he pulled back the tent flaps, only to find it empty but for bedding thrown about and, on the tent floor, a small leather-bound book of poetry, its pages crumpled by someone's muddy boot. Mckendree carefully picked it up, straightened the pages, recalling that the simple act of holding paper and book in hand was a luxury in the western wilderness. He casually thumbed some the pages, returning to the front cover where an inscription read:

*To Lynn on her wedding day
Feb. 4, 1874
Love, Mother
Be fair and share
And your love will wear.*

Today was March 4, 1874.

Tears welled up in Mckendree's eyes and a gentle sadness, worn like a mask, softened the hard lines that framed his eyes and mouth. "Damn," he said, as he slowly surveyed the meadow. He saw what appeared to be a body lying in a patch of winter-browned fern. He hastened to where the body of a young man, probably in his twenties, lay with two bullet holes in his chest that still oozed blood. He was wearing jodhpurs that pegged him as an easterner. Some branches were still bundled under one arm, evidence that he must have been

returning to camp with dry firewood, probably shot without warning. Mckendree picked up the small hand axe lying by the young man's outstretched hand.

Mckendree made an awkward yet frightening picture as he stood in his ragtag long johns, his long black hair and beard unruly and matted from the river crossing. A book of poetry and an axe clutched in his left hand, his right hand held a knife and a coil of rope still hung about his shoulder. He stood silent and stooped as if waiting for some sign. The darkening clouds still swirled above, trying to build into a snowstorm that wasn't meant to be. Only a smattering of snow drifted down, small amounts sticking to his wet hair and long johns. He took on the visage of a specter.

Mckendree jerked defensively at the sound of squirrels chattering in the woods. As he approached the commotion, he could see an area of the snow scuffed and tracked, signs that a scuffle had taken place. A torn pink robe was balled up at the base of a leafless wild rose bush. Uneasiness mounted as Mckendree picked up the robe and concern showed grimly in his eyes as he moved slowly forward. A bit of color at the meadows edge beckoned him. A Mother Hubbard, beautifully bordered with frills, was ripped full length in an obvious act of violence. Gathering it up, he moved forward into the darker shadows of the woods.

As clouds blocked the sun, shadows darkened. A low moan could be heard in the direction of the river. He rushed to the sound, its source an appalling sight. A woman, lashed with scratches, covered only by streaks of mud, crawling and dragging herself toward the river. "Oh God, let me wash all this away," she cried out, "this can't be happening to me."

The river at this point was raging through a narrow gorge, where the woman was on the brink of losing herself into the torrent. Mckendree rushed forward yelling "Don't."

The woman saw what appeared a wild apparition coming at her. Overcome with fright, she screamed before collapsing into a faint. Mckendree covered her with the robe and carried

her gently back toward the camp. Thoughtfully he said, "Too late to save your husband, but I reckon it was just in the nick of time for you, little one."

Mckendree placed her on loose garments that lay near the tent and pulled blankets from within, gently tucking them about her. As an afterthought, he partially unwrapped her and placed the book of poetry in her hands. Replacing the covers, he offered up the hope, telling her that "havin' that in hand might give you strength. God knows, you'll need it."

It was apparent the woman had been roughly abused, but Mckendree hadn't noticed any other physical damage with the exception of a bad lump and bruise at her temple. "They used her and left her to die. If she has spunk she will make it OK," Mckendree mused.

He collapsed the tent and bundled it along with whatever utensils lay about, then stuffed the couple's clothing in a satchel. Mckendree delivered the bulky load to point at the river where he had found her. "Looks to be the narrowest spot," he thought, "I should be able to throw my rope across."

Mckendree returned to the wagon. Whoever had set upon the young couple had rummaged through a large trunk once lashed to the buggy, its contents—books, dishes and other articles—scattered about. He hurriedly returned all of it to the trunk and even though the latch was busted, the lid closed tightly. "Should keep the varmints out," he said aloud as he carried the trunk deep into the brush.

The young man's pockets had obviously been searched. Everything of value was gone, including his hat if he had one. Mckendree shifted the bundle of firewood aside, exposing a gold wedding band, which he removed. He carried the body to a depression formed by an upturned tree where he unceremoniously covered the body with soil and snow from around the dead roots. What rocks that were handy he laid on top. The man's wedding band, which Mckendree had wrapped in a page torn from the book of poetry, was placed beneath one of the rocks.

Standing back, with head bowed, Mckendree spoke: "God, this boy was young, but gave his love and life for his young bride. Be gentle with him. I know he loved her Lord, and had grand plans. Signs show their short time together was filled with happiness and youthful dreams. This whole camp and the riggins' had the makeup of two young people strikin' out to their place in the West. I can't fault this young fellow Lord, but it looks like they both came from gentle folk, and were unprepared for the violence that is so much a part of dreams out here. Tell him a good man is lookin' after his wife, and that I aim to see justice done."

Mckendree paused. "Lord, while we are talkin' here, I reckon that little gal back yonder will need a powerful shot of strength. A little guidance won't hurt me none either. Amen."

Mckendree stood at the gravesite pondering his next move. As though the Lord had heard his prayers, the clouds parted and sunshine broke through. A smile spread across Mckendree's face. "That helps some Lord, for these long johns shore aren't fittin' in this cold weather."

With renewed purpose, Mckendree returned to the woman. He picked up her blanket-wrapped still body, advising her that they best "make tracks out of here in case they return. And if you just stay out for a bit longer," he added as carried her to the river, "it will shore help." Her breathing was the only sign of life.

Mckendree took his rope and moved to an overhanging rock, positioning himself at the most advantageous point from which to throw a loop across the narrow point of the gorge. The first throw snagged a rocky outcrop. He cinched up the rope and tested it. "That should hold." He double hitched the loose end of the rope to a tree as high as possible before trotting back to the buggy where he salvaged the harness and fashioned a sling. "You bein' a tiny thing, shore gonna help."

Bundling the woman—blanket and all—into the tent, he snugly fastened it into the harness. Grabbing the rope, he swung out over the water and began a hand-over-hand crossing. Dragging the sling was relatively easy until the

combined weight reached midpoint and settled closest to the water. With white water up past his knees, Mckendree's legs fought as he struggled to stay upright. Once he recovered and reached the other side of the river, he carried her well back from the water's edge.

McKendree's solo return to the campsite was easier, the sling more than adequate. After loading what belongings remained into the sling, he made another crossing. Catching his breath, he pondered what to do with the rope. "Guess I oughtn't to leave you there—shore enough someone will come huntin' and I don't relish another cold bath," he thought to himself.

Mckendree removed the sling and laid it aside, crossing the river yet again before releasing the rope from the tree. He now stood stranded, faced with no choice but to swim back. Before that, however, he moved to erase what tracks he could, using pine boughs to sweep away any indication of the girl dragging herself into the river.

Trotting downriver, Mckendree searched for a likely spot to cross, concerned, by this point, that she might be coming around. His choice of where to cross proved successful and less difficult compared to his first mad dive into the river, though the tug of the rushing water still left him gasping for air.

Once Mckendree returned to the young girl, who had not moved during his absence, he gathered his clothes and gun. He knelt and felt her temple, noting that her pulse was strong. "I hope you got a lot of heart and spirit. You'll need all the spunk you can muster to put this all behind you." He moved a strand of matted hair from her forehead. "No real harm done," he said softly to himself.

Turning his back to the girl, Mckendree removed and wrung out his long johns and brushed himself dry with the same, left with no choice but to wear them again. "Nothin' like clean damp johns' on a cold winter's day. Lord, a bit of hell fire would be right welcome." He dressed and buckled on his gun. "Expect I look almost human now though these clothes shore smell tangy," he thought.

He lifted the girl and carried her to where the horses were grazing. "Old Hoss, we have someone to look after for a spell." Laying her where the sun could wash her with its light, he said, "Old Hoss, watch her. I have some gatherin' up to do. Then I'll take care of you horses."

Mckendree returned to the river and retrieved the rope, gathered the sling and the young couple's satchels, and returned to his charges. The horses were scratching and nibbling at what new growth they could find. The scene was deceptive; so difficult to imagine what violence had just happened. Eyes would only behold a man, a woman, two horses, and spring trying to burst from what remained of winter's hold. The river flowed clean and full from the melting snow as new shoots appeared to unfold to meet the sun. Tamarack, aspen, maple, and wild rose seemed anxious to clothe themselves in new greenery.

Mckendree listened to the music of rushing water as he studied the girl, daydreaming of what might have been. A fish splashed in a protected backwater, bringing him back to reality. "I reckon that fish will make a dandy meal. I'm shore bathed proper and plumb hungry, Old Hoss, but that fish will have to wait. I best get us a place with a little more protection and see what I can do for our new partner."

Everything was soon loaded in a temporary fashion on the two horses. Carrying the girl, he led the horses along his back trail to an open area well protected from any watchful eyes. "I reckon this spot will capture about as much morning and afternoon sun as we are likely to have. That sun up there right now is misleading; my bones tell me there is a snowstorm brewin'."

He laid the girl on the ground, unloaded the horses and started gathering rocks and wood for a fire. "I don't know what I can do for her, but my body is craving some real coffee. I've had all the birch-trig tea I aim to drink!" The fire was soon popping and crackling. Mckendree began packing the pot with snow and some of the coffee he had salvaged from the young couple's camp.

The nameless girl began to twist and moan. As she fought

her imaginary assailant, she cried out weakly. "Please let me help Larin, Oh God, don't . . . Larin . . . Larin."

Mckendree placed the pot on the ground and moved to her side. He gently gripped her shoulder and upper arm to keep her from twisting about. "It's gonna be alright ma'am. You're safe. They're gone."

Her eyes, full of fear and anxiety, watched as he tucked the blankets tightly about her. "You just stay put and I'll heat some water so you can wash away the filth. It'll help, though it won't change what happened."

Mckendree thought he might as well tell her everything now, for it wasn't going to get easier. "You best know that Larin is gone." She closed her eyes. "I buried him," he continued, "I buried him and said words. He looked to be the type that would want you to remember the dreams you shared."

Her eyes opened, the pain, suffering and broken dreams mirrored there for him to see, filling Mckendree's own eyes with tears. "This day will most likely stay with you, but Larin wouldn't want it to get in the way and block out the good times you've shared. I know he would want you to look to the future. Give it a chance. I'd admire to help. Only the past can't be changed and there ain't no easy way to go from here. I know I put it to you rough about Larin, but you had to know. Now let you eyes tear up and cry—that's the only way to let the agony flow out of your system."

Great racking sobs began to wrench her body as she turned on her side and cried freely. Mckendree turned and moved to the fire. Coals were forming and he shifted the pot so it could reach a boil.

Taking a skillet he moved off a short distance from the fire and began to scoop out a shallow trench, mounding the dirt so as to create a fair-size depression. He sat down in it and said, "Reckon this will make a right nice prospector's bath. This should just about do." He went to his saddle, removed his slicker, and spread it out over the depression. Using the skillet he scooped snow into the slicker until he had the depression filled.

Using the skillet he retrieved hot rocks from the fire and placed them in the snow. As the rocks cooled and the snow melted he gathered more snow, replacing the cold rocks with hot ones.

He took his rope and some blankets and made a barrier between the bath area and the fire. "Don't reckon she needs me watchin' her bathe, and I don't reckon I could stand it. She is a right attractive woman, Old Hoss. She don't need you trampin' through her privacy either," he said, as his saddle horse sidled up and was shooed off.

No longer sobbing, the girl lay still on her side. She gave no indication that she had heard his exchange with the horse.

Mckendree tested the water. "About just right. Now let's see what we can find for her to wear." He rummaged through the clothes and selected a pair of breeches, shirtwaist, socks and boots. He placed them along with soap and towel near the makeshift bathtub. "That's right sweet smellin' soap that ought to help some in removin' what was done to the poor woman," he thought to himself.

She was now turned so as to watch him. It was evident she understood he only meant to help her. His quick movements spelled efficiency; the gun at his waist also signaled a man capable of violent action. She drew comfort, nonetheless, from the gentle way he had with her and his constant talk. As she watched this stranger her thoughts were of Larin. She was about to call out to him when reality set in. She struggled with the pain so deep within her. Silently she said, "If only we had been more careful. Oh Larin, father said we were being foolish to take such a trip alone. Everything was so exciting to you, worry and caution was for others." Her voice rose with passion, "Oh Larin!"

She was startled by her own sound. "Not much we can do for him ma'am, but I have warm water which will help soothe and cleanse you," he said. "While you bathe and dress, I'll see to gettin' your shelter set up. I'm Scott Mckendree. My friends call me Scotty. Be obliged if you'd do the same. When you're feelin' better in a day or two, we'll talk. Now I'm gonna carry you over by a tub I made. It's right comfortin', and beats dippin'

under cold falls or submergin' in a river. Just holler if you should need anythin' more. I fetched most of your belongings'."

Mckendree carried her to the tub, the blankets still tightly wrapped about her. Her eyes seemed to take his measure. She remained quiet and motionless. Cradling her with one arm, he dipped his free hand into the bath water and touched it to her face. "Feels good, you'll feel better ma'am. Please

. . . I can't do much more." She moved her head slightly in the affirmative. He helped her to a sitting position, then quickly moved away to set up her tent.

As he worked at setting up the small tent, he listened for some indication that she might be bathing. There was nothing but the river running and the sounds of his own movements. Once the tent was up he began to shake and fold bedding, placing it just inside the tent flaps along with their satchels. He maintained a running conversation as he moved about so that she might know his location, perhaps drawing a measure of ease from his nearness. He also guessed that such chatter would give assurance that her privacy would not be invaded. He knew this had to be important. "Suspect I might catch a trout or two a little later. Haven't had one sizzlin' in my skillet since last fall."

He began to hear vigorous splashing and a smile spread across his face. His whole body seemed to relax. "Reckon she has some spunk. She is gonna fight back. Thanks Lord." He began to assemble utensils and what foodstuffs he had salvaged, setting them near the campfire. Adding wood to the fire, he remarked that they must have been "either living on love and coffee or someone made off with their food supplies."

He mixed-up a batch of biscuit dough and set the skillet warming in the coals. He moved the boiling coffee away from the heat where it would just simmer. He took some jerky from his saddlebags. It could only be described as a meager feast. "Until I catch some trout, we'll settle for coffee, biscuits and jerky. I shore hope she has the stomach and the perseverance."

It remained quiet behind the screen. Mckendree reckoned

she must be close to decent and called out. "Coffee is ready and the biscuits will be soon." He looked expectantly toward the blanket screen just as she stepped around it and moved slowly toward the campfire.

He tried to look her in the eyes, still red from crying, so full of hurt and pain. She had made an effort to tidy her hair as one hand unconsciously strayed to brush the wayward strands in place. She was very much a woman. The light shirtwaist did little to hide the swell and shape of her breasts. Mckendree thought, "Don't reckon I gave her near enough clothes to cover her proper." He moved to the tent and returned with a jacket. "There is still a chill in the air. You best put this on and stand here close by the fire."

Hesitating, she did as he suggested, never taking her eyes from his face. He noted she had the book of poetry clutched in her hand. He handed her a cup of coffee. "Be careful, it is scaldin' hot. The biscuits will be ready directly."

She held the coffee, not drinking any, and just studied him. He could see that the hurt in her eyes were accompanied by questions she needed to ask. An uneasy silence hovered about the two of them.

"I know I'm rough to look at," he ventured. "I'm some gentle though, like a shaggy old dog, and hurtin' about as much as you. I'd have givin' most anythin' to have gotten to you sooner, but that old river kinda' slowed me some. I'm sorry."

Before she could speak, he added, "I'm gonna call you Little Sister. It will ease our relationship. There ain't no towns nearby, and I'm not anxious to go into those that are closest. We may be together for a spell. Do you have a brother?"

She only nodded her head.

He hesitated. "Well, you just let me take his place in your feelins' and needs, and we should be able to work things out. You're a right attractive woman, Little Sister. I reckon you know that. Strangers are gonna ask questions. Until we can find the means, and make arrangements to get you on your way home, we're brother and sister."

Her guard came up instinctively, but just as quickly lowered. Mckendree fidgeted. "Looks like those biscuits are 'bout right. Here, take one and try it with a piece of jerky. It's all we got." Without taking her eyes from his face, she took small bites of food but seemed to have little interest in eating.

McKendree grabbed a biscuit and some jerky and squatted down by the fire, studying the flames as he ate. When he had his fill he tossed the remains of his coffee aside and placed his cup on a rock nearby. He placed more wood on the fire. Standing thoughtfully, he said "Whoever put upon you took most everythin' of value, and all your foodstuffs but a little coffee. I did salvage your trunk and the things you had in it. I stashed it in some brush for safe keepin'. I'm gonna go back and stash the buggy, too. We just might be able to use it later if I can find a crossin' for the horses."

She stared level at him. "I can swim. I want to see where my husband is buried."

A deep worry dragged heavily at Mckendree. He had not planned on this. He had it in mind to cross the river alone, and look for what sign the assailants might have left behind. "It takes a right smart effort to get across. There just ain't no easy crossin'. Perhaps when the water goes down a bit, and you have a chance to . . ."

"I'm ready now," she said firmly, quietly adding, "I'll be all right."

Mckendree squatted, reaching for his cup. "OK Little Sister, but I reckon I'll have another biscuit and some coffee while I think on it. Been a long time since I've had real coffee. It's a taste and smell that shore grows on you." His gaze swept the woods. "I reckon I'll pack my gun across." He pulled some oilcloth from the saddlebag and tightly wrapped his gun. He rose and jammed it tight in his holster. "The day is wearin' down. If you are still of a mind to go for a cold swim, let's get to it. I'd like to get back while there is still a chance of sun for dryin' us out."

She rose and looked quizzically at him. He shrugged. "Downriver there seems to be the most likely spot." Her eyes

questioned his. "I used a rope and sling to bring you and your belongin's over," he explained. "It ain't there now. I didn't want anyone slippin' in on us. When we cross over you best listen hard and be watchful."

Mckendree led the way downriver. The horses showed some interest and then went back to browsing. He came to the place where he had most recently crossed. There wasn't any white water but the current ran swift and deep. Doubt and anxiety crossed her face, quickly replaced by something stronger as she moved closer to the water's edge.

"Now hold on just a minute, Little Sister," he said. "You might do well to at least take off your boots. They can drag you under for shore. These are the only clothes I own, so if you don't mind, I'll strip to my long johns. This is the third bath I've had today. My mother would have been proud."

She remained motionless, her eyes looking out over the water. Her thoughts were of her husband.

Clothes and moccasins removed, Mckendree buckled his gun belt around his waist and moved to her side. "Let me give you a hand with those boots."

Defiantly, she moved away. With haste and some awkwardness she wrenched her own boots off and removed her jacket.

"Swim hard as you can, and make for that backwater by the overhangin' pine. If the current pulls us beyond that point, I just don't know. I'm kinda clumsy in the water so I won't be much help."

"I can swim," she said.

A moment of doubt crossed his mind fed by the thought that she might be throwing her life away. It swiftly passed. She had already shown too much mettle. "Let's do it," he said as he dove in.

Without hesitation she followed suit. Sputtering as he surfaced, Mckendree looked side-to-side for her. Of little surprise, he could see that she was ahead of him and smoothly stroking toward their landmark. He followed her in a convincing—if not somewhat awkward—fashion.

She pulled herself up on the bank and turned to him to offer assistance. She seemed refreshed. He automatically reached for her hand and almost slipped back into the current, thinking to himself that she could easily distract a starving horse heading for the feedbag, her body sharply evident in her wet clothes, her shirtwaist like a second skin molded to her bosom.

Mckendree, still conscious of her appearance, felt flustered by her superior crossing of the river. Catching his breath, he thanked her, though somewhat grumpily, and began working his way up the bank.

She struggled keeping pace with his long stride. As they broke into the meadow, she asked to see her husband's grave first.

"I reckoned you would," he said. Before stepping from the woods into the meadow, he studied the trees on the far side. His eyes returned to the meadow and he moved out into the sunlight. She followed as they crossed to the fallen tree. He pointed to the exposed roots. "There it is, Little Sister," he said. "I placed his weddin' band under that rock. I figured it would do for a headstone, and the ring would make it some personal. I know it isn't much. I was anxious to get you across the river." Mckendree searched for a way to compensate for the limited and harsh reality of the gravesite.

She understood and softly said, "Thank you. My husband always talked about having a place in the western wilderness. I believe he would have liked this spot." Tears welled up in her eyes as she dropped to her knees beside the grave and cried.

Mckendree moved toward her then stopped himself, uncertain of what to do. "Stay here as long as you need. I want to stash the wagon and then do some lookin' around," he said.

Mckendree crossed to the buggy. He turned it right side up and worked it back into the brush near the trunk. With accustomed practice he removed any sign that might lead to its discovery. Looking toward the gravesite he noted she was still kneeling. He moved out into the wagon road and studied what signs might be left behind. "Looks like two horses, both shod. One must be a real bruiser from the size of those shoes." He

worked slowly along the edge of the road, a few hundred yards down one side and then back up the other. He found a bag of maple sugar. "They must have dropped this in their rush to get away. Lordy, this will taste good tonight, a real treat mixed with the biscuit dough."

Mckendree shook his head. 'Shore nuthin' about these tracks that will lead to anything. Maybe there is somthin' over where they abused Little Sister. She must have scrapped them some proper from the looks of all those scratches and bruises." Color squeezed into his face as his anger mounted. "Damn! Damn!"

He found a towel and some soap. "That helps solve some of the puzzle," he mused. "Looks like someone slipped up on her while the other took care of Larin. The sound of the river would have drowned out most noise."

Mckendree found a piece of green plaid with a button attached. "Must have got torn from a shirt." He tucked it in his holster. "Reckon one of them lost a shirt pocket. This just might lead somewhere." Then he spotted something shiny. "Well look what we have here. A brass ring torn off of something?" He wrapped it in the towel along with the soap and maple sugar. Going to the river's edge he tossed the bundle across.

Returning to the meadow he noted that she had moved to where their camp had been. He crossed over to her as she studied a large aspen tree. "My husband was going to carve our names on that tree," she said, looking at Mckendree. "Is there some way we might do it. I think he would like that, I would."

He nodded. "There was some broken glass back where the wagon was overturned. You just think on what you want and I'll go get a piece."

"My husband's name was Larin Willbright," she said when he returned. "I would like it to read:

LARIN AND LYNN WILLBRIGHT
MARCH 2, 1874"

She leaned against the tree and began to sob, her body racked with grief.

Mckendree reached above her and began etching 'L,' then asked for the spelling. "Is that L-A-R-I-N?"

"Yes," she sobbed. She recovered somewhat and stepped back.

He finished inscribing the names and date. "I reckon that does it." Tears welled up in his eyes as he watched her reach up and trace each letter with her finger. He waited briefly, then said, "We best be gettin' back across the river to some dry clothes before this chill brings on pneumonia."

Her voice was low and uneven. "Wait. Please." She reached down and picked up the broken piece of glass. She held it out to him. "Would you connect my name with his so that we might at least remain together in this place." When he finished, she softly murmured, "Thank you."

With a last look at the tree and across to the gravesite, she turned and led the way toward the river. He followed a pace or two behind. Admiration was strong in him for Little Sister. She reached the river first and without hesitation dove in.

Mckendree watched her swimming, so strong and smooth in her stroke. "Damn! I'm not conditioned for this." His was not an easy crossing. He fought the water and needed her assistance to get his footing as he climbed out. He hated to release her hand once he was on land. "Thanks," he said, somewhat defensively. "You best get up to camp and change. I'll gather up my clothes and bring up your boots and jacket when I come. Give a holler when you're decent."

His eyes followed her as she climbed the bank. He warmed at the sight of her. "She would make a right nice partner for life, but ain't no one worth four baths in one day. Jesus! I wish I had a dry pair of long johns."

He worked his way along the bank to their clothes and again carried on the ritual of wringing out his long johns and rubbing himself dry. "Lord, please keep that sun from settin' and leave those clouds over there on the other side of the mountain."

The sky darkened. "Damn!"

Dressed, he worked his way slowly back toward camp carrying her boots and jacket and gathering firewood as he

went. This time he carried his long johns. "I'm puttin' you on dry tonight. But I best hurry if I'm gonna get these damn things dry and catch any trout." Night would be settling in soon, for the days hadn't lengthened out yet and dark came early. The heavy cloud cover moving in did not help any.

Reluctant to barge in on her he waited. Shortly after he heard her call out, "You may come in by the fire."

Mckendree straightened. His first reaction was one of pleasure. "She's game." Smartly he strode into camp, the chill entirely gone as he took note of her at the campfire. She had stirred up the coals and added new wood. A good blaze was under way and she was adding coffee to the pot. Her attire was clearly more appropriate than what he had selected earlier, and not nearly so revealing. She wore a light buckskin jacket, something he had made note of earlier but assumed it had belonged to her husband. There was no doubt the jacket was cut to fit her.

She stared directly at him as he approached. He laid the wood by the fire and placed her boots and jacket beside her. They studied one another until Mckendree broke the silence. "Right nice fire, Little Sister. Soon as I soak up some heat and get these long johns up to dry, I'll slip down and catch some trout."

"I can hang those up for you," she said, trying to smile, "though from the looks of them a better place would be in the fire."

The touch of humor was not lost to Mckendree. He relaxed, returning her smile. "I reckon they're not much to look at, but they're the only ones I have. They're plumb clean now, too." He brushed a hand through his unruly hair. "I best get those fish before my stomach strips my backbone." He moved over and rummaged in his saddlebags, fetching a piece of line and a single hook. Returning to the campfire he salvaged the biscuit she had hardly touched.

"Reckon you'll be all right?" he inquired. "I'll not be long."

"I'll have the coffee ready," she said, as she rubbed the bruise at her temple.

Mckendree remembered the maple sugar and headed to the spot where he had tossed the bundle across the river.

CHAPTER 2

In all his years growing up, surviving the war and wandering the western wilderness, Mckendree had never encountered such grits and guts. This was something that belonged in a man's world and was governed by a man's code. She was real though, and how well he knew it. A new day had not come to pass since her husband had been killed and she brutally raped, yet she had outmatched him at the river. Her small size belied her strength; outwardly, she had already accepted what had happened and was quietly preparing for what lay ahead. But Mckendree knew that the days and nights ahead would not be easy for her, and the worry and concern began to drag at him. "Don't let me lose her, Lord."

The bundle was intact but the chute was not a likely spot to catch fish. He moved downriver to the backwater that he had made note of earlier. As he worked a piece of the biscuit into a ball, he pondered the river. Rivers were like good friends to him; he always felt better after a few hours in their presence. Now, because of the young girl, this river would always be something special.

He recalled a particular riffle back in his experience where he caught his first trout. That day had been sunny and warm; here,

the snow began to fall. "Damn! I'm daydreamin'. I best save this flood of memories and expectations until the weather warms up."

Mckendree slipped the dough ball on the hook and lowered it into the water. "I can think of better bait than this biscuit dough ol' fish, but it ain't to be had." He hooked a trout on almost immediately, horsed it out of the water, and it landed behind him. He retrieved it and smacked it on a rock. Baiting his hook, he tried again. This time the wait was longer, but the results were the same. Mckendree gutted and cleaned the two trout in the river. He felt like a kid again as he headed back to camp with the trout in one hand and the maple sugar in the other.

Mckendree frowned. "Best not be too pleased with myself. I can't afford to let comfort set in. Things are gonna be a mite testy for a while. Suspect I'll have to get off private-like and try this six-shooter." He shifted the sugar to his hand with the fish. He drew his gun smoothly—almost. "Sweet fires of Hell!" His hand clumsily held his gun for it was still wrapped in oilcloth. The torn piece of shirt fluttered to the ground. "She doesn't need a lovesick loner lookin' after her. Scotty, old man, get a grip on yourself. She would have to be blind to find you attractive."

He picked up the shirt fragment and put it and the oilcloth in his pocket. Subdued, he returned to camp. The coffee was boiling and its aroma drifted well beyond the firelight. Darkness was settling in around them and the snow had thickened. She had a larger fire going; his long johns hanging nearby on a makeshift rack made for a ghostly sight. She was young, but no tenderfoot.

Lynn watched him as he scraped some coals from the fire and made a bed for the skillet. He dipped the fish in salt and flour and put them to sizzling, then prepared dough and placed it in a pot near the fire. He looked to see her quietly watching his every move. He handed her his knife. "Mind the fish for a minute. They'll soon need turning. I'm gonna set me up a shelter over there in those pines. We might be in for a few inches of snow by mornin'." He gathered up his saddle and pack and moved out beyond the circle of firelight.

She could hear him as he stretched his tarp and prepared

for the stormy night ahead. She turned the fish and keyed her hearing to each sound Mckendree made. His voice was clear in the night air as he soothed the horses. "I'll save a biscuit or two for you, Old Hoss." Lynn found herself anxious for him to return and wondering about him. He was rough on the outside like those others . . . yet she felt secure having him near.

In just minutes he was back. "Fish looks about right," he said as he squatted by the fire. He now had on his sheepskin coat and loomed as a dark shadow in the firelight. Mckendree unrolled the towel, deftly slipping the brass ring into his pocket while holding up the bag of brown sugar. "Found this along the road. Plumb has my mouth waterin'." He took the knife and opened the bag and poured some chunks of maple sugar into the pot with the dough. "These won't be the best sweet cakes you ever had, but they should be right tasty."

The meal was quiet. Hunger had pushed other miseries aside. She had even cleaned up her fish and was on her second cup of coffee. Mckendree broke the silence. "I promised the horses some biscuits. They both have a sweet tooth, but there hasn't been much to flavor it." Mckendree stirred up the fire, adding more wood as he did so, and moved off into the darkness toward the horses.

Returning, Mckendree stopped just outside the circle of light from the campfire and studied Lynn. The firelight painted her in vivid colors: her hair, dotted with snowflakes, reflected the glow and her face appeared surrounded by a soft shroud of tawny gold. Shadows still etched in her face revealed her pain, though he could also see pride and strength. Her beauty awoke in him memories from the past. He looked away. His shoulders slumped and sadness filled his eyes. He moved to the campfire and said abruptly, "You'd best get some rest. Tuck yourself in good. The temperature is droppin'. I'll be over yonder should you need me."

She stood as though ready to speak. Her arms rose and crossed her breasts. Fear and loneliness had replaced the pain that had been etched in her face. She would have no peace of mind tonight. Lord, give me strength to see this trail to the

end, he thought. Then, impulsively, he shared that he was “not a prayin’ man, haven’t really put my mind to such for years. But today, as I laid your husband to rest, the prayin’ helped put me to ease. Might help some now?”

She straightened, letting both arms drop to her sides. Her eyes met his and seemed to say, “I would like that.”

As he looked into the dwindling fire he carefully chose his words. “Lord, you haven’t heard too much from me before today, but I’d be mighty grateful if you’d hear me out. I know you never promised the way would be easy or that we were meant to taste the joy and not the pain. But Lord, she’s had her share of sufferin’ today. Reckon you could clear some rocks out of the trail ahead. This battered girl could use some comfortin’ and strength, and a little guidance to buoy her up and carry her on. Please Lord, help her bear the burdens ahead, and know that hope has not died nor dreams all fled. Thanks, Lord.”

The last of the fire fluttered out, and only the glow of the coals broke the mantle of darkness. Soberly he said, “Good night.”

With tears in his eyes and stumbling slightly, Mckendree moved off into the darkness.

He did not see her, but as the darkness swallowed him up, her chin lifted and her face showed resoluteness. He also did not hear her as she softly said, “I trust you, Scott Mckendree.”

CHAPTER 3

Morning broke clear and cold. A light film of fresh snow lay like a clean blanket. "Damn!" Mckendree swore, his snow covered long johns standing like a snowman by the dead campfire. He stirred down into the ash and found some hot coals and soon had a fire going and coffee heating. The tent was buried in a cloak of white. He looked about. "Still be an hour or so before the sun touches here. Reckon I might get a deer before she rises." With a stick he wrote in the snow, 'Gone huntin'. "She should see that." He added wood to the fire, then saddled his horse and rode out.

Within a mile of camp he found signs of fresh deer and soon after spotted one nibbling on a juniper. Mckendree got within fifty feet before it whirled and bounded. With practiced efficiency he raised his rifle and shot the deer midway in its second bound.

Nearly an hour had elapsed before he returned to camp with the deer. He had bled and gutted it, saving the liver. She had replenished the fire. As Mckendree rode into camp she poured coffee and held out a cup for him. He dismounted and dropped the deer carcass to the ground. Loosening the cinch he turned and took the coffee. "Smells good. This coffee is just what I ordered, Little Sister. It looks like the storm has blown over."

Morning sunlight, filtered by the trees, lit her face. The fear he had seen there the day before was gone, but the memory of what had happened was still like a dark shadow. "Good morning," Lynn said, "and thank you, Scotty, for everything."

Mckendree flushed. "Hope you like fresh liver. Thought we'd have it for breakfast." His easy way with words failed him as he looked at her. He hunkered over and began to prepare the liver and a batch of biscuits.

Lost in their own thoughts the two ate in silence, taking turns replenishing the fire. A routine seemed to be emerging; he would finish off the coffee, she would make more. His eyes followed her. His mind wandered. Just yesterday she was a stranger, but now you've shared something with her. You are no longer strangers. She is important to you—you are important to each other. How many strangers in your past? How many bivouacs have you shared with friends you can't recall, only to become strangers again. This time it seems important to not let that happen.

She broke into his reverie. "What are your plans?"

"A little more snow on this fresh snow and the river will be plumb out of its banks. We'll stay here another day and smoke some jerky for our trip. Right now I thought I'd saddle up and look around upriver for a place we can cross the horses tomorrow. I don't know how far this gorge runs."

"I mean . . . beyond that," she asked, a touch of anxiety in her voice.

Mckendree shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't know, Little Sister." Then, knowing she would need something more firm to grasp, he added, "Old Jessie, that sorry pack horse of mine don't take kindly to anythin' but a pack on her back. She'll work all right with the buggy. I figure early in the mornin' we best cross over, get the buggy, and head for the nearest settlement. I expect that will be Moran. It will take three or four hard days to get there with the buggy."

Mckendree added some wood to the fire, then stood and studied her. Her eyes were still rimmed in red and he guessed they must burn like they were full of sand. "You need some

rest, Little Sister," he said, "and just stick close to camp. We'll talk some more when I get back. I saw some fern fiddles . . . "

Lynn looked quizzically at him.

A touch of humor flickered in Mckendree's eyes. "The ferns are just bustin' out of the ground. I saw some down near where we crossed the river." He held up a hooked little finger. "Fern as it starts to grow in the spring looks like this. Most folks call the new shoots fiddles. They are right tasty."

He continued, sensing that she needed to understand clearly what was happening. "A body can be filled-up plumb fine on venison, but meat alone don't keep the body goin'. I heard tell of a man starvin' to death stuffed with fresh venison. We ate the last of the biscuits. My system has a cravin' for some greens. With this snow those fiddles in the rock crevices along the river may be all we can find. Ain't nothin' better than a fresh venison steak, but it don't give a body all the get-up-and-go it needs.

She nodded.

Before she could say anything, Mckendree promised to take care of the deer when he got back. "We can talk some more then," he said, "just don't you worry none, Little Sister."

"Scotty, be careful," Lynn said.

Their eyes met. After a short interval he shrugged, "Take care. My saddle gun is over by my bedroll." No need for further explanation, he thought. He abruptly moved to Old Hoss, tightened the cinch, and rode upriver. He only glanced in her direction briefly, before the woods obscured the camp.

