



The little boat is crowded with people. Men, most holding their hats, smile as they jostle against women wearing fancy, feather-topped caps. Dark trousers and starched, white shirts; long skirts and blouses; all modestly buttoned, despite the morning's growing heat.

There is a sudden start followed by a collective sheepish laugh when Dancer sounds her high-pitched whistle, backs away from her berth, and swings out to begin her three-mile journey, the length of Fiddler's Lake. A slight, cooling breeze sweeps away the boiler's smoke. Her passengers smile. Some distance away from the dock, the pilot signals and the engineer eases the boat ahead.

Steam chuffs. Water churns from the propeller. Slowly at first, then gaining speed, Dancer splashes northward, headed for the Fair Grounds at the far end of the lake. She is the smallest of the passenger boats on the lake, holding about twenty-five paying customers when she is as crowded as she is today. There is a bench running around the inside of the boat but nobody sits, except for a few of the older men and women on board.

Dancer's shallow, widely rounded hull has a tendency to rock when the waves are high. But on calmer days, like today, she's nice and steady. Her fresh, bright white, new summer paint makes her as pretty as any boat on the lake. She may not have the lines of the newer and larger boats, but her crew is proud of her. The three, compact men are brothers, each a few years away from the next. Hard workers, they are as dependable as the day is long, not counting the middle boy's occasional lost argument with

liquor. They all carry freckles and sky blue eyes. Each successively older man shows a correspondingly smaller amount of curly, bright red hair. They took the boat over from their father and uncles and split the duties of pilot, engineer, and purser among themselves.

The pilot's position naturally fell to the oldest. The youngest was the most mechanically inclined, perfect for the job of engineer. By default, the middle one ended up as purser, the man who handles the money.

That's fine by him. With nothing to do once the boat is on the lake, he stands in the starboard doorway and enjoys the fresh air. Squinting into the sunshine, he gazes at the passing shoreline, looking nowhere in particular. He notes, more from habit than anything else, that they are coming up on the Narrows, the point where the lake's opposite shores approach one another and drop from their high bluffs. Here, sand and gravel beaches face off with less than two hundred yards of water between.

He glances at the bow. There, in dark suit and tie, his older brother wears his pilot's cap low on his forehead. Standing at the wheel, he is intent on steering the boat through the passage. The purser looks amidships at his younger brother, dressed in bow tie and rolled shirt-sleeves, fussing with his fire, boiler, and engine. Grinning, the middle brother feels no envy for either. His siblings can worry about the risks of collision or explosion. After collecting the fares, all he has to do is wait for the next landing. A fellow can even take a nip or two, now and then, providing it's good, clean, and carries no smell.

It is a perfect day on Fiddler's Lake. The bright morning throws sparkles on the tiny waves skittering across the water's surface. Even when it's calm, the lake is the most comfortable place to be, in part because Dancer is quick enough to outrun her own coal smoke.

But she is far from the fastest on the Fiddler's Lake. The purser swivels his head, looking astern at the source of a loud whistle. It's the much larger Seneca, gaining steadily. The purser shakes his head as the larger boat easily overtakes them on the right. Dancer's passengers stumble as the larger boat's wake strikes them broadside. Then, at a not quite safe distance ahead, Seneca cuts directly across their bow to land workers at the construction site of the large, but not yet complete, West Bluff Hotel.

Seneca might be run by pirates who behave as if their next paying customer is their last, but Dancer has no such worries. Loaded to capacity, all she has to do is continue up to the Fair Grounds at the north end of the lake. They are about halfway there when Seneca whistles to steam by again, this time on the left. Dancer's pilot provides a smoother ride by turning and cutting across the large waves produced by the faster boat.

A shrill, three-note call from behind announces Conneaut. The sixty-foot boat charges through the water, also overtaking them on the left. Again, Dancer's pilot cuts across the larger boat's wake. It's a move that puts them well to the west of their usual course.

The purser steps down into the boat and squeezes his way through the crowd. He keeps a straight face as he

pushes past the young ladies, sliding by closer than necessary, inhaling their various perfumes. Gripping the roof supports on either side of the doorway, he looks in disgust at the size of the new icehouses going up along the west shore of the lake's North Basin. You'd think the southern houses, down near town would be enough.

In the bow, the oldest brother watches closely as Seneca and Conneaut race to the right, cutting near a blue rowboat, one of dozens carrying early-morning fishermen. Dancer's pilot grimaces as the fishermen panic at what looks like a near miss. He steers again to the left, passing behind the rowboat and giving it a wide berth.

They haven't traveled much farther when the pilot suddenly turns and shouts "Damn! Albert! Cut the engine!"

The crowd in Dancer falls silent as the curse brings disapproving glances between passengers.

The pilot leans forward, straining to see the object in the water. The purser feels a slight bump. The passengers hear a hushed whisper slide along the underside of the boat. The engineer watches the slowly spinning propeller shaft. There's a muffled thump. The shaft stops.

The purser and engineer work their way to the back of the boat and the rounded sweep of Dancer's stern. They've caught up waterlogged and half submerged tree limbs and boards before. There's never any damage as long as the engine's slowed. With an air of practice, the brothers intertwine their legs as they lay down on their stomachs across opposite sides of the fantail. They lean out and over

the edge of the boat, cussing a bit as they go. They fall silent.

Hoisting themselves back onto the deck, they look at each other with wide, sky-blue eyes. The stricken face of their older brother as he makes his way through the passengers tells them they all know the same thing:

There's a drowned woman tangled in the propeller of their beloved little boat.



I hate traveling by train. The hurry and noise and stink and crowds. I hate it.

I'm old enough to remember when there were hardly any trains, when an engine was a marvel, an almost magical thing. I remember traveling by canal at a slow, steady, easy, human pace. Well, a mule's pace, maybe.

Canal travel has been gone almost thirty years. Railroads run in their place and mostly along the same routes. The scenery's familiar, but it rushes by at breakneck speeds. Trains may carry more, and they may be faster, but I've never read of a tow-mule exploding with a stuck safety. I will allow the railways bring opportunity for business, but I hope with all my might that someday a more civilized form of transportation takes its place. One where people aren't treated like cattle, freight, and baggage.

I shift in my seat, trying to find a comfortable position. It's not easy, crammed in a car with more people than there are seats. I sit back and close my eyes, trying to calm my

train-sick stomach, well aware I'm hurtling along at the God-forsaken speed of thirty-five miles an hour. Kids scream, mothers shush, and men talk and shout with their mouths full of the boxed lunches I refused to eat.

I catch myself tapping my leg with my apple-wood cane. Thud-thud-thud. A bad habit displayed when I'm aggravated or nervous. Not only does it tip my hand at business negotiations and, maybe more importantly, card games, it also makes people uncomfortable when they realize one of my limbs isn't real. I smile slightly. I suppose the leg's real enough, but it isn't the one I was born with. Then there's the unspoken question as to how I ended up with it. I'd be happy to answer if people were brave enough to ask, but I'll be damned if I'm going to offer the information to satisfy some fool's idle curiosity. The hell with them.

I sigh. I'm grouchier than usual because it has been a long day. I've come down from Cleveland, through the Cuyahoga Valley, and to the city of Akron. There, I made the switch to the train north from Kent, and it's now, in the final stretch of my trip, I decide I cannot sit any longer.

I lurch up and out of my seat, grabbing its upholstered back for balance. One thing about a wooden leg, it makes it difficult to keep your feet on moving surfaces. I suspect all of those peg-legged pirates I've heard stories about spend much of their time falling down, stumbling about, lashed to the mizzen, or holding on for dear life.

I carefully walk to the comfort room at the rear of the car. I enter and close the door. I don't need to use it, thank

God, I can't imagine trying to get my drawers down and plopping myself onto the seat while being tossed around inside this little space. I shudder to think of the "newly improved and smoothed track" roaring by, a few feet beneath my bare bottom. Being in this small room intensifies my train sickness, but my nausea pales when compared to my desire to find a space with nobody around me. Even if it's only for a few moments.

I look in the mirror and, as always of late, am startled by the man looking back at me. Graying hair, lines on my face. I admit resenting the passage of time with its fading senses and slowing reflexes. My hair recedes from the top of my head to spring to life in my ears and nose. I glare at my reflection and rub my chin. I recently rid myself of a beard I had carried for more than twenty years. I'm still not sure if I'm going to grow it back. I think maybe I look younger without it. I am certain I don't look any prettier.

I return to my seat as we slow for our destination. The engineer picks the perfect speed—one that results in us being pulled through our train's own coal smoke. It and tiny cinders pour into our car's open windows. How wonderful.

We crawl past the remnants of an abandoned canal lock and come to the northwest shore of Fiddler's Lake. There's a new rail spur that looks as if it'll run along the lake's north end, probably to the Fair Grounds. Advertisements in the Cleveland papers make Fiddler's Lake and the Fair sound like heaven on earth. Truth be told, the area *is* pretty nice. The fact the railroads are pouring money into the place makes it worth their while to boast.

The air clears of smoke when our train jerks to a halt. Dammit. To get so close and then stop like this. Since there's only one track, I'm willing to bet there's another train, late at the station. If I had two good legs, I'd jump this deathtrap and walk the remaining couple of miles. As it is, I'm stuck.

To the right is nothing but a vast low-brush swamp. To the left, the construction site of my uncle's huge, bright yellow icehouses and the lake, beyond. The complex, along with an already completed parallel section of track, looks to be coming along nicely.

There's a loudly whining sawmill driven by a stationary engine belching fumes as it works to make boards from one of the many logs laying alongside it. As luck would have it, a sudden breeze blows the thick wood smoke from the mill over and into our car. A few of the passengers stand and begin closing the windows. The overheated car grows even hotter.

Some of the new buildings are in use. A number of insulated rail cars are in the process of being loaded with large blocks of ice. The heavy, ashy smoke from the mill is carried, in part, over the ice as it slides into the freights. That'll please the customers on the far end of the line.

All conversation in the car stops when the safety on the sawmill's engine blows open and fills the air with white, live steam and a loud, screeching hiss. Everyone grimaces. Mothers hold their hands over their children's ears. Several youngsters look as if they're crying, but I can't hear them.



Unable to catch our own engine's whistle, we're surprised when the train lurches forward. Several people who stood to close their windows are thrown violently about the car. Another simple joy of train travel.

We creep down the track that occupies the old canal's tow-path until we cross over the bridge at the lake's outlet. Past that, the train wheezes to a stop. The conductor arrives from the rear of the train to call the station. "Fiddler's Lake!" He shouts. "Rizvville and Fiddler's Lake!"

I am home.



I'll never understand why train passengers leap to their feet and grab their bags as soon as the cars come to a stop. They stand up fast and then spend the next ten minutes milling around, like so many lost sheep.

Despite my desire to get into the fresh air, I remain in my seat and look out the window to my left at Fiddler's Lake Station. It's easily twice the size it was when I made my last visit, but it's still a standard-looking affair. A light gray, board and batten building capped with a tin roof. A multitude of telegraph wires run to and from the station along the poles beside the track. The building has a number of broad windows and a well-worn bench running alongside.

The station's boardwalk extends a good hundred feet beyond both ends of the building. It's awash with people, but not for long as the crowd makes its way past the station,

heading down the embankment for the docks along the lakeshore. I see a number of boats lined up and ready to go. Some are pulling away from their berths, filling the air with even more smoke.

I wait until everyone has left the car before standing. I disembark on the town side, opposite the lake and its crowds, backing down the ladder, holding tight to the railing and double-stepping as I go. Moving gingerly across the rough grade, I hail the first young driver I see and toss him a half-dollar, about ten times the normal fare for almost any ride I could take. The effect of the money is immediate. The boy hurries from his four-wheeled rig and takes my bag. At this point in my life, drivers are much more likely to offer an arm to assist me up into their buggies. I used to resent the implication. But now, I appreciate their efforts. I've found a man can never have enough help.

The lad climbs to his seat beside me and gathers the set of reins. He's tall and lanky, seemingly all arms and legs, and is wearing a fairly clean white shirt with no collar. His sleeves are rolled up. His gray knickerbockers seem somewhat threadbare and a little big for him. Hand-me-downs? The short trousers are buckled below the knee and cover the top of his dark gray stockings. His shoes are scuffed, but not holed. He's without a hat or cap and sports a full head of light brown, tightly wavy hair that makes me slightly jealous. His face is clean enough to be respectable. He appears to be well loved and cared for.

"Where to mister?" He asks in a voice that's starting to break.

I take off my straw hat and toss it in the back with my bag, glad to be done with it for a while. Then I turn to look into the driver's darkly tanned face and young, gray eyes.

"The cemetery," I reply. "Take your time."

No doubt a strange destination to start. The boy looks at me for a moment, sizing me up. "C'mon Becky," he clucks at his horse, an old, brown mare with a single, front left white sock.

We slowly move ahead. My young man takes his rig south on Depot Street and turns left on Main. Feeling like a tourist in my own hometown, I swivel my head, taking in the changes. I see new stores along both sides of the street, with actual boardwalks between them. Clothing stores, a second hardware store, at least three more eateries. A billiard hall... I wonder who put forth the effort to get approval from the city fathers for that! Easier to build a hundred saloons than put up a single table. I smile to myself. It's one thing to get drunk, quite another to have something to entertain you while doing so.

Some of the familiar places are still around. I see Burkett's General Store with the same old bench out front. "More fish caught on that bench than from the lake," my father used to say. There's Sivits' Ice Cream, still in business. I'll have to stop in and have a dish, when I get the chance. I'd enjoy a visit with old man Sivits. If he's still alive, that is.

My young driver pipes up. "Where you in from, mister?"

"Down from Cleveland. But I grew up here. Haven't been back in some time. I might know your folks, though. What's your name?"

"You probably don't know us. We moved up from Youngstown a couple of years ago. My name's Bobby, uh, Bob Tavers." He sticks his hand out to me.

I take it. "Pleased to meet you, Bob. My name's Rizvi. Ashrad Rizvi."

He looks hard at me, I can tell the name sounds odd to him. It sounds odd to me.

Then it registers and his eyes grow wide. "Rizvi! Like Rizvillage? That you?"

"I'm afraid so. You still willing to drive me around?"

He nods and smiles. "You bet, Mr. Rizvi. Wait'll the guys hear about this! I got the guy that founded the town in my rig!"

"Hold on, there! My grandpa, Esau Rizvi, and old Steve Evans did that. I came along years later."

His smile dims and wrinkles cross forehead. "Oh. Well. But you're almost famous, right?"

I laugh. "That's me. Almost famous." I decide I like gray-eyed Bob Tavers.

We turn south on Chestnut. A little farther, now. I notice the dust, deep on the road. "Been pretty dry, has it?"

He nods. "Yessir. Hot, too. Pa keeps saying it's gonna rain. His knee bothers him when the rain's coming." The boy has a serious look. "But it hurts him when he works hard, too, and he's been doing that."

"What's he do?"

"Carpenter. Up at the icehouses."

I look at him. "I came past there on the train. He working today?"

The boy shakes his head. "Not there. Not today."

"Oh... You thinking of learning the trade?"

Young Bob Tavers blows out his breath, puffing his lips, sounding like his horse. "Shucks. Who'd wanna do that all day? Besides my brother's gonna be a carpenter."

"And so, what do you want to do when you grow up?"

He looks at me, light in his eyes. "Drive one of the boats out on the lake!"

I smile broadly at his enthusiasm, then grow solemn as we round the right-hand corner onto Watson. One block ahead we see the iron gate in the fence that surrounds the graves.

As we approach, Bob gives me the eye. "You don't want me to drive in there, do you?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No! Well, all those dead people..."

"The dead ones are the safe ones. You can let me out at the gate. I'll be a while, but you stick near. I've got someplace else to go after this. Come looking for me if you get bored, but don't leave me behind. Promise?"

I can feel his desire to get back to the station and more fares. He wrestles with it for a split second, then nods.

We pull up to the cemetery gate and I haul myself out of the buckboard and onto the ground.

Once I have my footing, I look up at Bob who's staring intently, no doubt curious about my awkward dismount.

"Remember," I remind him. "Don't leave."

"I promised I wouldn't!"



I turn and walk into the cemetery, the only one the town has ever had. A few folks are buried in family plots out on some of the farms but, for the most part, every, single person who ever died in Rizvillage is buried here. People laughed when the town fathers laid out over a hundred acres for the graveyard. I figure it'll be filled before too many generations have passed.

A few yards beyond the gate, I pay my respects at the Williamson family plot.

Past that, I don't have far to walk, which is a good thing since the ground is more uneven than I'm used to. I pick my way carefully and take my time, leaning heavily on my stick. The Rizvis are far enough away from the gate to be unseen by passersby, but near enough to the front of the place to be fashionable, as if a person can be fashionable in death.

The graveyard holds a wide variety of markers running from nothing more than wooden slabs to the ornate. My family has to be ostentatious, as if there was any other choice. No simple markers for us. No, sir. In the center of the plot sits a large, fifteen foot column of black granite with the family name carved in deep relief. My grandparents lie there. Around each face is where my more immediate family meets its eternal rest.

Father and Mother lay on the south side. On the north are two empty plots, one for my Uncle Isaac, who is still alive, the other for the wife he's never had. The east side waits for the next generation. A shame to waste such prime real estate.

Around the column's west side I go, taking it slow. There, is a small and simple brown sandstone monument. Feeling the familiar rise of sorrow, I run my hands over the top of the smooth, curved, sun-warmed slab and read, for what always feels like the first time, the words inscribed. "Gone from sight but not from heart, I send my love to thee - Dearest wife, Alicia and daughter, Evangeline."

They died the same day, the fifth of July, 1861, one giving birth to the other. I wasn't there. Far off, instead, to the south and east, along with so many others trying to preserve the Union. Word of their death came after Bull Run. Before I began to lose my leg. We had been on the move. The mail didn't find me for several weeks. It didn't matter. I could've never made it back in time, even if I had heard straight away.

I never kissed my wife goodbye. I never held my baby girl. Their funeral was arranged by her family and my friends. All I have of them is hidden away in a dresser drawer, a lock of hair from each and a photograph, the two of them together in their casket with eyes and lips sewed shut.

I stand for a time, filled with the thoughts of a life I missed. Before each rare visit I figure I'm past the point of

tears. Yet, my vision always blurs. That never hurt anyone, I suppose.

I hear somebody come up behind me. I wipe my eyes and turn to see the face of the man that saved *me* for this life, Abner Evans.

"Thought it was you," he says, like the last time we met was yesterday. He offers a hand much rougher, with a grip far stronger than my own.

It takes me a moment to reconcile this older man with the person I saw last time I visited. I want to embrace him, but don't dare, for Abner has grown taciturn with the passing years. An overt display of affection would embarrass him.

"Shaved your beard." He raises an eyebrow. "Doesn't make you look much younger."

I bark a laugh. And then, remembering where I am, quiet myself down. There's a shovel on his shoulder. "Working?"

He nods. "Digging, now that it's cooled. Good day for it too, as dry as it's been. Walk with me?"

I hesitate. "I have a rig waiting at the gate. I don't want it to leave."

Abner smiles, and points a chin in that direction. "I came around that way. He's not going anyplace seeing as he's asleep under the chestnuts. C'mon. I'll stick to the paths."

As we walk, I look at his lined face in profile. My friend was always smarter than me, taller and better looking, too. Straight nose, strong chin, sleepy brown-hazel eyes.

Despite his quiet nature, maybe because of it, he was enjoyable company. He liked having a good time in his



younger years, probably even more than me. As he grew older and married, Abner became serious about religion. The personal, strong faith that has eluded me. Nowadays, for Abner, time and trust in the Almighty is the solution for nearly every problem. He gets push-it-down-your-throat with it, sometimes, but I can forgive him. He deserves the comfort he gathers from his beliefs, even though I am jealous of it.

He smiles. "Must've been quite a trip down from Cleveland."

"How do you mean?"

"You're filthy. Hold out your handkerchief."

I oblige.

He unslings a canteen from around his shoulder and pours a good amount of water into the white cloth. I run it over my face and around the back of my neck and am surprised by the amount of black soot I gather. "I hate trains."

"Me, too," he grins. "Let's go back to canal boats and stage coaches."

We're almost at a meander of Fiddler's Creek, the stream that starts at the lake's outlet, when he turns, walks off what trace of path remains, and paces down the row of graves. Each spot is designated by slightly sunken earth instead of a stone. Potter's Field. Those too destitute for a marker, or poor souls that are unknown, unwanted, or otherwise ignored.

I follow, unable to match his purposeful stride. He reaches the end of the row, the very edge of the cemetery,

sticks the shovel into the ground and then pushes a small stake into the earth beside it. He steps back a few paces and takes a small object from his pocket.

It takes me a moment to realize that it's a compass.

He moves back and forth, turns from side to side, then places another stake at his feet.

"What are you doing?"

He looks at me. Cocks his head. "Finding east."

"East?"

"Don't you remember? From the war?" He asks seriously. "All are buried with their heads to the west. So, when Christ returns in the east and His Trumpets sound, the faithful can rise from their graves to face Him and become His Army of the Righteous. Everyone in this place, including the poorest and most unloved, is buried so they can rise to face the east. We are equal in God's Divine Grace."

I look around to see all the graves aligned just so. "Yes. I do remember, Abner. Despite the effort I've put into forgetting." Then, to change the subject, "who you digging for today?"

Abner takes off his coat and rolls up his shirtsleeves, keeping his collar and tie. "You've not heard about the woman?" He bends and begins to strip away the sod.

I watch him work. "Woman?" I echo.

"The woman found drowned in the lake this morning?" Looking up and seeing my confusion, he continues, "caught up in the propeller of Dunbar's boat."

"My God. David Dunbar? In the Dancer's prop?"

Abner frowns at me, no doubt for using the Lord's name in such a way. Then he's back to digging. "That's the boat, but old man Dunbar give it up couple years ago. His kids run it now. The redheads."

I nod. Who could forget David Dunbar's three redheaded sons? Hot as firecrackers. "Who was she? The woman?"

He shrugs. "Nobody knows. Probably never will. She's pretty much a mess from what I'm told, what with her chewed up in the propeller after being in the lake long enough to float." His eyebrows go up. "You know?"

I shiver at the childhood memory of the two of us finding a body washed up on shore in North Basin. The lake holds its victims for about two weeks. When it surrenders them, they're in sorry shape.

"They're burying her Monday morning. Would've done it today, I suppose, except I'm too doggone old to work through the heat of the day, and they never hire extra help for a pauper. Tomorrow's Sunday, of course." He stops digging and sighs, scratching behind his left ear, he turns to squint at me. "I didn't want her this close to the crick. She'll be soaked every time it rains. I told the trustees, but they insisted. As it is, the only reason the grave won't be half-full of water now is because it's been so dry."

I marvel at his bluntness. "I'd have to agree. Doesn't seem right."

"Poor woman. Don't even know her name. Everybody deserves a name."

Chewing my lower lip, I glance up the slight rise to my wife and child's resting place. I feel very old.

Again, Abner's digging. "How's the leg?"

"What? Oh, fine." I thump it with my stick. "Same as always."

"Still hurting you?" He's referring to the unnerving pain that used to bother me, as if the leg that wasn't there was being pulled and bent.

"No, that's mostly gone. I can't complain about it too much."

"Not for a man who ought to be dead." He looks up from his digging and smiles. "Well, I have work to do and your ride's coming down the road. Come visit tomorrow afternoon. Not working then. We're still at the sexton's house. We'll share dinner. The wife'll be happy to see you."

"You bet." I turn east to walk up the rise to meet Bob, Becky, and their rig.



"Thanks for driving in to pick me up!"

"I decided there was nothing to be afraid of. Besides, I was wondering what was taking so long," the boy says as I climb to my seat.

"I took nap," I say, joking with him.

He narrows his eyes, giving me a slightly suspicious look. "Where to now?"

"Let's go up Watson to Lake and then take me to the Lord House."

Bob sits up straighter at the name of our destination. He doesn't say a word but stirs Becky into a fast walk toward the cemetery gate.

We clear the east end of town and take the little rise to cross the railroad tracks. I look to my left and see the South Basin of Fiddler's Lake coming into view. I take in a deep breath, smelling the water and flooding my mind with memories. I see my young driver pretending to watch the road, but giving me a sidelong glance.

"Spend much time out on the lake, Bob?"

"Not as much as I like. I do fish, some."

"Have much luck?"

"Yessir. Caught me a fourteen-inch muskellunge last week. You fish?"

"My father did, but I never had the knack."

"Some don't."

We bounce over the tracks and settle onto the road. Passing my uncle's older icehouses, still in use. With the lake on the left side, railroad tracks, old canal, and south swamp on the right, we continue on to the high bluff about a half a mile away. The setting sun casts a long shadow down the road in front of us.

We ride a while in silence. Bob takes it easy, but I can tell he's in a hurry, probably to get home to his evening meal.

"Did you hear about the woman who drown?" I ask over the clatter of the horse.

"Yeah. Got caught in Dancer's prop."

"That's what I heard. Who do you think she was?"

He shrugs, but doesn't answer, paying extra attention to his rig as Becky works to pull us up the steep bluff and into the drive that runs beside the Lord House.

Coming to a stop, the horse stands, huffing and stamping, sounding nothing so much as a hay-fueled engine.

He sets the brake and jumps from his seat. Grabbing my bag and hat, he stands, curiously watching my awkward leg, as I ease myself down from the buckboard.

I'm thinking I'll sleep well tonight.

I repeat my question on the identity of the drowned woman.

He shrugs again, carrying my bag and hat and setting them near the door of the building. "Nobody knows who she is. But Pa said she's pretty."

"Your pa?"

He turns to look at me. "Yep."

"And he would know because...?"

He sighs as he walks back to me. "Because he's a carpenter, like I said. He builds boxes for the undertaker. He was called down from the icehouses to measure her. Dinnertime, he said it was a shame such a pretty young woman had to die that way. Said she looked like she was sleeping."

I stare at him as he climbs aboard, then reach into my pocket and try to hand the boy a quarter dollar.

"I can't take seventy five cents for a little trip like this. It'd be stealing. Ma'll wonder what I did to get it!"

"Now... Take this. Give your ma the half-dollar. This is for you."

He smiles as he slides the coin into his pocket.

"Bob, let me ask you, would you be interested in being my driver for a few days?"

He looks down at me, dubious.

"I've been away for a long time. I need somebody who knows what's been going for the past couple of years."

He hesitates, needing to be convinced.

"How much money do you earn in a day? Four bits?"

"Driving? On a good day?"

I nod.

"On a really good day?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Bob, on a really good day."

"Well," he scratches the side of his face, "let's see." He runs the calculations in his head, no doubt adding extra for good measure. "Maybe six bits. Maybe." He rocks his head from side to side. "Sometimes more, sometimes less."

"Alright, so listen. Starting tomorrow, I'll pay you a dollar at the end of each day and an extra two dollars if you stick with me the whole time. I'm here four more days. That'd make it, what?"

"One times four plus two. Six dollars total," he says quickly. "Six dollars," he repeats more loudly, as if I'll change my mind. He blinks at the sum, knowing it's almost as much pay as his father makes. "Wow! For that much money I'd drive you to perdition!"

I laugh. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that, but I'll make sure you earn your pay. Pick me up here at seven tomorrow morning." I point a finger at him. "Be on time!"

"Yessir!" Bob says as he releases the brake and urges Becky to a start. He's already headed down the bluff when I reach the door and pick up my bag. I enter the Lord House, and step into familiar surroundings.



The three, substantial floors of the cube-like Lord House were built of red brick and topped with slate in 1822. Catering to overland and canal travelers, it was cut off from mainstream traffic when the railway came through. It is true the tracks take the same course as the canal, but the train stops only at designated stations. The Lord House isn't one of them.

Even with thousands more people arriving in Rizvillage each summer, in its now out of the way location, the Lord House receives far fewer guests than in its heyday. But I'm willing to bet it'll be standing long after everyone I know has gone to their peace.

I always take a room at the Lord House when I visit. I like it here. Not only because of its somewhat deserved reputation as a place of dubious encounters, but because of the woman who operates it.

Mary Lord's husband was cruel and abusive, so she abandoned him, moving the few miles from Gelfen, where she had worked as a midwife, to Rizvillage. She began at



this place by working as a maid and cook for the previous owners, John and Sara Chidester. Granted I was looking at them through the eyes of a child, but I remember the Chidesters as quiet folks. Prosperous, respectable, retiring, and kind. Whenever we visited, I was, more often than not, given a piece of rock candy to keep my mouth shut while the adults talked of grown-up things. That's when, as a youngster in tow with my parents, I first met Miss Mary. Our initial encounter involved her unapologetically chasing me from her kitchen for being a pest. Neither of us has changed much since then.

When the railway came through, the Chidesters decided to move on. Mary took over. Some say the fact business had all but dried up had everything to do with her getting the place, but I don't think that's giving Mary her due. I fancy the notion that she had more than enough dirt on the moneyed gentry to keep them from outbidding her. Adding to the cloud of already scandalous rumors swirling about her, Mary gave birth to her twin girls, Maggie and Adela, near the very end of her child-bearing years. Never giving a hint to the identity of the father, she raised and educated her daughters to be self-reliant and independent.

With her girls wedded to good men and gone. Mary runs the place, her place, alone and in the way she wants. Despite what folks might think, there never has been a stable of women for rent. That would smack too much of servitude to Mary who prefers, instead, to simply rent space to the occasional freelancing lady, more frequent sporting gentleman, and almost anyone else wishing to maintain a

more relaxed home away from home. Mary's, shall we say, accepting nature makes the proper ladies in town view her as an outcast, which is the likely reason the two of us get along so well.

I step through the door and into the front parlor. It spans the whole width and half the depth of the first floor and is the largest room in the house. It looks almost the same as when I last visited. The walls are limed white. The floor is a wide local oak. Mary has placed small rugs here and there to cover some of the more worn spots in the wood. Likewise, the furniture is old. Far out of style, but it's clean and comfortable.

With a holler, Mary Lord gets up from her chair. Moving fast, she sweeps me up into a hug and holds me long enough to make me feel the least bit uncomfortable. She steps away and looks at me, folds her arms across her bosom, tilts her head and smiles so widely that her dark brown eyes are nearly lost behind her smooth cheeks.

She steps in and hugs me again, as ferociously as before, laughing, and rocking me back and forth as one would a small child. Which I am, I guess, to Miss Mary.

"Ashrad Rizvi!" She exclaims, releasing me so I can breathe. "I'd recognize you anywhere! You look so much like your dear mother."

"Thank you, Miss Mary." I scuff the floor with my stick, feeling like the youngster I was when she first said those words to me. "And let me say you haven't changed a bit."

"Liar!" She smiles even wider and lifts her chin up more. She stops, looks at me again. "You shaved your beard and look so much younger."

I laugh. "That's not what Abner said!"

"Abner Evans?" She says disdainfully. "That old stick in the mud? He'd be a lot more fun if he'd loosen up and be more like he was in the old days. You two used to have all the pretty young girls running, but now he's trying hard to make up for past sins and land his seat in heaven!"

"And I," I say in a deep voice, "have grown much too old for the pretty young girls to even notice."

She gives me a sly look. "I know plenty of women who'd give you the time of day if they thought you were willing—some of them fairly respectable, too." She moves my bag to the bottom of the stairs. "How was the trip?"

"Long. Noisy. Filthy."

"Still getting train-sick?"

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"How are things in Cleveland?"

"My business is good. My house..." I shake my head.

"That bad?"

"Worse. What I wouldn't do for a competent housekeeper. You sure I can't lure you away from Rizvillage? The pay's good and the boss is an angel."

Mary laughs. "I know the boss too well, and nothing will get me out of this place except Old Scratch himself!"

"Pretty quiet night for the Lord House," I say, looking around the empty room.

Her smile widens. "It'll liven up later on. Big card game tonight, maybe some girls, if the fellows bring them along."

I raise my eyebrows. "Why, Miss Mary, aren't you afraid of the law?"

"Not when the law's one of the players." She laughs loudly and spins in her bright red, definitely un-hooped dress. "You're welcome to join us." Leaning in, she grins. "I bet you and I could clean 'em all out."

I shake my head. "It's tempting, Mary, but I've had a long day."

She makes clucking sounds, like a hen caring for a chick, and leads me to a rocking chair. She turns her back as I lower myself into the seat and arrange my leg so it looks as it should.

"You hungry?"

"No."

She turns to me, scowling. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Don't remember."

"Then, wou' ye care'a wee nip, or wou' ye rather no?" She asks in a good approximation of a Scot's brogue. "How about some of our dear Marvin's finest?"

"He's still at it, huh?"

She smiles and shows me a glass jar of crystal-clear liquor. "He's getting better all the time. A real ar-teest," she laughs.

I smile back and shake my head. "No, thanks, Mary. After what I've gone through today, a glass of that would put me to sleep right where I sit."

So, instead, she pours two large glasses of water from a pewter pitcher, gives one to me, and, with the other in hand, sits down in her chair a few feet across the room.

"The water's cold!" I say, slightly surprised. "You're not buying Uncle Isaac's ice are you?"

"Certainly not! The water's fresh from the well." The frown she produces doesn't fit her face built for smiles. "I'll not own an icebox as long as he's selling the ice!"

I instantly regret teasing her. "I'm sorry..."

"Now, none of that," she interrupts. "We both know what I think of that old so-and-so!" Then, in a conspiratorial tone, "when I got the letter you were coming I almost burst! But I kept quiet like you asked."

"Thanks. No use going through what happened last time I came to town."

She throws her head back and laughs. "That was one hero's welcome that was cut short. I don't think Francis Adsell ever forgave you!"

"Nor anybody else." I sip my water. "How is Francis?"

She shakes her head. "No good. Worse than last time you were here. The liquor's got a hold of him something terrible. He can't seem to shake it. I don't think he cares to."

"Dipsomania's a hard devil to wrestle. I should know." We share rueful smiles. I sit back in my chair and rock for a moment or two, tap my leg with my stick, take another sip of water. We all lost something in those hard years after our service.

I look around the room again. "Mary, where's Sergeant Packwell?"

"Packwell died more than a year ago," she says sadly.

"Oh. Didn't know. That's a shame. He was a good, old dog."

"That he was. Faithful, too, right up until the end. I buried him out back, under his tree."

"The General still around?"

She makes a face. "Of course! I figure that old, wore out cat's going to last longer than me. He's probably loafing in the kitchen."

I smile at Mary. Despite her protests, she loves her ancient tom cat, probably more than her dear, departed dog. Packwell was the king of the hill until the cat came along and took over the house with imperious ways that earned him his name. The dog was demoted to sergeant in light of his fear of the feline.

Mary and I sit, talk, and catch up with each other. She's been made a grandmother twice in the years since I last visited. A boy and girl. She says both are the most beautiful children she's ever seen. I believe her.

One of her daughters, she allows, is doing fine with the man she married treating her well. The other, Maggie, the one with the baby girl, was recently widowed. Her husband was crushed to death while coupling freight cars in the Warren yards. Naturally, there were no benefits due him and things were looking pretty bleak.

"I've asked her to come back and stay with me, until things improve," my friend says, "but I'm not sure she'll take me up on the offer."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"Queen bees," is the simple reply.

The air around us cools as the heat of the day vanishes into what feels like a comfortable night for sleeping. Mary gets up and lights a kerosene lamp. No gas yet, here in Rizvville.

As she returns to her chair, I ask, "Mary, have you heard about the woman that was found in the lake?"

She leans forward. "You know about that? I heard she was floating." She takes a mouthful of water, swishes it around as if trying to get rid of a bad taste. "Talk in town is that she's too rotten to be recognized."

I cross my arms and lean back. "You know, I saw Abner today, down at the cemetery. He was digging her grave in the pauper's field. He told me the same thing, about the body being decomposed. But the boy who drove me here said his father, who built her coffin, mentioned how pretty she was, how it was like she was sleeping, and I know a body up from the lake doesn't look like that."

She raises an eyebrow. "I think you listen too much to gossip." She grins. "Isn't that some sort of a sin?"

"You'd have to ask Abner about that!"

The door to the kitchen swings open and the General swaggers in.

I'm surprised by the yellow cat's looks. There was a time when almost every kindle of kittens born within a mile of the Lord House contained at least one with yellow fur, but looking at the General's timeworn appearance I would guess that's no longer true.

The cat strolls over to me and starts wrapping himself around my legs, purring unevenly. He looks up and I see his yellow-green eyes have taken on the ragged appearance old cats display. He opens his mouth. All that comes out is an odd croak.

I smile and lean down to rub him behind his fight-tattered ears. "Still can't meow, huh, General?"

"Can't make any decent cat noises," Mary says, shaking her head. "Been like that ever since that time he almost died from eating saw grass. Crazy old thing."

The cat leaves me and walks over to his human. He pauses a moment at her feet before leaping into her lap where he settles, content for the moment.



Mary and I talk a little longer before I begin to yawn. I refuse another offer of food and a repeated invitation to clean out the poor unfortunates in tonight's card game.

As if on cue, the first one pulls up the drive.

I take a small lamp in one hand and my bag and stick in the other. As much as I can, I hurry upstairs to my room. By the time I reach the top floor, two more players have arrived and the games have begun.

What a day! I leave my stick and bag inside the door, place the lamp on its stand, and sit heavily on the bed. Slouching, I stare at myself in the mirror. I do look old.



There's a quiet knock on the door. It swings slightly open. It's Mary. Behind her, I hear the laughter of her guests in the front parlor.

"Ash? I fixed you a plate to eat. I couldn't enjoy the game knowing you might be hungry."

I straighten up and square my shoulders. "Yes. Thanks. Come ahead."

The door opens and Miss Mary fills the room. She sets the plate on the table across the way. "I know how you are with food. It's chicken, cooked dry, and some potatoes and carrots. They're scrawny from the cellar," she apologizes. "It's nothing fancy. Will you eat?"