

On a Dark and Snowy Night/Leanne W. Smith

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Excerpts from the book, *Paul Clifford*, by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and lyrics from the song, *Silent Night*, are in the public domain.

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*Dedicated to the memory of my father,
Don, who had the courage to leave his hometown
when a light appeared and guided him elsewhere.*

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Chapter 1: The Light

December 1845

The light from the cabin drew him like the beacon of a lighthouse pulling in a weary sailor. It shone for miles over the rolling land.

Hoke's breath came in bursts. Each release of it into the icy wind formed a mist below his dark, brown eyes. The steam hovered, then fled as the next breath advanced, much like Hoke himself had fled before the law could overtake him.

Was he a criminal now?

He had to be. He'd killed a man.

Hoke had watched his father die years before, but it was worse to look down into the empty eyes of a human whose life he'd snuffed out with his own hands—a life he had taken with the life given to him. That man's breath had come in bursts, too, until his body had stilled.

The horrible realization had flowed through Hoke's pumping bloodstream in an instant. *I killed a man. I killed a man.*

So he had fled. But the cold, sober reality had followed him.

The snow had only been a spit when he started running. Then it turned into a blinding white haze that stacked and piled against the trees. By the time the snow stopped falling, he was tromping through a foot-high covering. He moved through it until long after the sun had set. He was falling, stumbling...thinking about lying down and letting the whiteness cover him like an icy death blanket. But then the light blinked at him in the distance.

The light was out in front of him now, smaller than the moon but brighter, pulling him forward through the knee-deep snow like the hope that keeps a drowning man fighting his way to the surface. Only Hoke wasn't a man. He could have passed for one if someone saw him floundering through the snow, for he was tall and broad-shouldered, but Hoke was just fifteen. He had tried to act like a man—had wanted to think of himself as a

man. But out here running—frightened, alone—he felt sharply aware of his youth.

A fifteen-year-old boy had no business running scared in the woods on a snowy night. But where else did he have to go? Nowhere. He had nowhere. *Belonged* nowhere. For five years now he had been bobbing like driftwood, with no family of his own to claim.

He thought of Ed Branson and Mrs. Ruby. They had provided the closest thing to a harbor he'd known. The news of his deed would hurt them. Hoke could imagine the way it would pierce through the walls of their peaceful home and hearts, and hover over them like a shame cloud.

The shame was what had sent him running.

He wanted to justify the killing in his mind. Surely it wasn't the same as murder. Still, he expected the sheriff from Independence to pursue him. How would the woman, as sole witness, tell the story in town? Hoke suspected she would spare him no grace.

It wasn't the threat of being jailed or hanged he couldn't face. It was the shame his actions were sure to bring on the Bransons. The last thing Hoke had ever wanted to do was cause pain to the couple that had been so good to him—who had let him sleep in their livery, fed him, seen to it that his education didn't suffer.

It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents. Those were the first words of the first book

Mrs. Ruby ever read to him. Hoke usually remembered the first line of a book. Violent gusts of wind had swept the cold streets of London in that story. Hoke wondered how they compared to the violent gusts of wind sweeping over him now, on the dark and snowy night that presently encompassed him. The moon was only a thin slice, but God still gave it charge over the night, the white of the snow magnifying its brightness.

Paul Clifford was the name of the book. Mrs. Ruby had read it aloud to him as they sat in the parlor near the crackling fire. Paul Clifford had been a gentleman...and a criminal. Did that description fit him now?

The memory of that crackling fire haunted Hoke as he rubbed his numb hands together and pulled the collar of his worn coat tighter against his chin before stuffing his hands up under his armpits. At least when he left he had been wearing a hat, made from the pelt of a beaver he'd skinned. The brown of the fur was as dark as his wavy hair, and kept the snow from falling directly onto his head. He wore good boots, too, and thick wool socks Mrs. Ruby had knit him, but the fabric of his pants and the johnnies beneath them were thin above his boot line.

Mrs. Ruby was a peace-filled woman whose calm permeated her home like the warmth from her fireplace. Her heart was daring, though, drawn to the adventures found in the pages of books. The French Revolution, a pretty cousin named Lucy, a man of unknown

origins...words from stories like *Paul Clifford* had opened up a whole new way of thinking to him.

Hoke had wondered if there might be a mystery in his own background. Was he really the lone son of Douglas and Rachel Mathews? What if they'd found him wandering as a toddler and his real parents were wealthy gentry in the East? What if he had siblings? Or a wealthy uncle looking to pass on his riches? Most of his fantasies centered on lost family or unclaimed treasures.

Mrs. Ruby must have seen the dreaming look in his eye. "We don't get to pick our background, Hoke," she told him one time. "But we can sure enough pick our future." Mrs. Ruby knew his parents had left him with no family and only scant possessions, but she talked as if that didn't have to be the whole of his story. Hoke wondered if Mrs. Ruby knew how he hung on every word she spoke to him, but he was careful not to let his heart fully open up to her or Mr. Branson. He had tried not to love them, but now—feeling the sharp ache that was connected to their memory—realized that he had been no more successful at that than he had been at achieving manhood.

As he moved his cold legs through the snow, Hoke knew he had been right to at least hold the Bransons at a distance. If he hadn't, he might have lacked the strength to flee, and fleeing was the kindest thing he could do,

for the sake of their reputation. He owed that much to the two people who had become his closest thing to a family since the death of his own parents.

Hoke's mother had been the first to fall ill, back when Hoke was nine. It happened a year after they arrived in Independence, off the boat that carried them over the Mississippi. Hoke's father had built them a makeshift shelter just outside the city's edge, shortly after they arrived. It wasn't much more than a lean-to and was only ever meant to be temporary. They had come to Missouri from Kentucky planning to work and save money to travel west. Hoke's father had been laboring to do just that—helping a local wagon maker build schooners, shaping iron wheels for city blacksmiths—when Hoke's mother fell ill.

From that point on, Douglas hardly left her side. It became Hoke's job to hunt for game and keep fresh water on hand.

One day Hoke returned with a dead rabbit and heard his father weeping. Hoke had never heard him cry before. It was a terrible sound. Douglas Mathews was a tall, strong man: thick of shoulder, but thin on words. The noise was so awful, Hoke had thrown the rabbit to the ground and fled. He ran until he was out of earshot, but the sound of wailing lingered and echoed in his mind.

As night began to fall, he crept back into the yard. His father, who'd cooked the rabbit over the fire pit, handed him a plate. Hoke sat down to eat, studying his father's sunken eyes across the flames.

"I have it, too," his father said, at last.

Hoke didn't know what he meant at first. The blaze of his father's eyes bore into him. His father lit a lantern and set it next to Hoke's feet. "Go look at your mother one last time before I bury her. Then you need to go pitch a different camp, up the creek, away from this place. I don't want you to get this sickness."

"But—"

"Do as I say, son."

Douglas Mathews' voice was so strained, Hoke feared his father was going to cry again. He set down his plate, took the lantern, and stepped to the door of the lean-to that had been their home for the past year.

Back when Rachel first fell ill, Hoke's father had sent him to summon first one doctor and then another. Both had shaken their heads as they left. Their payment ate up what little money the family had managed to accumulate.

As Hoke stepped now to the bedside from which he'd so long been barred, he hardly recognized the face of his own mother. She was still—lifeless—not at all like the spirited woman he had known. Cholera had left Rachel Mathews gaunt and her mouth was open, as if

she'd been straining for one more breath after the final one left her body.

Hoke reached for her hand, wanting to hold it one last time, then drew back. It felt heavy, yet hollow. Empty. Strange. He wanted to close her mouth but was afraid to touch her face. Thankfully her eyes were closed. He didn't think he could have stood it had her eyes been open.

He backed out of the shelter into his father's arms. He hadn't realized his father had come to stand behind him. Douglas Mathews wrapped his arms around Hoke as the boy's body began to shake.

"She loved you." His father's voice, always deep, grew deeper still. "She was proud of you."

Hoke cried then—cried as his father held him, cried as he lay on his bedroll that night upstream, cried at first light as he and his father walked up a hill at the edge of Independence to the cemetery, where they dug the hole that would serve as his mother's final resting place. Finally, Hoke was cried out.

His father didn't hold him again.

It took the cholera a few months longer to rob Douglas, a man who had once stood so tall and proud, of his remaining strength. Once again, Hoke walked up the hill at first light and dug a hole: this time, beside his mother's grave. It was slow work for a ten-year-old. But he did it. And his eyes didn't shed a drop this time. So

fearful was he that the wails building up inside his chest would come out sounding like his father's, he refused to release them. If he let them out and his soul and body unraveled, what then? Would he die, too? And if he did, who would find and bury his body?

The last words Douglas Mathews spoke to him were, "I'm sorry, son, to leave you like this. Take my Bible. Let it guide you. Be a good man. Stand strong to face whatever lies before you."

A man. At ten? But what other choice did Hoke have? He was on his own; he figured he'd best face the future with strength, like his father had told him to do.

With the memory of his father now guiding all his choices, Hoke packed Douglas Mathews' Colt Patterson and Bible into a bag and fed the remains of the diseased camp into a fire. He had his bedroll and blanket, which his father had insisted he keep far from the sickness; but no money and no photographs, and his mother had had no jewelry.

Besides the pistol and Bible, his father had owned a half-decent horse: a large red roan he'd called "Big Irish." It was late summer and the roan had plenty of grass. Relying on his developing trap-setting and hunting skills, Hoke fed himself the best he could.

For a while he slept near the cemetery, the horse tethered nearby. Then one morning there was frost on the blanket. Winter was coming. Both he and the roan

needed shelter. Hoke watched the town. That night, as dusk fell, Hoke snuck the horse into a livery stable filled with hay.

Ed Branson found him there next morning. Hoke had meant to sneak back out before morning's light, ruffling the hay back into place so no one would know he and the horse had been there. But it was the most comfortable night he'd known in a while and he'd slept too soundly.

"I see you took the largest stall," said Branson. "And tied your horse in the corner so he wouldn't step on you. That was smart."

Hoke didn't answer.

Branson pointed to the fresh pile of horse dung near the stall entrance. "What were you going to do about that?"

Hoke frowned. He knew the right answer. The man wanted him to say he would have cleaned the pile, but the truth was, he hadn't thought about it.

"Who are your people?" Branson had asked. He was older than Hoke's father had been, his hair graying at the temples.

"My folks are dead." Hoke brushed himself off and reached to untie the roan's bridle. "I didn't take anything, was just looking for a warm place for me and my horse."

Branson seemed to find him a curiosity. “Where did you come from?”

“We were livin’ near the creek on the west side of town. I burned the camp. It was diseased.”

“When did you burn it?”

“Before the leaves started to fall.”

Ed Branson studied him. Hoke stood tall, like his father had stood, and braced himself for a dressing down, a scolding, a kick in the pants with an admonition to stay out of the man’s livery.

“Are you hungry, son? My wife, Ruby, is a mighty fine cook.”

Ed Branson didn’t lie, Hoke would come to learn, and he sure didn’t lie about that. Hoke couldn’t remember when such fine food had passed through his lips! Mr. Branson and Mrs. Ruby watched him clean three plates. Worried they might think he’d overstepped their generosity, he offered, “I’ll be glad to go clean up after my horse, and the other horses in your stables, as payment for your kindness.” He eyed some apples in a bowl. “And to get one of those apples for my roan.”

Mr. Branson grinned. “Been needing some help. Thought about hiring someone to work for me regular in trade for meals and lodging.”

Even at ten, Hoke sensed that Ed Branson might just be saying that out of Christian duty. But the words

sparked such a burst of hope in him, he couldn't help sitting up straighter.

"I could be that someone."

"What is your name?" asked Mrs. Ruby. She fit *her* name. Her hair was as red as the hide of his roan.

Hoke looked into Mrs. Ruby's kind eyes, unable to speak. His mother had named him David, but his father always called him Hoke—his father, who had said to be strong.

"Hoke, like 'choke' without the 'c.' Mathews."

The story was that his parents had laid him under a chokeberry bush when his father was building their home back in Kentucky. After that, his father started calling him *Hoke, like 'choke' without the 'c.'* That's how his father used to say it.

Mrs. Ruby brightened. "You can spell?"

Of course he could spell! Did these people think he didn't have any sense?

Mr. Branson pushed his chair back. "Let's go out and I'll show you how I mix the horses' feed."

On their way out of the house, Hoke saw Ed Branson exchange a look with his wife. He wasn't sure what the look that passed between them meant, but he did see that the woman's eyes pooled with tears.

Hoke stopped and looked from her to Mr. Branson. Suddenly worried he'd eaten too much and shouldn't

have slipped that apple in his pocket, he said, “Are you sure about this, sir? I don’t want to—”

Mrs. Ruby hugged him suddenly. “We’d be honored to have you work for us, Hoke. And we have a spare room you could sleep in.”

“Oh, no, ma’am.” Her warmth caught him off guard. “I slept fine in your livery. I like it there, near my horse.” They had let him do as he wished, though Mr. Branson insisted he at least take his own stall. “So you and the horse don’t get crossways with one another.”

Five years rolled by, slow and steady—each day different, yet the same.

Most mornings Hoke woke to find Mr. Branson looking at him over the top of the corner stall. Mrs. Ruby would cook them a breakfast of eggs and biscuits, and sometimes a fresh chicken she plucked from the yard. And he and Mr. Branson kept a clean stable that proved popular with the folks who came and went from the town, seeking lodging for their animals during their stay.

Not long after Hoke started working for the Bransons, Mrs. Ruby asked, “How much schooling have you had, Hoke?”

“None, ma’am. But my father taught me to read, and to work numbers.”

After that, she began reading to him as soon as the supper dishes were washed. Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul*

Clifford, Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*, and Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. Dickens was her favorite, so Dickens became his favorite, too.

Mrs. Ruby would often hand the book over to Hoke and have him do the reading. He read shyly to her at first, but over the five years of their habit, he adopted more boldness, imitating the passion she injected into the words.

Mr. Branson would smile as he sat and listened. The Bransons never had children of their own. Hoke sensed the hope his presence brought them. He knew Mrs. Ruby, especially, would have given him more hugs had he not stiffened to receive them. That Mr. Branson would have laid a large hand on Hoke's shoulder more if Hoke hadn't always turned to draw it off. The last thing he wanted to do was seem ungrateful for their generosity. But Hoke could not afford the damage to his soul that losing another family might cause.

And now...losing another family was exactly what had happened. Hoke's eyes watered as the steam from his breath rolled up and blurred the winter scene before him. The saddlebag he'd slung over his shoulder was heavy. He was close enough to the light now to see that its source was a cabin. Where was he? He wondered if he had gotten as far as Kansas yet. Could someone get there from Independence, on foot?

Hoke missed not having the roan. He had been riding one of Mr. Branson's horses that morning, before the killing happened, but couldn't bring himself to grab the reins and swing up on the gelding's back again as he had fled. He couldn't add stealing from a good man to his new list of crimes, although he had allowed himself the liberty of taking the saddlebag. He'd done so because it held nearly all that was dear to him. If only that had included the warm scarf Mrs. Ruby knit him last Christmas.

Christmas! With a sinking heart, Hoke remembered that today was Christmas. He had killed a man on Christmas Day. Surely that was doubly wrong.

Shame flowed through him again. Not only would the Bransons be disappointed to hear what he'd done, if his father and mother could see his actions from their eternal vantage points, they would surely be shaking their heads, too.

Hoke crested a rise in the land. The cabin was set squarely in a valley before him. He had thought to approach the house to ask for food and a chance to thaw his frozen hands by the fire. But now that the light's source was in sight, and now that he remembered it was Christmas, his courage failed him.

Hoke found an evergreen to put his back to, broke off a couple of the branches, and hollowed out a hole in the snow at the tree's base, laying a canopy with the

limbs to serve as a layer between him and the icy walls. He thought of his old blanket and bedroll lying in the corner stall of Mr. Branson's livery. The roan was growing old. Hoke was comforted to know Mr. Branson would care for the horse in his absence. Mr. Branson knew horses well and was good to them, even if he didn't love them the way Hoke did. Still, it pained him to think he might never see his horse again.

While Hoke was guarded with any flows of love between himself and the Bransons, he freely offered his affections to animals: dogs, cats, cows, goats, mules, donkeys, horses—even the chickens Mrs. Ruby kept out back. Hoke loved each animal that came into the livery, and they seemed to sense it.

Mr. Branson didn't keep dogs, but occasionally one wandered into the barn. They might growl at Mr. Branson and bark at the horses, but they never growled or barked at Hoke. He felt like he understood most animals. All but sheep—sheep didn't have a lot of sense. It was one way he differed from the David in the Bible.

A stray cat had wandered into the livery about the time Hoke was twelve. It slept curled by his side for nearly two years before it disappeared. Hoke was sorry to see it go, it had become such a handy heat source.

Hoke closed his eyes, in order to think more clearly. God had handed him a difficult life, but He'd also given him a gift: keen insight. Few things ever caught Hoke

off guard, and when they did they really rattled him. Things like his father's crying...and this morning's events.

Was it only his imagination, or were those pine branches providing the smallest bit of warmth? He pulled a knife from the saddlebag—the knife Mr. Branson had given him last Christmas—and stood to hack more branches off. It wasn't easy to do with his frozen hands, but he managed it. Once he had a respectable pile, he used the branches to add another layer to the inside of his scooped out hole, and piled the rest around his legs and shoulders after climbing in. They blocked the wind, at least. He might not freeze to death after all. Positioning the leather bag behind him like a hard pillow, he leaned back against it and considered his plight.

Hoke's stomach rumbled. He reached for a handful of snow and when he put it in his mouth, it melted and slid down his throat. At least he had no lack of water, only food. Hoke cradled his numb hands between his knees and stared at the light coming from the cabin. The light was evidence that he wasn't alone. He might not belong inside the warmth of those walls, might not be welcomed there if they knew he was a criminal, but the cabin and its light were proof that he was not all alone in the world.

No other homesteads were in sight. Through the cabin's two front glass windows, Hoke could see a family gathered. It seemed like a lot of people for so small a place. A barn stood to one side, and a wagon sat to one side of the barn. Presently the front door opened and two men walked out onto the porch. A large dog came out with them.

One of the men's words, *livestock*, floated out over the frozen land and reached Hoke's ears. Sound traveled farther in the cold.

He heard the words *meal*, *neighborly* and *children* pass between the men as they made their way with a lantern out to the barn. As its door swung open Hoke could see another wagon inside. Hoke decided one of the families must have been neighbors, visiting overnight. When the men came back out a bit later, *fiddle* and *sleep* rolled up the hill.

The dog beside them stopped and looked toward Hoke. Hoke stiffened. One of the men looked toward him, too. "What is it, Shep?"

Hoke held his breath as the man raised a rifle. Hoke was just about to call out to them when the second man laid a hand on the rifle bearer's arm. This time Hoke heard every word. "Whatever it is, Tom, leave it alone. We've got plenty of meat."

Shep didn't run up the hill toward him and the men moved on to the house. Hoke breathed easy again.

Soon he heard the sound of a violin. Hoke strained to see inside the windows. His exposure to songs had been limited, and he didn't initially recognize any of the tunes, but presently there was one he knew. "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen." It caused a sharp ache in his chest. He had longed to hear a familiar tune and then when he did, the notes pierced him, floating so fine and lovely into his ears that it hurt to hear them.

Later there was the stirring beauty of "Greensleeves," but the source of his undoing was "Silent Night."

Hoke had not shed tears in a long time. He had not cried when his father died. Not when he dug the hole for that second grave or laid his father's stiff body inside. Not when Mrs. Ruby made him a cake on the day of his birth. Not when she and Mr. Branson gave him gifts at Christmastime. Not when a pretty girl he admired turned her nose up at him for his uncut hair and shabby clothes or when the cat stopped coming to the barn. Not even when he felt the stilling of the man his hands had killed.

But when the strains of "Silent Night" floated out over the snow and circled his heart and head like a halo, Hoke began to weep.

The words to the song were true for him, he realized...and yet they weren't.

Silent night, holy night...

The night was silent, but not calm. His heart was not calm, and hadn't been since that morning. His breath had finally begun to level out now that he had stopped running, but Hoke wondered if his heart would ever be at peace again.

Holy infant, so tender and mild...

The thought of a mother holding her child was like a sharp stab to his chest. When was the last time his mother had held him? Would he feel the pain of this loss for the rest of his life?

Heavenly peace...

And now Hoke's life had changed again, this very day. He was frightened by what the future might hold—or not hold. The light in the cabin below, the sliver of moon above, and the white blanket of land all around him were bright. But his heart and the only future he could envision were dark—darker than they had ever been, made all the darker by the contrast.

Hoke remembered a conversation about “Silent Night” he'd once overheard as he lay on his straw bed in the livery. It was amazing what pieces of information a curious boy with a sharp mind could collect when he listened more than he talked. Two men had been deep in discussion when one of them claimed the words of the song had been written by a priest, but set to music by a schoolmaster.

Now, Hoke couldn't quite make out the voices coming through the wooden walls of the cabin below him, but no matter: he already knew the words to the song. He wondered if they would be the last message ever to reach his ears. Would he freeze to death later that night? Would his own mother be holding him when he woke on the other side? Or would he travel to the depths of hell, now that he'd killed a man, where his only link to his mother would be the punishment of her memory haunting him?

Hoke's father's Bible was in one of the leather pockets at his back. He knew the story of Christ's birth was found in Luke. When he had read Luke's account in the past, he had pictured angels in a sky over a field much like this one. But when he looked up now, all he saw was a low cloud cover with a few open patches, showing the stars and moon.

Where had those angels been every time he had needed them? Where were they when his parents died? Why hadn't one of *them* responded when that woman screamed this morning...or at least warned Hoke not to?

Chapter 2: The Killing

At breakfast, Mr. Branson had asked Hoke to deliver a pair of mules back to their owner, who lived a mile from town.

“Come right on back, Mrs. Ruby’s cooking a big dinner.” Mr. Branson winked at his wife, who had already started bustling around her stove.

Big Irish had a bruise on the pad of his right foot, so Hoke fed him one of the apples from the sack Mr. Branson kept on a hook in the livery, rubbed his coat down the way the roan liked it, then put a bridle on Mr. Branson’s tan gelding.

The farmer was pleased to get his mules returned so promptly, and his wife and daughter both smiled sweetly at Hoke. After a whisper from the daughter in the mother's ear, the mother asked him to come inside and have a piece of pie. He thanked her and said, "Mr. Branson said to come right back. Mrs. Ruby is cooking a pie, too, no doubt." He tipped his hat to the mother and daughter and climbed back on the tan gelding.

He was halfway back to the livery when he heard the scream.

Kicking the gelding to the right, Hoke saw a man and woman through the trees. They were fighting. The woman was slapping, clawing, kicking. The man easily deflected her blows. He turned when Hoke crashed through the brush. The woman took the opportunity to push the man, and he tottered.

"Damn you, woman!" The man's thick arm flung outward and, with a slapping sound that reverberated through the crisp morning air, sent her sprawling to the ground.

She screamed again—a blood-curdling scream—more from anger than fear.

Hoke had one leg halfway over his horse when the man growled, "Get on out of here, boy."

"No!" The woman squirmed on the ground. "Help me!"

She started to rise, but the man pushed her back down with his foot. “She don’t need no help,” he snarled.

The woman was dark-haired, tiny, attractive and wiry. She had a hard look about her, like the saloon women Hoke had seen on the streets, but she was dressed like an average woman in a long dress, even if the neckline of the bodice was a little lower than normal.

“I saw you hit her.” Hoke hesitated, sticking his foot back in its stirrup.

“But you didn’t see what she did to me!” The man yanked at the necks of his shirt and fringed buckskin jacket. He looked like a trapper, with a pistol tied to his right hip. “You see that cut?” The blood shone bright red. The wound was fresh.

“I didn’t do that!” The woman looked up at Hoke with pleading eyes. “He cut himself shavin’. He’s lyin’ to you.”

“Shut up!” The man kicked her with the toe of his boot. She screamed again.

Hoke was off his horse this time, barreling into the man with his shoulder. The blow knocked him down, but the man was quick to spring back to his feet. “Look, boy, I don’t have no quarrel with you, but you do that again—” He flicked his wrist and a knife shot into his hand from somewhere up his sleeve. “—you’ll be cryin’ for your mama.”

Hoke stepped back and to the side, keeping an eye on the man's hands and that knife. He had bloodied his fists more than once—what orphaned boy trying to make his way in the world hadn't? But he'd never faced a large, grown man, like this one, holding weapons in his hands.

"Let me take her to town," said Hoke.

The man laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. "Boy, you don't know what you're steppin' into here."

"Quit calling me *boy*."

"Why?" Hoke watched the man look him over.

"You're a boy, ain't you?"

He knew what the man saw: a tall youth who wasn't even shaving yet. But hadn't he worked hard and shouldered his responsibilities, like someone older would?

"He's a fine young man is what he is." This time it was the woman who was getting to her feet. "Coming to a woman's aid. Protecting her from the likes of you."

"*Likes of me?* You liked me fine the last couple of nights, I reckon. Sure acted like you did. Then you try to rob me this mornin'."

Hoke and the man circled one another warily.

"He's lyin' again," said the woman. "This man took advantage of me. He—he did awful things to me. And

he won't turn me loose. He knows I'll report him to the sheriff."

The man laughed and held up his knife. "Don't be fooled, boy." He lunged. Hoke side-stepped.

His father's Patterson was in a saddlebag on the gelding, now several feet away. It wasn't much use to him over there. Hoke's only advantage was being lighter on his feet. He hopped back as the knife swung in his direction.

What came next all happened so fast, when he tried to recall it later he felt like he was revisiting a foggy dream. He remembered side stepping again, losing his footing, being on the ground.... And then the man was on top of him.

Hoke grabbed the hand that held the knife and pushed it away from him, twisting the man's wrist until the knife dropped. They rolled. The man's right arm reached for the gun on his hip. Hoke dug an elbow into the man's arm and pushed to the left, then pulled the gun from the holster and flung it toward the woman. He heard the gun drop as it thudded on the ground. The two of them rolled again, then the man's hands were on his throat. He straddled Hoke's midsection as Hoke's eyes bulged from the pressure. He couldn't breathe. The man was going to kill him; Hoke could see it in the set of the man's face.

But then the man's head jerked left. The woman had cracked his skull with the butt of the pistol. Yelling like an angry bear, the man knocked the woman down, took the gun from her hands, shoved it into her mouth and pulled the trigger.

The gun didn't fire. The woman pushed the pistol from her mouth and sneered. "I pulled the caps off!"

Hoke rolled over on all fours, fighting to draw breath back into his lungs.

The man slapped the woman across the face and Hoke jumped on his back. They rolled once more. When the man reached for the knife that lay nearby, Hoke put his hands under the man's chin and pushed upward so the man couldn't see. As the man's hand continued to grope for the knife, Hoke inched his foot around so he could kick it away. Both his hands were on the man's throat then, squeezing like the man had squeezed Hoke's earlier. Suddenly the man's body shuddered.

Hoke let go.

He grabbed the knife and scrambled to his feet, waiting for the man to cough...to start drawing in great gulps, like he'd done when the man had turned loose of his throat. But the man didn't. Instead, his breath came in sharp, ragged bursts.

Hoke kneeled beside him and put his hand on the man's chest. All at once the breathing stopped. Hoke shook the man's shoulder. Nothing.

No. He couldn't have squeezed the man's throat hard enough to cause the man to die, could he? *Had he?*

Behind him, the woman laughed. "I never would have put money on you, but you did it! You killed him."

The horror Hoke felt as he realized the truth of the woman's words was matched only by the horror he felt at the woman's manner. This was nothing to celebrate! Hoke hadn't meant to *kill* the man; he understood too well the permanence of death.

The woman fell to her knees beside Hoke and began to check the man's pockets. "Let's see what he had on him."

Finding each of the pockets empty, she put her hand down his shirt. "I knew it!" she squealed, pulling out a small leather pouch that had hung low around his neck. She lifted it up and down, feeling its weight, before undoing the knot. "Gold coins! I bet there's two hundred dollars in here. Liar! He told me he didn't have any money."

Hoke backed away from her, shaking his head. She got a strange look in her eye. "Don't worry, Sweetheart." She reached for his hand. "I won't tell that you killed him."

The way she placed emphasis on *you killed him*, Hoke knew right away he'd played into her hands.

I killed him. I killed a man.

Hoke reached for the leather pouch she had unwrapped from the man's neck. "This isn't your money. Who was he? What was really going on when you screamed?"

The woman slapped Hoke hard across the cheek. She took the knife out of his one hand and grabbed the leather pouch back from the other.

"It is, too, mine! As payback for the way he shortchanged me last night. And you don't need to know one thing about what happened before you got here. Because I saw what really happened—how you came riding in here and attacked us both, and killed my husband without so much as a guilty conscience." She put the money in her pocket but kept the knife pointed at Hoke as she stepped over and picked up the pistol. "Folks in this town don't know this man. We were just riding in. They won't know the difference."

Hoke shook his head in disbelief. He now saw this woman for what she was. How could he have been so gullible? How could he face the Bransons, or anyone else in Independence, once the truth was known...that he had killed a man after allowing himself to become the unsuspecting pawn of a spider?

"You're mighty strong for a boy your age. How old are you?" She stepped back over the dead man's body, closer to Hoke. He could see that she wasn't upset about the man's death at all. "You could come with me."

Hoke backed away from her. He knew he was strong. He was used to lifting heavy saddles, pitching hay, hauling buckets of water, scrubbing the stains manure could leave on the walls of a stable.

There would be no scrubbing this stain away.

“You’re a nice-lookin’ boy, with those fierce eyes and wavy hair. How old are you, exactly?”

Hoke didn’t answer.

“You ever been with a woman?” She inched closer and looked from his head down to his feet. “I could teach you.”

Hoke’s eyes fell to the low cut of her bodice. Women were a mystery he’d often longed to know more about, but he couldn’t lay one sin on top of another. He wouldn’t.

He turned and walked over to the gelding. He couldn’t take the horse—that would be stealing—but he took the saddlebag and flung it over his shoulder, then walked the horse away from the woman’s camp and from the dead man lying in the middle of it. Once he got a safe distance away, he pointed the horse in the direction of Mr. Branson’s livery and slapped its rump, knowing the horse would find its way back. Then he located west with his eyes and ran.

* * *

February 1866

Hoke stared into the fire. It was another dark and snowy night.

Earlier that day Hoke and his riding partner, James Parker, had narrowly missed being attacked by a mountain lion.

“You still thinkin’ about that cat?” asked James. He used a stick to stir the coals around the fire, then fed it into the flames.

“I am.”

“Closest call we’ve had in a while.” James leaned back on his bedroll.

Hoke didn’t answer. He hadn’t been thinking about the cat so much as he had about the dream that had distracted him just before the cat sprung. Hoke was so engrossed in his thoughts then that he almost didn’t feel the warning in the horse’s skittish flanks. He had only been riding his black stallion a few months, and was pleased with the horse’s instincts. The stallion had likely saved his life.

Still, dangers like the mountain lion were common to Hoke. Dreams of Independence were not.

Twice in a fortnight Hoke had dreamed about the town that was the source of his darkest pain. In the dream, some kind of light had appeared on the horizon beyond Independence. Hoke couldn’t make out what

caused the light, but he felt its pull as strongly as he had felt the pull of the cabin's light the night he fled.

He had never shared the story with James: how he had sat on a hill in the snow and watched a family celebrate Christmas with their neighbors, how he'd listened to their songs while tears froze on his cheeks. But he thought of it every dark and snowy night, and he especially thought of it every Christmas—whether he was cattle punching in Kansas, riding through northern Texas, or hunting men as a U.S. Marshall in Colorado Territory.

He had met James Parker in Kansas five years ago, in a saloon where James had come close to getting himself shot. So the last five Christmases had been spent with him—four in the Army during the War Between the States, and this last one in Colorado, before they turned in their badges. Killing, even in self-defense and from the right side of the law, had never allowed Hoke any peace.

Now it was February. Cold. This snow was only a smattering of flakes, coming off and on. Hoke looked up. And this moon was full and round through the break in the cloud cover, not like the thin slice that had helped lead him to the cabin that night twenty years ago.

Hoke remembered how he had awakened sometime during that night, surprised to have slept at all, surprised to be alive and not frozen to death. He knew that if he

was still in his nest at daybreak when the dog was let out, it would likely find him. So he pushed the pine branches off and began walking. After the initial shock to his lower limbs, walking helped heat his body.

Mid-morning he came to a creek that ran off a hillside. There was an indentation in the hill with an overhang of rock that made a protective shelter, so he crawled inside and gathered enough sticks to get a small fire going using flint and gunpowder. Hoke knew animals would come to the creek eventually, and by nightfall a rabbit did. He shot it with the Patterson.

Hoke stayed in his shelter until the weather turned, surprised that no one had followed the sound of his gunshots, and that the Independence sheriff hadn't come searching for him. Finally he crawled out and continued to make his way west.

At some point he wrote the Bransons a letter, trying to explain what had happened and how sorry he was. One year rolled into two, three...seven. Twenty.

Hoke had stayed mainly to the west and south of Independence, and sometimes to the north, swinging wide of the memories. Now Independence was calling him back.

The dreams of Independence, coupled with a twenty-year ache in knowing that if he died, no one—besides James, now—would feel it enough of a loss to mourn for him, led him to a decision that cold February

night. He would return to the site of his darkness and see if he could finally find some light there. He felt a longing to see the Bransons and to visit his parents' graves...to read their headstones.

He told James the next day, as their mounts picked a careful footing down a hillside into a picturesque valley. They had chosen to make their living roping wild horses, and a herd now sat below. The way the creek ran off the hillside of the Texan valley reminded Hoke of the spot where he'd taken shelter when he fled. Everywhere he looked—everything he did—struck him as reminders now.

James nodded to the horse herd. "Take 'em to St. Jo or Council Bluff?"

"Independence."

"I thought you didn't like Independence."

"Why'd you think that?"

"You never want to go there when I suggest it."

"Well...suggest it now," said Hoke.

James looked at him crossways. "Is the trail dust itching you?"

For the rest of that day, James mused aloud about whether he knew any women in Independence. While it was Hoke's habit to avoid the fairer sex, James welcomed every opportunity to be around them.

"There's always new women in a jumpin'-off town."

James smiled. "That'll make things interestin."

Hoke didn't comment. James was younger than Hoke by nine years: taller, leaner, with a thick, full beard—and a talker. Hoke wouldn't have had the tolerance for most talkers—as used to solitude as he'd become—but James also knew when *not* to talk. And for all his rambling, he was capable. Hoke couldn't help but hold a capable man in high regard.

“I wouldn't mind tackin' on to a wagon train one of these days,” said James. “Be kind of nice to see the upper half of the Rockies, wouldn't it?”

Hoke cast him a sideways glance. “I wouldn't mind seein' 'em, but I'd hate to be shackled to a train full of people while I was doing it.”

Given how little time Hoke had spent in towns and around people the last twenty years, he couldn't imagine having the patience required for traveling in a wagon train. But he had plenty of patience with horses. Hoke and James spent the next several weeks hovering around the wild herd, roping and calming them, letting the horses get used to the smell and sound of civilized men—if he and James could be called that.

When the herd was ready, the men drove them toward Independence.

Chapter 3: The Return

Hoke rode into town on the back of the stallion in late March. So much had changed, he couldn't believe it was the same place. Independence had grown considerably. Signs of post-war reconstruction were everywhere he looked. The air was ripped by the sounds of sawing, men *hawing* horse teams, and the clang of metal striking iron. To his relief, Ed Branson's livery was still there: there was the same large, circular fence where Ed turned the horses out and the same large barn beside it, with the wide open doors and the stalls running down either side.

Hoke dismounted and walked to the barn, his legs jumpy with trepidation. Would the Bransons be happy to see him? Or would the memory of the killing bring a shame cloud back upon them? Would anyone else in Independence know him and think him a murderer?

He peered in the barn. There was his corner stall, currently occupied by a small red colt that didn't look to have lost his milk teeth. How many times had Hoke found one of the younger horses' teeth on the ground near the feeding trough?

Hoke had half expected to see Big Irish, even though logic told him the horse would have died years ago. Mr. Branson taught Hoke to read the age of a horse by the grooves of its teeth. Big Irish's grooves were halfway down his teeth the last time Hoke saw him, making him near the same age Hoke had been.

"Looking to lodge?" called a lanky man walking toward him. He wore a tan hat and had a slight bend in his back now, but Hoke recognized his old friend right away.

Mr. Branson walked right past him, the stallion having caught his eye. "My word, what a beauty! What'll you take for him?" He turned back to Hoke then.

Time slowed as a thousand memories rushed past.

"Hello, Mr. Branson," said Hoke.

The old man's mouth fell open and he grabbed Hoke by both shoulders. "Lord, have mercy. Hoke! *Hoke!*" He pulled Hoke to him, muttering his name over and over, instantly putting the younger man's worried mind at ease.

Hoke let Mr. Branson hug him, ashamed at the memory of how he used to pull away. As the older man finally held him at arm's length to study him, a lump so large rose in Hoke's throat, he wasn't sure he'd be able to speak.

"I can't believe it. Look at you, all grown up! A man. A strong man, too!" He squeezed the tops of Hoke's shoulders again. "I got a feel of those arms."

Hoke swallowed the lump down. "I guess you got me started, with all that manure I shoveled." Hoke looked toward the house on the other side of the livery. "Is Mrs. Ruby in the house?"

Mr. Branson blinked. His hands fell back to his sides. "I lost her, Hoke. About a year ago."

Hoke swallowed again and looked at the stallion with its ears perked to their conversation. He had waited too long. "I'm sorry to hear it," he said at length.

"She's not too far from your folks, at the cemetery. If you want, we can walk up there later, and I'll show you. Oh, Hoke!" His eyes lit up as he remembered something and laid a hand back on Hoke's shoulder.

“I’ve still got a couple of her books. She told me if you ever came home, I was to give ‘em to you.”

Home. It *had* felt like home, much as he’d tried not to let it.

Mr. Branson turned to the stallion and ran an appreciative hand over the horse’s side and flank. “He must be seventeen or eighteen hands. Where’d you find him?”

Hoke was pleased that Mr. Branson admired his horse.

“In Colorado, four or five months ago. Running with a wild herd. Trained him just like you taught me.” Mr. Branson had never liked the term “breaking a horse.” He always said a horse should never be broken, just trained to work with a rider.

“You served?” asked Mr. Branson.

Hoke nodded. “As a scout.”

By the time the war started, Hoke had traveled through Kansas, Texas, up through Colorado country and back again a dozen times. He felt like he knew every dip and rise in the land.

“Come back to the house and tell me all about it. I’m not as good a cook as Ruby was, but I can feed you.”

They ate and talked until the sun began to sink. Mr. Branson wanted to know where Hoke had been, and the things he’d seen during the war, and Hoke wanted to

know about the changes in the livery and the town. They talked of horses each of them had trained, and of people Hoke remembered.

As the sun began inching toward the horizon, Ed pushed back from the table. "Come on, let me show you where Ruby is buried."

They walked together up the hill that was all too familiar to Hoke, coming to Mrs. Ruby's grave first. Hoke's parents lay on the other side of the cemetery, farther up the knoll.

"Ruby died on a Wednesday," said Mr. Branson, that far-off look in his eye again. "I met her on a Wednesday." He looked down at his wife's headstone, then back up at Hoke. "You never married?"

Hoke shook his head. Why would he open himself up to the risk of Mr. Branson's loss? And his father's?

As if reading his thoughts, Mr. Branson said, "You just haven't met the right woman yet." He rubbed his grizzled chin and nodded, knowingly. "You'll know when you meet the right woman."

Hoke stared down at the final resting place of one of the two women he'd ever loved. Finally, he mustered the courage to speak. "I hope the tan gelding made it back to your livery that day."

Ed crossed his arms and sighed, his shoulders sagging. "It did. Scared me when he came back without you on him."

Unspoken questions and painful memories hung in the air between them. Hoke had had a lot of time to consider how the events might have played out. He'd fostered a dozen theories and wondered if any of them resembled the truth.

“At first, I was afraid some wild animal had attacked you,” said Ed, “but there weren't any scars, no blood on the horse. And the saddlebag was missin.' I rode out to Mr. McMullen's place to see if you delivered his mules and he said you had. He also said his daughter had seen what happened to you. She must have had eyes for you and followed you when you left their place.”

Hoke knitted his brow. The farmer *had* had a daughter. Hoke had always had a good memory, but certain details of that day were especially distinct in his mind. Now he remembered what the daughter looked like and how she had whispered to her mother before the mother invited him in for pie. If he had taken them up on their offer, what followed might never have happened. He wouldn't have been there to hear the woman scream. This thought had run through his mind on countless occasions.

“The girl was hiding in the brush and said she saw it all: how you went to the woman's aid, and then the woman turned it around on you. The girl was scared and didn't tell the news at first, but she came out with it when I showed up asking questions.”

Hoke winced. The thought that someone else might have witnessed the events had *not* occurred to him. Ever.

“I didn’t know that,” said Hoke. “I was afraid people would think I had done wrong. I didn’t want to bring shame on you and...” Hoke looked down again at Mrs. Ruby’s grave as a memory of her sitting by the fire, reading to him, flashed through his mind. Hoke had kept reading—everything he could get his hands on over the years. He would always be grateful that she had taught him to appreciate good books.

Mr. Branson squeezed Hoke’s shoulder. “We figured as much. That woman did come into town and went straight to the sheriff with her story. But I talked to him, so he knew the truth. The woman lit out right after—back East, I guess, with her money and her lies.” He shook his head and studied the grass around his wife’s grave. “We looked for you. I hunted you for weeks after, but that big snow made tracking impossible. Ruby and me feared you’d frozen to death.” His voice caught.

Hoke tried to keep his own voice steady. “I don’t know how I didn’t.”

Mr. Branson’s eyes shone when he looked at Hoke. He smiled. “God’s grace, I reckon. And an answer to our prayers.”

All Hoke could do was nod.

“It’s a gift to have you back, Son,” Mr. Branson said at last. “A mighty fine gift, indeed.”

Hoke hadn’t felt such lumps in his throat since the day he’d fled this town and forfeited this good couple’s hospitality. Countless times, he’d wondered if he did the right thing in leaving. But he couldn’t take it back now. He couldn’t change the past, only the future. Mrs. Ruby was the one who’d taught him that.

Together, he and Mr. Branson walked down the hill in the direction of the livery. Hoke wanted to see his parents’ graves, but he figured he’d come back and do that later.

As soon as they were back, Hoke said, “My riding partner, James Parker, and I have fifty head of horses we brought up from Texas. We’re looking for a place to hold ‘em until we can sell ‘em. We’ll pay you, of course.”

“No you won’t. You bring ‘em on up here. If they’re anything like your horse....” Mr. Branson nodded toward the black steed and winked. “You can pay me in stallions.”

Hoke grinned and looked at the sun, which had nearly set. “We’ll camp outside town tonight and bring them in first thing in the morning. You mind if James and I bed down in one of your open stalls tomorrow night?”

Mr. Branson put a large hand, still surprisingly strong, on Hoke's shoulder. Hoke didn't move away. "It'll be like old times."

* * *

Two weeks into their arrangement, Hoke and James had sold half their stock and Hoke was thinking he would stay. It was good to be back in Independence, good to have reconnected with the man who had taken him in and taught him so much.

Hoke's heart ought to have felt at peace, but for some reason it stirred. Surely he had been called back to Independence to help Mr. Branson. But every time his mind landed on this conclusion, something whispered to his gut that it wasn't quite right.

"I'm going up to the mercantile to get me some new clothes," he told James one morning. His pants were worn nearly to threads and he wanted a new shirt, maybe a vest. He rubbed his jaw. "Might get me a shave."

James raised an eyebrow. "Did you see a woman you liked?"

Hoke shook his head. James seemed to think women were the pinnacle of a man's existence, but women had only ever caused Hoke pain. He couldn't imagine ever meeting a woman he liked well enough to be the cause of his shaving. Now, had Mrs. Ruby still

been alive, he would have readily shaved, out of respect for *her*.

As he walked to the mercantile he passed a sign that read, “Tailor” and stopped there instead. An hour later, he left wearing new black pants and a buckskin shirt without fringe. He decided to skip the shave. He didn’t want anyone confusing him with a dandy. And he didn’t polish his boots, either. With all the dust at the livery, there wasn’t much use in doing that. Nor did he trade in his worn black hat. He liked his felt hat, worn or not, and set it on his head as he went back down the street. He knew he needed a haircut but figured he’d get that later.

As he passed in front of Granberry’s Café, a man called out to him. “Hoke Mathews!”

Hoke recognized Colonel George Dotson, a respected Union leader he had met during the war. “Colonel Dotson.” He strode over. “How are you?”

“Fine as a fiddle!” Dotson shook hands with Hoke and indicated a shorter man standing beside him. “This is my brother-in-law, Gerald Jenkins. He’s come from the East with his wife, Josephine.”

“Mr. Jenkins.” Hoke tipped his hat. He recognized the man, having passed Jenkins and his wife on the sidewalk a few days ago. Word was, Jenkins had owned a hotel. A man could still pick up on a lot of news by hanging around a livery.

“We’re gettin’ up a wagon train of folks to go to Oregon,” said Colonel Dotson, his eyes gleaming. “Come go with us!”

Hoke just smiled. He had, more or less, decided to stay in Independence. Mr. Branson was getting old and Hoke could see how much the man could use his help. Helping was the least he could do, after all the years he’d stayed away.

“It’s God’s providence you happen to be in Independence, Hoke,” said Dotson. “We could use a seasoned man like you. There are quite a few eastern folks on this trip.”

“I don’t have plans to settle that far west,” said Hoke.

“Who says you have to settle?” asked Jenkins with a grin. “Oregon leads to anywhere.”

As Hoke leaned against a railing and let his eyes sweep over the sidewalk, Gerald Jenkins lifted an eyebrow and said, “We’ve got some good folks going on this trip. Several single women.”

Hoke just shook his head. He didn’t see himself joining any wagon trains, even one led by a man as fine as Colonel Dotson, but he stayed and listened to their talk, all the same. He liked the paternal nature of these men. Jenkins was saying something about a preacher going on the trip, and about how, if Hoke met someone

he liked, he wouldn't have to depend on the Colonel to marry them.

Then Hoke heard the sound of boots clicking on the wooden slats of the boardwalk behind him. All three men turned as a woman came toward them. For a moment, Hoke forgot to breathe.

"Is one of you Colonel George Dotson?" asked the woman.

Dotson put out his hand. "I am."

The woman was blond, tall, and wore a brown hat and stylish tweed suit. And she smelled like lavender. Hoke had only ever smelled it in a shop one time, but once was all it ever took for Hoke.

"My name is Abigail Baldwin."

Hoke watched her take Dotson's hand and smile. Something inside of him released. He hadn't even known he was holding on to whatever it was, or that he'd held it so tightly.

"I'm interested in joining your wagon train," she told Dotson. "I understand you're leaving next week."

* * *

Afterward, Hoke hardly remembered Colonel Dotson introducing him to Abigail Baldwin, or his heated exchange with her about some horses she wanted to buy. He wasn't even sure why or how it had grown

heated, exactly; he just knew that when he walked away, he couldn't think straight anymore...couldn't push the image of her arresting face from his mind.

He had only walked down the street for clothes and a shave, after all. No, he hadn't gotten the shave. He wished he had. But then he might have missed seeing Colonel Dotson and meeting her. At least he was wearing a new shirt. Oh hell...what did he care what he wore? And what did it matter the way her tweed suit fit her curves?

That lavender...good Lord, the scent had seeped into his brain like a tonic!

Hoke rather hoped he wouldn't run into her again. But he woke the next morning longing to. And he couldn't help his ears perking when the wagon maker came by to talk to Mr. Branson and mentioned Abigail Baldwyn's name and the wagons she had ordered.

All his senses were heightened as if he'd come out of a long sleep. So much had seemed commonplace only the day before.

Following up on a hunch after the wagon maker left, Hoke sought out a man with a fine set of mules. Something in him wanted to see this woman as well outfitted for her journey as he could help make her. Mules were what she needed.

With bated breath he waited, and that afternoon she came to the livery—a tall blond boy beside her, who looked to be the age Hoke had been when he fled.

Hoke sold her the mules in another heated exchange...or was it heated? He wasn't sure. His temperature had certainly gone up. She paid him a fair price for the mules, but, truth be told, he would have almost *given* them to her at that point. What was wrong with him? He was starting to act like James. And Hoke had taken such pride in not being influenced by swaying skirts and batting lashes!

Later that day he stood with James by the corral fence, thinking of Abigail Baldwin's graceful hands and the soft way she had interacted with his horses.

"George Dotson's been after me to join his wagon train." Hoke rubbed his still-unshaven jaw with the back of his hand, the words slipping from his mouth before he realized he'd made a firm decision. "I believe I'll do it."

James seemed surprised. "How come?"

"I don't know," Hoke answered truthfully.

"Branson offered me a job here."

In fact, Ed Branson had all but said Hoke could have the livery after he was gone. Two days ago, Hoke thought he would take Mr. Branson's offer. But then *she* came up the boardwalk with her boots clicking against the wooden slats.

James looked at him a long minute before slapping his hands together. “We better go then. When you start making decisions you can’t explain, things always get interesting.”

Relief washed through Hoke as soon as he heard James was open to the idea. If he was looking for confirmation, there it was. Men he wanted to keep riding with didn’t come along often.

“You think you can be around people that long?” asked Hoke.

“I can—but I don’t know if *you* can. How long will it be?”

‘Bout five months.’

James clapped Hoke on the shoulder and grinned. “You can probably tolerate people for five months. Although...” James turned to go back inside the livery, “if you do, that’ll be a record.”

“What made you change your mind?” Dotson asked the next day, when Hoke told him he and James were joining the wagon train.

“I don’t know. Just feel like I’m supposed to go.” Despite the risk of disappointing Ed Branson again, the desire to go was flaming strong inside his chest.

Colonel Dotson nodded. “The Baldwyn woman signed on, too...her and her four children, as far as Fort Hall. Her husband’s supposed to be a captain out there. But somethin’...somethin’ don’t seem right about it to

me. Nobody I've asked knows anything about him. I guess we'll find out."

"I guess so," agreed Hoke. He didn't like hearing she had a husband. But his gut refused to accept Colonel Dotson's news.

Hoke relied on his gut. And his gut was telling him to go. It didn't make a bit of sense. It defied his every argument of logic. A *woman*, after all! And *married*! But his gut was telling him to stick with it, and his gut never gave him any peace when he tried to back out of a decision once it was made.

* * *

As much as Hoke dreaded sharing his decision with Ed Branson, he swallowed his pride and sought the older man out. He owed him that much. He found Branson working on a saddle in the barn.

"Mr. Branson, I came back to Independence thinking I would stay. But something's happened." Hoke dropped his head. How could he explain how he *knew* he was supposed to go? He couldn't, any more than he could explain why he'd left this good man the first time.

Hoke shuffled his feet. "I think I'm supposed to join a wagon train pulling out next Tuesday."

Mr. Branson pushed the saddle to the side, a hint of sadness in his eyes. Hoke's guilt increased as the older man studied his face. Then Mr. Branson's eyes changed, something like hope sparking inside them. He leaned toward Hoke with a sudden grin. "What color are her eyes?"

"Blue." Hoke answered without thinking. Blue as the water he'd seen in a lake as he came off the Rockies. Mr. Branson must have known him better than Hoke realized.

The old man smiled. "Say no more, Son." As he pulled the saddle back to him, he added, "Ruby's eyes were brown...brown as the leather on this saddle."

When Hoke turned to leave, he added, "I told you, you'd know."

* * *

Yellow flowers were growing in a patch by the house where Mrs. Ruby had planted them. She had loved flowers almost as much as she had books. Hoke scooped a handful and walked up the hill to the cemetery one last time to pay his respects. He stood for a long time over his parents' graves. The words on his father's headstone had rubbed off—a ten-year-old's efforts at etching were not as lasting as a man's. But the

words on his mother's were still readable: *Rachel Mathews, beloved wife and mother.*

Hoke walked to the lower end of the cemetery and laid the remaining flowers on Mrs. Ruby's grave. He straightened, then took his hat off and squeezed it in his hands. The guilt he'd felt at telling Ed Branson his news was back, and double-fold. Branson had already lost his wife, and now Hoke was riding off a second time.

"I'm sorry I didn't let you hug me," he said in a low voice. "And...and I'll treasure the books you gave me." Hoke looked out over the cemetery. The evening sun was about to set. A warm breeze blew down the hill and stirred his hair. Hoke closed his eyes and enjoyed the warm caress.

"I hope you won't fault me for leaving again. You see...there's this woman." Hook opened his eyes and chuckled. "Mr. Branson saw right through me...but...I don't know."

An image of his mother filled his mind—how her hands had felt after she died: heavy, yet hollow. Empty. Strange. He was struck by how differently his own hands—and heart—felt now: light, yet solid. Filled. Still strange.

"She has blue eyes and smells like lavender."

Hearing the sound of voices, Hoke looked to the top of the hill. There she stood—Abigail Baldwyn—with her family, and with the woman Hoke recognized as the

one who ran the boarding house where they lodged. Abigail had removed her hat. Hoke smoothed his hair back and put his own worn hat back on his head.

He hadn't understood the pull he'd felt two months ago to come back to Independence, and he didn't understand the pull that was now telling him to leave it again. It was nothing short of foolhardy to follow a married woman he'd barely met into the unknown. But there were many things that had happened in his life that he couldn't explain. In fact, all the major turning points eluded his understanding.

He looked to the top of the hill again and smiled, knowing that from where he stood in the shadows at the bottom, he was likely only a silhouette. They couldn't see his face clearly, like he could see theirs. But the afternoon sunlight, as it threw out its final golden beams before dropping, gleamed so brightly off of Abigail's and each of her four children's heads that the Baldwyns could have passed for angels.

It was a sign...like the beacon of a lighthouse pulling in a weary sailor.

Author's Note & Acknowledgements

A *denouement* is a tying up of loose ends. I respect the denouement as a critical component of good storytelling and realize that readers of this short story who may not be familiar with my first novel, *Leaving Independence*, risk coming to this final page with frustration at its lack of denouement.

What? She's married?

The truth is, it's taken me a little longer than I had hoped to bring my second novel, a follow-up story to *Leaving Independence*, to print. That book, *A Contradiction to His Pride*, is written and approaching the final editing stages as this short story is released. It is mainly the story of James Parker and Corrine Baldwin, although many characters we came to know and love in *Leaving Independence* make a return appearance, including Hoke and Abigail. (An excerpt from that novel is included at the end of this author's note.)

If you happen to be a new reader frustrated at my lack of denouement in this story, I wanted to explain what readers of *Leaving Independence* will (hopefully) recognize: the second part of this tale challenged me to write inside the cracks of a story that is already in print. Which, I must say, was *exhilarating!*

In *Leaving Independence*, there is a scene near the end of the novel where Hoke harkens back to a dark and snowy night when he sat on a hillside as a fifteen-year-old and watched a family inside their cabin while tears froze on his cheeks.

I wanted to know more about that moment. Perhaps you're curious about that moment, too. Since that part of Hoke's story happened at Christmas, it seemed appropriate to release *On a Dark & Snowy Night* at Christmas, too.

It is my ardent hope that new and old readers alike will enjoy this look at Hoke's past.

Hope is an important theme in all that I write and teach. My challenge here was to convince new readers that brighter days lie in store for Hoke, without boring familiar readers with too much repetition on those details.

Now, that excerpt...

A Contradiction to His Pride

Prologue

A cold wind rustled the leaves of the evergreens west of Baker City, building like the crescendo of a symphony. When the wind unfurled and swept into town, it lifted the top layer of a twenty-inch snow that had fallen the day before, sending icy sprays swirling over

several residents who had rushed to stand in the drifts and on the boardwalk following the gunshots.

James Parker had wanted to give Corrine Baldwin a day to remember him by, not a day to curse his name.

Now, as she thrashed while he tried to hold her, the blood from her hands raking stains over the sleeves of his coat, James squeezed his eyes shut against the wind, the ice, the snow and the slaughter, and wondered if she could ever forgive him.

If you'd like to know more about the second book's release, please follow me on any of the following social media outlets:

Website (with option to join email list): www.leannewsmith.com

Facebook: leannewsmith2016

Instagram: leanne.w.smith

Twitter: @leannewsmith

Amazon & Goodreads author pages: Leanne W. Smith

This short story exists because Julie Gwinn, my agent, suggested it. So thank you, Julie, for believing in me, and for your part in the creation and evolution of this tale.

Several people helped make this story stronger. What started as a seedling quickly grew into a mature work I'm proud to call partly mine. I can't claim it all, for without Shari MacDonald Strong, editor

extraordinaire—who responded to my vague pronouns and quirky habits with the patience of Job—and the feedback of several test readers, this manuscript would never have come to the page.

Thank you to Dana Chamblee Carpenter for being my writing critique partner and some of the earliest eyes to see all my (rough and painful) drafts. Thank you to Stan Smith, Shelby Mick, Lincoln Mick and Joan Wood, who also served as early readers and pretty terrific family members. And thank you to Mrs. Neika Stephens, Melissa Wilson, Wendy Lipscomb and Melinda Caudill for the important feedback (and friendship) each of you offered.

Thank you, finally, to Phil Pfeffer, Amanda Bostic and Ami McConnell, who all offered mentoring and book industry counsel at a time when I really hungered for it, and to Jenna Land at Ingram Content for walking me through the self-publication process.

About the Author



Photo © 2015 Shelby M'lynn Mick

On a Dark & Snowy Night is Leanne W. Smith's first published short story. Her debut historical fiction novel, *Leaving Independence*, was released by Waterfall Press in 2016. In addition to writing, she teaches for a university in Nashville, Tennessee, where she lives with her husband, two daughters, and son-in-law. Leanne believes that when something calls to you, you should journey toward it. Visit her website at www.leannewsmith.com for inspiration in pursuing personal and career-related dreams.

On a Dark and Snowy Night/Leanne W. Smith