

The crowd in the Silver Dollar saloon was lively; the air cloudy and pungent from the combination of the foul smelling cigars being smoked by a large percentage of the patrons and the stench of unwashed bodies. Above the din the pounding strains of the piano demanded to be heard but the volume of the crowd, rising as it did in direct proportion to the quantity of spirits imbibed, was winning the competition against the struggling piano-player. In one corner of the room an island of tranquillity stood apart from the general throng, a veritable sea of revellers surging around the green baize table but in no way interfering with the game in progress or the concentration of the players involved. Four men sat equidistant from each other around the playing surface, each with a hand of cards and a pile of money of varying amounts depending on the vagaries of Lady Luck and how free she had been with her favours that night.

Ezra Standish, the finery of a Southern gentleman setting him apart from the rough and ready cowboys with whom he played, rhythmically fanned and closed his cards and waited patiently for the ante to increase. He held what he knew to be a winning hand -- he just wanted maximum stakes on the table before cleaning his opponents out and leaving the game a somewhat wealthier man. The round of bidding drew to a close and Ezra smiled contentedly as he displayed the five cards. An ace high straight flush.

“Well, gentlemen. Does anyone have an answer to that?”

There was a protracted silence broken first by a muttered curse, then a gentle chuckle. One man threw down his cards and pushed his chair away from the table, amiably tossing his last remaining dime into the pot.

“You done cleaned me out, boy. Maybe one day I can return the favour.”

Ezra’s smile widened, flashing a gold upper premolar.

“That would be my pleasure, sir -- to relieve you of your spare cash at any time.”

The man tipped his hat good-naturedly and withdrew to the bar. The remaining two players were, however not so accepting of their losses. One man pocketed his meagre reserves of coin muttering darkly about Ezra’s ancestry; the other carefully turned the cards over one by one as if searching for a clue to his losses -- some evidence that the Southerner had not won fairly and squarely -- but Ezra Standish had not cheated and there were no cards hidden up his sleeve. He scooped his winnings into a leather

drawstring pouch, pleased by its comforting weight, and made to rise. A dirty hand snaked out to clasp his wrist.

“Hey, mister. How about a chance to win some of that back?”

Ezra eased out of the man’s grip and adjusted his cuff.

“Gentlemen, the hour is late and I must be away. No doubt we will meet again and you, sir, will have your opportunity to lose a few more hands.”

He picked up his jacket manoeuvring his way around the table and through the crush of bodies to the door of the saloon, where he paused to check his silver pocket watch. To his surprise it was 2 in the morning, time to be on the road if he hoped to make it back to Four Corners by sunrise. He had already stayed longer than he planned, lured by the cards and now he faced the prospect of a long, hard ride through the darkness with something less than enthusiasm. Glancing up and down the main street which stretched no more than a hundred yards from end to end, he suddenly thought of New Orleans, of Richmond and Atlanta and realised that he missed the bustle and pleasures of the city. New Orleans was so...cosmopolitan. He started walking slowly down the street to the livery thinking carnal thoughts of the delightful Creole ladies and all their charms that were not entirely worthy of a true gentleman.

There was no sign of the stable hand so Ezra saddled and bridled his own horse, all the while his mind reflecting on a part of his life he knew would never come again; for that life had ended with the defeat of the Confederacy. Leading his mare out of the stable Ezra quietly whistled the chorus of “The Bonnie Blue Flag”, pausing mid-refrain as his mount suddenly balked then reared, and cursing as the reins jerked through his grasp burning his palm. Gathering the reins once again he soothed the fretting animal with reassuring murmurs but the horse reared back again at the same time Ezra understood he had company. His mellow mood -- the result of several whiskeys and a full purse -- rapidly dissipated but his reactions were sluggish and before he could reach his gun he found his upper body encircled by a rope and his arms pinned to his sides against which his struggles proved futile. The last thought that went through his mind before a mighty blow to the side of his head stunned him into submission was that he had badly misjudged the mood of his poker-playing opponents.

By the time Ezra's brain had cleared sufficiently to be able to communicate effectively with his muscles he had been bound to one of the upright posts in the stable, stripped to the waist with his arms secured at maximum extension above his head. One of his assailants stood in front of him; a fist clenched in his hair holding his head upright and a knife blade resting on the bony rim of his eye socket.

"How'd you like to try them fancy card tricks with only one eye, Mister?"

Ezra worked some moisture into his mouth and was relieved when his voice came out steady, strong and sounding totally unconcerned.

"It's not something I would rejoice in, sir."

The man brandishing the knife stepped back a fraction and moved the blade to Ezra's neck. The gambler swallowed hard as the weapon was drawn across the angle of his jaw, easily opening a stinging line of blood in the soft flesh.

"Hey, don't kill him, that'd spoil the fun."

"Naw, just made him bleed a little that's all."

Ezra sucked in his breath as the knife moved to his groin.

"Maybe we should unman him, huh? Watched my daddy do it to a field hand once. Did he squeal like a pig!" He tightened his grip on his captive's hair and stared him in the eye. "What do you think to startin' a new career as a dancin' girl? You're sure pretty enough."

Hysterical laughter followed and Ezra had no illusions that this man would indeed follow through on his threat to emasculate him should the fancy take him. Suddenly he thought he might lose the contents of his stomach, or his bowel -- or both, as the blade pressed more insistently between his legs. Against all odds he maintained an expression of equanimity, although the cold sweat of fear trickled between his shoulder blades and his gut was tying itself in knots. For a moment he was thankful that the ropes binding his wrists held him upright otherwise he suspected he would have had difficulty remaining standing.

"Quit wasting time." This from the second man who had remained out of Ezra's vision.

"Let's get the money, give this cheatin' bastard a whipping and send him on his way."

"Sirs," interjected the gambler, "If money is your only concern then I will gladly reimburse your losses. Surely we can discuss this like reasonable men?"

The assailant with the knife grunted.

“Discuss nuthin”. We don’t need your lyin’, cheatin’ kind in this town.”

If the circumstances hadn’t been so dire Ezra would have laughed in the man’s face but the option of becoming a eunuch did not appeal so Ezra merely dropped his gaze in case the cowboy saw a challenge, real or imagined, there.

“C’mon. Let’s finish this.”

The second man impatiently shouldered his way past the cowboy with the blade and roughly turned Ezra to face the post to which he was tied. The ropes tightened viciously around his wrists as the rotation of his body took up the remaining slack. His hands already felt numb and his arms ached; added to the nausea of fear and the ringing in his skull from the earlier hammer-fisted punch to his head, he felt totally wretched.

Something whistled past his ear and snapped with the familiar crack of rawhide over his right shoulder and his stomach lurched as he recognised the menacing sound of a bullwhip being flourished. Closing his eyes, Ezra pressed his cheek against the rough wood supporting him and wondered if he was man enough to endure what was to come. The whipping the two cowboys had spoken of was obviously to be a literal one and Ezra’s mind reeled recalling the slave pens and the floggings he had witnessed as a boy. Silently praying he tensed and waited for the first cut of the lash.

The man wielding the whip knew his business and he laid on the strokes with a plantation overseer’s finesse. The first half-dozen strokes raised solid welts without breaking the skin, inflicting maximum pain with minimum damage, the next laid open the southerner’s shoulder. By the time the cowboy tired of the sport and coiled his whip, Ezra had fainted and his back was crisscrossed with reddened weals and bloody stripes from shoulder to waist. Without ceremony the two men cut the gambler’s bonds and allowed him to fall bonelessly to the ground. Laughing and counting their ill-gotten gains the pair returned to the saloon, which was still doing a lively trade, without a backward glance.

The early morning mist had not yet cleared from the ground as the lone horseman rode into Four Corners. The horse moved slowly but purposefully, the man in the saddle leaning wearily over the pommel and allowing the animal its head. Few people were about and those that were spared no more than a cursory glance at the familiar figure on the chestnut horse as man and beast negotiated the length of the main street before

finally coming to a halt outside the office of The Clarion newspaper. Ezra Standish made no move to dismount, instead he glanced first up and then down the almost empty street before calling out.

“Mrs. Travis!”

At first there was no response. Then after several more increasingly insistent shouts the door to the office opened and out stepped an obviously irritated Mary Travis. She frowned at the man’s unusually unkempt appearance.

“Ezra! What on earth are you doing?”

Standish leaned forward and beckoned the woman to come closer. Her frown deepening she moved reluctantly forward to stand beside the still-mounted Southerner. Ducking his head to her level he spoke in a conspiratorial whisper.

“I would greatly appreciate some assistance in dismounting from this animal, Miz Travis. As you see, I am currently indisposed.”

Mary stepped back to avoid the wash of brandy fumes that enveloped her.

“Mr. Standish, you’re drunk!”

The gambler slowly and with great deliberation brought his right leg over the neck of his horse and started to slide to the ground. Stumbling, he used Mary to right himself leaning heavily against her to arrest his fall. Instinctively she gripped his arm and he was able to regain his balance.

“Purely medicinal, my dear lady,” he responded blithely, “Now if you would do me the honour of accompanying me across the street to my lodgings, I would be eternally grateful.”

Mary, noticing the pallor of his skin and the sheen of perspiration on his brow, realised that Standish was indeed in real need of assistance and suddenly understood that she was being asked to participate in some bizarre charade. Providing a supporting arm she did as she was asked and the unlikely couple started to cross the street. He stumbled once and Mary quickly slipped an arm around his waist, instinctively drawing away again as her hand encountered a sticky wetness under his jacket. Seeing blood on her fingers she glanced in sudden alarm at the Southerner who continued to walk shakily towards the boarding house where he rented a room.

“Ezra! You’re bleeding.”

“A very astute observation, Miz Travis. Now, if you could just bear with me and see fit to escort my obviously inebriated self to my humble abode....”

Mary bit back the questions forming on her tongue and tightened her hold on the unsteady gambler, who with his pale countenance and erratic gait was giving a masterful performance as a drunken reveller returning home after a night of uninhibited carousing. Only Mary now knew that although he may have been drinking, he was by no means drunk. The mismatched pair navigated the stairs of the boarding house with difficulty and both were breathing hard as Standish finally opened the door to his room and practically fell over the threshold, dragging Mary after him. Clutching at the bedpost like a downing man, Ezra gingerly lowered himself onto the edge of the bed and rested his head on his hands. Solicitous as a mother hen Mary started to help him out of his jacket, fussing and talking rapidly to try and mask her concern. Ezra for his part responded mechanically as if crossing the threshold into the seclusion of his own room had drained him of all energy. Finally easing the jacket free, her eyes widened at the amount of blood staining the remains of the once-white shirt.

“My God, what happened to you?”

Without a second thought Mary, grimacing, began to strip off the bloodied shirt afraid of what she might find but more afraid to not look. Ezra wordlessly permitted her to continue although it was obvious that her actions were causing him pain until at last she had peeled the sodden fabric away from the ruin of the gambler’s back and shoulders. As she stood aghast with the bloodied shirt clenched in her hands Standish raised his head and met Mary’s tear-filled eyes with his own anguished green ones.

“The bastards horsewhipped me,” he said simply, his voice devoid of emotion.

Mary, sleeves pushed up past her elbows, patiently bathed the crisscross of welts and lacerations decorating the pale skin of the gambler’s well-muscled back. He had already refused her offer to fetch Nathan. Throughout her gentle but inexperienced ministrations Ezra maintained a rigid posture still clinging to the bed post with a white-knuckled grip, which only served to make Mary more aware of the added pain she was inflicting on the Southerner. As she again rinsed the bloody washcloth in the basin, her eyes were drawn to the deep rope burns encircling his wrists and the bruise she could see developing at his left temple.

"I still think I should get Nathan."

"Mrs. Travis, I appreciate your thoughtfulness but that would utterly defeat the purpose of my carefully engineered subterfuge. I am appealing to your honourable nature never to reveal my current unfortunate circumstance to another soul."

"But Ezra..."

"Your word Mary," he insisted, wincing as she cleaned the last of the blood from his back, "Promise me that this will remain between you and me."

Mary made a reluctant promise, wondering just how Standish intended concealing his injuries from his comrades. Biting her lower lip she silently bemoaned the lack of even the most basic medical supplies but she knew Ezra would forbid her fetching any requirements from either the store or Nathan. Looking quickly around the room she came to the conclusion that Mrs. Muldoon would hardly appreciate her tearing her bed linen into bandages and decided that she would have to resort instead to sacrificing her own petticoat. Moving into the lee of the bureau behind her she discreetly, but not without a flush of embarrassment, divested herself of her fine lawn petticoat and systematically began tearing the material into long strips. If Ezra was aware of her actions he gave no sign but Mary suspected that even had she been forced to undress entirely in front of him that he would behave like the perfect gentleman and feign total uninterest. Hesitantly she placed a hand on his shoulder, surprised at the firmness of the muscle under her fingers.

"Ezra." She had to gently repeat his name before he looked up, then putting pressure on his shoulder she turned him to face her and started to wind the strips of her petticoat around his back and chest.

A short time later Mary leaned away breathless and flushed both from the exertion of applying the bandages and the resulting close physical contact which under other circumstances would have left her mortified at her own boldness. Blowing a strand of stray hair out of her eyes, she sat down on the bed beside the gambler, rather pleased with her impromptu handiwork. Ezra had remained silent throughout the ordeal, raising his arms at her prompting, but otherwise unmoving. Impulsively she took one of his hands and tentatively traced the deep, inflamed furrow encircling his wrist, wondering all the while at the softness of the skin on hands which had never seen hard labour -- indeed her own hands had more calluses from working the printing press.

“Tell me what happened.”

Standish rose with slow and deliberate movements to cross wordlessly to the dresser and remove a clean shirt from the top drawer. His injuries attended it was clear that he meant to maintain the pretense that nothing had happened. Mary jumped up to stand beside him, reaching out and physically preventing him from putting the shirt on.

“I don’t know what you have in mind but I don’t think you should be doing anything more than resting up right now!” To her surprise there was no argument forthcoming and her tone softened. “You’re exhausted and you need to sleep.”

Gently taking the garment from Ezra’s unresisting hands she steered him back to the bed.

“I don’t suppose this is open to negotiation?” he ventured hopefully, a wan smile crossing his features.

“If you dare move from this room before noon I’ll forget any promises I made and have Nathan here so fast....”

She didn’t complete the sentence as Ezra lowered himself carefully to the bed, wincing as he leaned forward to tug off his boots. Mary rested a gentle hand on his shoulder wanting nothing more than to comfort the solitary gambler.

“Does it hurt terribly?”

Ezra paused and looked up into Mary’s cornflower blue eyes.

“I would like to be able to reassure you that I have indeed suffered worse experiences in my life. I would, however, be lying.”

Mary left when she was certain that Standish was sleeping. As a rule Ezra was a late riser and the fact that he had among the townfolk several witnesses who would attest to his drunken state should quickly dispel any idle speculation as to his nonappearance. To all intents and purposes Ezra Standish was sleeping off a bender. As she walked briskly along the boardwalk she mulled over the paradox of Ezra not caring that people thought him a drunk but rather fearing that his fellow peace-keepers would discover he had been horsewhipped. She assumed it had something to do with stubborn male pride. After seeing the injured Southerner finally succumb to exhaustion and crawl under the bedcovers to sleep awkwardly on his stomach she had quietly withdrawn from the room, standing for a few moments in the hall to compose herself. Mixed emotions

flooded through her. The recollection of blood and torn flesh sending a shudder down her spine, quickly followed by the rising flush of shame as she realised that it would soon be known that she had been alone with Standish in his bedroom. Indeed she reflected that she had been closer to him physically than any man since her husband had been killed but it wasn't any attraction to the gambler that had drawn her to him -- rather the needs of someone hurting who was dependent on her and for whom she could care. Straightening and tucking her hair behind her ears she started down the stairs and slipped quietly out of the front door avoiding any meeting with Ezra's landlady. Thinking rapidly she mentally listed the items she would take back with her to the boarding house when she returned at noon; food, bandages, laudanum, salve and, she thought with half a smile, some brandy -- for medicinal purposes.

Ezra dozed fitfully finally waking several hours later disorientated and perspiring, the biting pain of his back an unwelcome reminder of the night's events and his head aching as much from lack of sleep and an excess of brandy as from the bruise now blackening his temple. From the heat in the room he guessed it to be late morning but a glance at the carriage clock on the bureau confirmed that it was closer to midday. Time to be moving for even if Mary Travis did not make good on her promise to return at noon it was reaching the limit of the time that his associates would allow him to sleep uninterrupted before physically ousting him from his bed. Having washed and shaved in tepid water from the ewer, he managed to pull on his boots and a fresh pair of trousers before a knock came at the door. He quickly grabbed a clean shirt from the dresser hastily shrugging into it but it was Mary who announced herself softly calling his name through the door. Thankful that it wasn't Buck, Standish turned the door handle and allowed the door to swing open to admit the woman. Mary raised a critical eyebrow as she closed the door behind her.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Standish?" She placed the basket she was carrying on the foot of the bed and turned back to scrutinise the gambler with a critical eye. "You know you look terrible."

Ezra studied his reflection in the looking glass and had to admit that Mary was being truthful. Aside from the obvious bruise at his temple, the pallor of his skin only served to accentuate the dark shadows under his eyes. Without a doubt after taking one look at

him Mr. Jackson would be inquiring after his health and how would he explain away the deep purple swelling above his right ear.

Mary uncorked the bottle of tincture of opium she had brought with her and poured a generous measure into the glass she found on the night stand.

“Here. Take this. It might help.”

Ezra looked sceptically at the proffered medicine but in deference to Mary’s wishes he downed it with a grimace.

“Now, I think I should look at that back of yours again. I managed to find a salve and some clean bandages.”

Standish smiled in spite of the circumstances.

“I do declare Miz Travis, you are equally as relentless as the esteemed Mr. Jackson.”

Mary found the process of dressing Ezra’s injuries easier the second time around but while the gambler bore her ministrations stoically, occasionally sipping from the silver flask of brandy that Mary had kindly thought to retrieve from his saddle bag and refill, she knew it was no easier on him.

“I believe it will be quite some time before these wounds are healed Mr. Standish. I’m not sure how I can continue to attend to you without arousing suspicion.”

“Please, let us not stand on ceremony. Considering that you have twice visited my room today and seen me in a state of undress, I think you may call me Ezra. As for my future requirements concerning your very capable nursing skills, I shall be departing this town within the hour.”

Mary paused, her arms encompassing Standish’s torso as she reached around to complete a turn of the bandage.

“You’re leaving?”

“I have some...unfinished business in Bitter Springs to take care of.”

Slowly Mary tied off the tail of the dressing and rising to stand, placed both her hands on the Southerner’s shoulders. Gently raising one hand she stroked the now livid bruise on the side of his head.

“Something to do with all this I’ll warrant. Why can’t you just walk away from it?”

Standish stood up, moving aside the chair he had been sitting astride while Mary tended him, a little disconcerted by the intimacy of her touch. He turned to face her taking both her hands in his.

“Mary. I have spent most of my life walking away from situations I was not prepared to face. I have never done anything that could be in any way considered either courageous or noble. In fact, as Mr. Larabee will tell you, I have a habit of throwing in my hand when the odds are stacked against me.”

“But you haven’t walked away from this town, Ezra.”

Standish smiled with genuine humour.

“My dear, that is only because it is understood that should I make any attempt at a permanent departure Mr. Larabee will lay claim to my head and there are five of his associates ready, willing and able to deliver it to him -- on a platter!”

“You devalue yourself, Ezra. I don’t believe for one minute that fear of Chris Larabee is the reason you stay in Four Corners.”

Again Ezra smiled.

“But you must admit, ma’am, it’s a very persuasive argument for remaining.”

“Then let me at least come with you. I don’t think you should go to Bitter Springs alone and I have some friends over there I’d like to visit.”

Standish finally released Mary’s hands and turned away, reaching for his shirt which he quickly donned in silence, his features expressionless.

“I don’t think so, Miz Travis. I do not believe the purpose of my excursion could be interpreted as a social occasion.”

Mary moved forward to help as Standish struggled to put on his vest, and was in the process of fastening the buttons when a commotion erupted outside in the hall and the door to Ezra’s room burst open. Buck, yelling Ezra’s name, skidded to a halt his expression one of comic confusion as, caught off guard, he took in the completely unexpected scene. Gaping, his eyes flicking uneasily from Mary to Ezra, Buck was for once at a loss for words. Mary smoothly turned and passed Standish’s jacket to him as if being in his room and assisting him with his wardrobe was the most natural thing in the world.

“In one hour then, Mr. Standish. If you could bring the buggy to The Clarion, I shall be waiting.” Collecting her basket from the foot of the bed, Mary smoothed her skirts and moved to the door, offering her arm to a still bewildered Buck and giving him her warmest smile. “Mr. Standish was good enough to deliver a message from a business associate of mine and has most kindly agreed to escort me to Bitter Springs. Now Mr.

Wilmington if you would be so kind as to walk me to the store, I'm sure Mr. Standish has some preparations to make."

Buck tipped his hat in acknowledgement as he was skilfully manoeuvred out of the room by the blonde woman who, with an impudent backward glance at the uncharacteristically speechless Ezra, smiled triumphantly. As the door closed behind them Ezra shook his head and smiled. The con-man had been conned. Mary had managed to save him from some awkward questioning from Wilmington while neatly turning the situation to her advantage and for that he admired her. She was a woman with spirit and while under normal circumstances she would have been the last person he would turn to as an ally, he was glad that she was on his side.

Mary gathered the items she had purchased and stowed them in her basket, before nodding her thanks to the counter hand and turning to leave. She started visibly as she pivoted straight into a black-clad figure who had silently moved to stand behind her.

"Ezra been botherin' you, Mary?" The words delivered in a cold monotone suggested repercussions to the gambler should her answer be in the affirmative.

"I don't know what you've heard Mr. Larabee but Mr. Standish merely delivered a message to me from a business acquaintance in Bitter Springs."

"I heard he was drunk as a skunk and hollerin' at you from the street."

Mary ducked her head for a moment.

"It's true Mr. Standish was suffering from an overindulgence in brandy, but he still behaved like a perfect gentleman. In fact by way of an apology for his rowdy behaviour he is going to escort me to Bitter Springs this afternoon."

Chris held her gaze which she met unflinchingly.

"Vin or Buck would have gone with you, Mary," he answered softly, "You just had to ask."

"I know any one of you would go with me, but I think the journey will be more beneficial for Mr. Standish's hangover; besides which he has some business of his own to attend. Now if you'll excuse me I have some things to do."

Chris stood aside then followed Mary out of the store, stopping beside a buckskin-clad figure leaning against the verandah post.

"Ezra's up to somethin'."

"You think so?"

Chris continued to watch the slim figure of Mary Travis as she swept down the sidewalk towards The Clarion office.

“I know so. I’d just like to know what it has to do with Mary.”

Standish drew the buggy to a halt in front of the newspaper office, set the brake and jumped down onto the dusty street. His own horse, saddled and tied to the back of the buggy by a lead rope, stamped restlessly and he walked back to settle the animal. Flexing his shoulders to ease the set of his jacket he was rewarded with a familiar tightness across his back which was now, as a result of the opium, more uncomfortable than painful. Self-consciously pulling at his cuffs he made certain the layers of fabric concealed the rope burns around his wrists and stepped up to the door of The Clarion just as the newspaperwoman opened the door. She looked at once relieved and embarrassed.

“I thought you might not come.”

“You left me very little choice in matter, ma’am.” He took from her the hamper she was struggling with and loaded it into the back of the wagon. “And I really must congratulate you on your fine performance this morning Mrs. Travis.”

Mary blushed as Standish assisted her into the buggy.

“I’m sorry. It was unfair of me but I was afraid of what Buck.....”

“Mary,” Ezra interrupted as he swung into the seat beside her. “You handled the situation perfectly; far better in fact than I could have done because Buck believes in you implicitly. I doubt that Mr. Wilmington could accept the notion of a woman deceiving him.”

“I don’t usually tell lies,” confessed Mary, adjusting her skirts, not sure that she was comfortable with the situation she had engineered.

Standish took up the reins and urged the pair of horses forward.

“Where is the lie, Mary? Am I not indeed accompanying you on a trip to Bitter Creek? You are confusing the telling of a lie with failure to disclose the whole truth.”

“Is there a difference?”

In front of the saloon Chris Larabee sat in his customary spot in the shade of the verandah balanced on two legs of a tilted back chair, one spurred boot resting on the rail in front of him. Not more than a step away Vin Tanner leaned easily against the

wooden facade of the building. Both watched silently as Mary's buggy, with Ezra Standish at the reins left town at a brisk pace.

The pair drove in companionable silence for some time until Ezra finally allowed the horses to slow from a trot to a steady walk and turned to look steadily at the blonde woman beside him.

"Tell me, Miz Travis. As my appointed guardian, are you intent on remaining at my side once we reach Bitter Springs?"

Mary absently twirled the parasol she held to keep the sun at bay and gazed out over the endless plain.

"I doubt that I would be welcome in the saloon Ezra, and I assume that your unfinished business involves spending some time in that particular establishment," she responded drily, "Besides I was telling the truth when I said I had friends in town."

The gambler ducked his head and smiled.

"You are indeed correct in your assumption that I will be spending some time in the saloon, and I sincerely hope that your friends will be offering you hospitality for the night. My business may take some time."

Mary reached out and impulsively grasped the Southerner's hand, her expression revealing her concern.

"Please tell me you're not looking for vengeance, Ezra."

"Not vengeance, Mary - Justice."

"You can give it any name you want but what it means is that in the end someone gets hurt. Wasn't last night enough for you?"

Standish didn't respond immediately and when he raised his head she could see the pain in his eyes.

"This is something I have to do, Mary. Are you familiar with the term *amour-propre*?" As the woman shook her head Standish continued. "It's pride, ego, vanity...all of which I admit to possessing in abundant measure...and if I do nothing, if I walk away as you ask -- as I have always done, I will have lost more than my self-esteem -- I will have lost my very soul."

Mary tentatively slipped a comforting arm around Standish's shoulders.

"Oh, Ezra."

For a moment Standish tensed then Mary felt the resistance go out of him and he sagged listlessly in her arms accepting but not returning the embrace. For several minutes the gambler remained motionless then with a heavy sigh he straightened and gathered up the reins once more. The horses started forward again, having slowed gradually to a standstill when no direction from the driver had been forthcoming, and a flick of leather across their rumps sent them into a ground-eating canter, the animals sensing the urgency transmitted from the driver's hands through the reins.

Chris Larabee rarely made a hasty decision; he had discovered one tended to live longer that way but as he looked thoughtfully across the street to the boarding house he could not shake the feeling that something was seriously amiss; indeed he had a strong sense of impending disaster for which he could find no logical basis. It was this gut feeling that prompted what was for Larabee an uncharacteristically impetuous act. Rising quickly he strode across the dusty width of main street to enter Standish's lodgings and seek out his room knowing full well the gambler was by now well on his way to Bitter Springs. He had no clear idea of what he was going to do once he had gained entry but he was convinced that the key, or even a clue, to Ezra's -- and Mary's -- decidedly odd behaviour might be uncovered in the Southerner's quarters.

Chris glanced quickly around the well-furnished room, a direct contrast to his own spartan cell, but then Ezra often made more in one night at the poker table than Chris was likely to see in a month. Moving slowly around the room Chris paused his nose twitching as he caught a faint whiff of bay rum tainted by another, stronger, underlying odour which while not unpleasant was out of place. On the night stand he found the answer in a small jar of salve -- a herbal concoction Nathan often used on cuts and bruises. He opened the closet and shook his head; Standish had more clothes than anyone he had ever known. And who needed more than one pair of boots? He was about to close the door when his eye caught a flash of white in the corner of the closet, what seemed to be a crumpled shirt, out of place in the otherwise pristine neatness of the gambler's wardrobe. A moment later he held in his hand the torn garment, a hand-stitched silk shirt once-white but now stiff with dried blood and his stomach performed a gymnastic manoeuvre that left him feeling slightly sickened.

"Find somethin'?"

Somehow he was not surprised to find Vin Tanner at the open door.

“See for yourself.”

He tossed the gory evidence towards Tanner and sat down on the edge of the bed, aware that he was looking at a piece of the puzzle but not certain where it fitted in the bigger picture. The bounty-hunter turned the shirt over in his hands, checking for damage but he found only that several of the pearl buttons had been torn off. He made a slow, thoughtful circuit of the room, pausing to look out of the window.

“He looked fine when he drove out of town a coupla hours ago, Chris.”

Larabee could not argue with Tanner’s observation but his instincts were telling him an entirely different story.

“Somethin’s wrong, Vin. I don’t know what it is but I’ve got a bad feeling.” The gunslinger stood up abruptly and began to pace restlessly. “I don’t like this. We know that’s Ezra’s shirt - he’s the only man in town who wears silk for God’s sake! - yet he’s hiding something and somewhere along the line he’s involved Mary. Why?”

“Just because it’s Ezra’s shirt doesn’t mean it’s Ezra’s blood,” answered Tanner reasonably, then seeing the unconcealed anxiety in Larabee’s usually frosty eyes continued, “Do you want me to go after them?”

Larabee’s first inclination was to do just that but instead he slowly shook his head as he considered the reactions of both the gambler and Mary to being followed by any one of the town’s peace-keepers, least of all him.

“Hell, Vin. If I thought it would do any good I’d be on my horse and after that buggy right now but I get the feeling that neither of them would take too kindly to a chaperone.”

Vin leaned easily against the window frame.

“Is this about Ezra...or Mary?”

Larabee looked pensive for a moment and picked up the small jar of herbal salve from the night stand.

“It’s about trust, Vin.”

Mary Travis roused from the light doze she had fallen into with the change in the buggy’s rhythm as the horses slowed to a halt.

“Are we there?” she asked quickly.

Standish handed her the reins.

“Not quite, Miz Travis, the town is about another ten minutes ride but here’s where we part company.”

He started to climb down from the buggy.

“Wait!” She hurriedly drew a piece of paper and a pencil from her reticule, quickly writing a few words and handing it to the Southerner. “This is where I’ll be staying. It’s the Mason’s, just the other side of town. Meet me here when you...when your business is concluded.”

Standish smiled roguishly.

“My dear lady, how could I possibly refuse such an eloquent invitation?”

“If I don’t see you before midnight, I’ll come looking for you.”

“I’m sure you will,” he drawled, a little bemused by the newspaperwoman’s concern.

He tucked the note in his pocket and moved to untether his horse from the rear of the buggy. Mary watched Standish gather himself, bracing against the pain of climbing into the saddle, overcome by a mixed sense of relief and foreboding but as he turned the horse’s head around and prepared to ride away she impulsively called after him.

“One more thing, Ezra!...” Mary paused momentarily feeling suddenly foolish, “Be careful.”

He tipped his hat in acknowledgement and waved once as he kicked the horse into a canter. Sighing she flicked the reins and urged the tired beasts forward, wondering if she had not made the biggest mistake of her life by becoming involved in the gambler’s subterfuge.

Ezra slowed his horse to a walk as he entered the town and guided the animal to the hitching rail in front of the “Silver Dollar” saloon, not wanting to risk stabling the horse at the livery again considering the consequences of his earlier visit. He smoothly dismounted showing no sign of the discomfort that the action caused him his expression, the result of years of practice at the poker table, giving away nothing although in truth every movement of his upper body radiated waves of pain. Pausing to adjust his cuffs and straighten his jacket Standish strolled nonchalantly into the building ready to play for the highest stakes of his career as a gambler -- his life.

Few patrons frequented the bar this early in the day and the Southerner was content to order a bottle of whisky and secure himself a place at a table in the shadows, back to

the wall with a clear view of both the doorway and the other tables. Tonight he would leave nothing to chance. The barkeep pushed a bottle of rye and a glass towards Standish in exchange for coin, a welcoming smile creasing his ruddy features.

“Back so soon, Sir? Always a pleasure to serve a return customer. Obviously my little establishment was to your liking?”

Standish raised a sceptical eyebrow but decided not to spoil the bartender’s inflated perceptions of his modest facility.

“Some unfinished business, my good man, which I hope to bring to a satisfactory conclusion tonight.” He refrained from adding that it was also his firm intention never to set foot in Bitter Springs ever again if he could avoid it.

It was late. Standish had successfully engaged not only any number of cowboys, but also a travelling salesman, a local store--owner and the town’s ostler in an ongoing poker school which reaped him a substantial amount of cash in a relatively short space of time. He permitted his various opponents enough winning hands to allay any suspicions, playing them with as much skill as he did the cards and purposely avoiding any ill-feeling. He found it genuinely amusing that he had to cheat repeatedly in order to lose and his losses were small enough to compensate for the lapse in his usual dedication to winning at all costs.

Dealing yet another hand Ezra glanced up as yet one more patron pushed through the batwing doors and although his hands continued to dole out cards without a break in rhythm his heart skipped a beat as he watched one of his assailants arrogantly scan the room. The man stopped abruptly, his face registering a moment of shocked recognition then in a strangely elongated moment of time the two men traded stares; the cowboy’s look of pure malevolence returned in equal measure by the gambler with unwavering and coldly appraising intensity. Standish felt an icy flutter in his gut only to realise that rather than apprehension the sensation he was experiencing was anticipation; it bothered him that he was actually looking forward to meting this man again on more equal terms. The cowboy, recovering his wits sneered unpleasantly, aimed a stream of tobacco juice at a nearby spittoon -- missed -- and turned towards the bar. Ezra considered it a small victory that the cowboy had not been able to maintain eye contact and wondered briefly as he fanned his cards how long it would take the man to make

his first move as he surely would before the night was too much older. Barely aware of the game in which he was involved Ezra, playing like an automaton, nonetheless managed to complete the hand and claim the pot before checking his watch and excusing himself by pleading a previous engagement.

Vin Tanner chewed pensively on a toothpick, his gaze fixed on his friends seated around the table in the saloon watching the interplay of five diverse personalities. Chris had brought the six of them together in an attempt to make sense of the situation that had transpired with the absent seventh member of their team and the newspaperwoman. So far there had been a lot of talk and even more guesswork with very little hard evidence to go on.

“Hell, Chris! What are we waiting for?” exploded Buck finally, as ever the man of action, “If Ezra’s in trouble then let’s do something about it!”

Josiah leaned forward, huge hand resting on Wilmington’s arm to restrain any rash movement.

“It seems to me, Buck that if Ezra has gone to such lengths to keep his business private then maybe we should respect that.”

“Josiah’s right,” agreed Nathan, “Ezra’s a grown man. He might not appreciate us interfering. ”

J.D. squirmed restlessly in his seat, eager to be doing something and if that meant riding off after the Southerner then he was all for it whatever the excuse.

“That don’t mean nothing -- Ezra’s mighty free with them five dollar words of his but it don’t mean he’s got sense, any more’n the rest of us! And what about Mary? Do you want to stand by and maybe let something bad happen to her?”

Vin deftly shifted the toothpick in his teeth.

“There’s nothing to prove that either one of ‘em is in any trouble,” he pointed out intent on playing Devil’s advocate, “You saw Ezra this morning, Buck. What do you think?” Buck ducked his head.

“To tell the truth, Vin, I was so damned surprised by Mrs. Travis standing there fixing Ezra’s shirt buttons as nice as you please that I didn’t pay any attention. Then Mary hustled me out of that room so fast that I didn’t get a chance to even talk to Ezra.”

Chris shook his head slowly.

“That’s the thing, Buck, don’t you see? Mary in Ezra’s room helping him dress? That’s not like Ezra, and it’s definitely not like Mary either! And tell me this, why would Ezra go straight to the Clarion when he rode in this morning?”

“I heard tell he was mighty drunk,” responded J.D. “Couldn’t take two steps without falling over.”

Chris twisted his hat repeatedly through his hands, still thoughtful and obviously unsatisfied with the answers he was getting.

“Have you ever seen Ezra so drunk he couldn’t stand up?”

The six men exchanged worried looks, the seed of doubt now firmly sown in their minds as well.

Suddenly Vin stood up and threw the toothpick to the ground.

“Come on, Chris. Let’s you and me ride out to Bitter Springs and check things out. You’re not gonna rest until we find out what’s going on. Worst that can happen if you’re wrong is that Ezra and Mary will be mightily offended that we followed them.”

“And if I’m right?” countered Chris.

Tanner settled his hat on his head and stepped down from the boardwalk.

“Then at least we’ll be there when we’re needed.”

Chris stood up and looked at each of the four men in turn.

“I’ll send a wire when we get to Bitter Springs. Let you know if we need you. Meantime you’all stay here and keep an eye on things.”

Buck sketched a brief salute and the two men mounted up, leaving Four Corner’s in a cloud of dust.

Josiah squinted into the setting sun, watching the two figures ride away.

“Never seen Chris so antsy before. Think it has something to do with Mary?”

Buck grinned as his gaze followed Josiah’s.

“Well, it sure as hell’s got nothing to do with Ezra!”

Nathan slowly rose from his seat.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Buck. It has everything in the world to do with Ezra.”

Standish, epitomising Southern elegance and style in his distinctive and expensive attire, leaned against the bar only inches from his filthily clad nemesis and ordered a drink.

“Well, sir.” He spoke quietly. “We meet again.”

The cowboy was slow to recover his composure, hardly expecting the man he had so soundly whipped less than twenty-four hours before to approach him directly. The man’s adam’s apple bobbed nervously as he quickly downed a shot of whisky, his eyes never leaving the gambler at his side. Ezra half-turned to face the man, protecting his back in case the cowboy decided to take advantage of that particular weakness.

“I believe we have some business to discuss, my friend. I think you are in possession of something which rightfully belongs to me.”

The man wiped his mouth with the back of his hand his eyes skittering nervously around the room before settling once again on the Southern gambler.

“You’ve got some nerve, mister, coming back here.” He whispered hoarsely, “Looks like you don’t learn your lessons too good.”

Ezra lowered his head for a moment and when he raised it again, the cowboy stepped back a pace as he looked into blazing green eyes and read -- correctly -- the danger there.

“I don’t think I care for your teaching methods, sir. What transpired last night was nothing more than common larceny and assault. Even in this godforsaken lawless excuse for a town I do believe you stand a more than even chance of being found guilty as charged.” He extended his left hand palm up. “One hundred and twenty-one dollars if I recall correctly.”

Standish, a master at reading the subtlest nuance in a person’s expression did not miss the flicker of malicious cunning which momentarily crossed the wrangler’s scarred features. The man hesitated, his thought processes almost transparent to the Southerner who had once made a career out of conning people.

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, mister,” he hedged, licking his lips, “I don’t have none of your money.”

Ezra had expected no less. Although less than twenty-four hours had passed he suspected that very little, if any, of his stolen winnings remained and that this man with nothing to lose by killing him would do just that given the least opportunity. He smiled broadly showing a flash of gold tooth; reassured that in this particular battle of wits he was up against a man with a fairly meagre arsenal. The man’s gaze kept flicking to the gambler’s half-concealed back as if puzzled by the idea that, so recently after a vicious

beating, the Southerner could be still standing let alone talking to him at the bar. Standish himself was beginning to wonder the same thing as the still raw flesh of his upper body signalled periodic waves of pain to his brain, increasing now as the large draught of opium he had swallowed some time earlier started to wear off. His face revealed nothing of this discomfort as he continued to parlay with the very man who had inflicted those injuries. In one rapid movement Ezra quickly downed the shot of whisky which stood on the bar in front of him and turned as if to leave in wordless dismissal. The man's arm snaked out and a filthy calloused hand closed around Ezra's forearm jerking him back to face the cowboy. The Southerner felt a flare of pain as a laceration beneath his armpit broke open under the sudden stress but his face reflected nothing as he calmly pulled his arm free and straightened his cuff.

"You came back here looking for trouble, mister?" the man hissed, still keeping his voice low, "Well I guess you' ve found it!"

He started to reach for his gun but before his fingers were even half way to the holstered weapon Ezra had fully extended his right arm and the spring-loaded Derringer was in his hand and pointed squarely at the cowboy.

"No, on the contrary. *You've* found it."

Standish quickly glanced around, the small pistol nestled in his right palm, but if anyone had witnessed the exchange between the two men they effected not to notice; even the bartender continued to wipe glasses and serve drinks although looking once in their direction he met Standish's gaze and winked. Tipping his hat to the barkeep he urged the cowboy to move with the Derringer held against his ribs, herding the man outside into the street.

Mary Travis had been pacing nervously glancing alternately between the clock on the mantelpiece and the closed door for fifteen minutes. It was approaching midnight and she was becoming increasingly fearful for Standish's safety. Her hosts, Dr. John Mason and his wife Lilit, continued to exchange questioning looks at their guest's uncharacteristic behaviour as they attempted to maintain a semblance of normal conversation, all too aware of Mary's distraction. As the carriage clock softly chimed the stroke of twelve, Mary apologetically reached for her cloak.

"I'm sorry. I have to go."

Lilith Mason stood up, an expression of alarm on her face.

“Out? Now? It’s the middle of the night, Mary!”

“There’s someone I have to meet. I promised.”

“Then let John go with you at least,” pleaded the auburn-haired woman, “It’s not safe for a woman alone here in the day let alone after dark.”

Mary hesitated then nodded briefly.

“All right. But hurry. And bring your gun.”

John Mason glanced quickly at his wife then did as he had been bidden and retrieved a battered but serviceable Spencer carbine from behind the door then followed the determined newspaperwoman out into the night.

Mary could understand why Lilith had been adamant that John accompany her; even with his reassuring bulk beside her the walk to the saloon was far from pleasant as drunken cowboys made sport in the dusty street, catcalling and whistling as she moved by them barely deterred from pawing at her by her armed companion. As she came within sight of the “Silver Dollar” she saw, with a profound sense of relief, Ezra stepping down from the boardwalk. It took her a moment to realise that he was ushering a man before him and as he gestured with his right hand she understood that he held the cowboy at gunpoint. There was no doubt in her mind that this was one of the men Ezra had been seeking. As the two men mounted their horses she stepped into the street.

“Ezra!”

The gambler gave no indication that he had heard her as he turned his horse’s head and waving the cowboy on ahead spurred the animal to a canter.

“Ezra wait!”

Mary’s shoulder’s slumped as Standish vanished from sight with no acknowledgement that he had even heard her calls.

“Strange company you’re keeping these days Mary,” commented Mason as the sound of hoof-beats died away, “Are you in some kind of trouble?”

She smiled wanly, thinking of Chris Larabee and his six companions who had so changed the face of Four Corner’s. A couple of gunfighters, a bounty hunter, a failed priest, a former slave, a boy seeking adventure and a gambler -- seven men who had brought order to the town and who had found a special place in her heart.

“You don’t know the half of it, John.”

For several minutes Mary stared down the empty street as if her wishes could bring the gambler back. Mason finally touched her arm.

“I think we should be getting back, Mary. There’s no cause for us to be out any longer.” The blonde woman nodded, feeling as if she had somehow let Standish down but powerless now to intervene. Slowly she turned and linking her arm with that of the older man began to walk back towards the Mason’s house.

“Mary?”

The blonde woman turned at the approach of two men on foot, leading their horses. Surprise, doubt and relief crossed her features in equal measure finally settling into a welcoming smile as she recognised the pair. Leaving John Mason on the sidewalk she ran to the two men, embracing first the black-clad figure of Chris Larabee then Vin Tanner, dressed as usual in buckskin.

“I’m so glad you’re here! I’ve done something terrible...and now I think Ezra’s in danger.” She suddenly pulled back and held Vin at arm’s length. “But what are you doing here? It’s after midnight! Is there something wrong?”

The two men exchanged knowing looks.

“We were hoping you could tell us, Mary,” said Chris, quietly, “Now what have you done that’s so terrible and where’s Ezra?”

Having told her story in as few words as possible Mary sat contritely before the two men in the Mason’s parlour, looking down at her hands. Worried for Ezra but at the same time mortified that she had betrayed his confidence she was finding it difficult to meet their eyes.

“Ezra was determined to come and face the men who beat him so I ...” she paused, “I tricked him into taking me with him.”

Chris smiled.

“You tricked Ezra?”

“I’m not proud of what I did...”

“You should be,” interrupted Vin, “It’s not often someone gets the upper hand with Ezra!” Mary flushed then raised her cornflower blue eyes to look at the two men.

“You will help him won’t you?”

Vin leaned forward and gently took Mary’s hands in his own.

“How badly hurt is he?”

She swallowed hard.

“I’d never seen a man horsewhipped before. It was terrible. He was bleeding badly and I had to get him some opium for the pain. I was hoping that I could get him here to let John take a look at him. He didn’t know that I was visiting a doctor.”

“Could you tell how many lashes?” This from Chris. He *had* seen men horsewhipped before and he knew what Mary had witnessed was not a sight for a weak stomach. Mary thought back to the criss-cross of welts and open lacerations on the gambler’s back and shoulders.

“I couldn’t say; maybe thirty. He said something about passing out after the first twenty.” Chris drew in a sharp breath imagining the effect of that number of lashes; he had known men die from such a whipping from a combination of shock, pain and blood loss. Ezra was obviously made of sterner stuff than Chris would have given him credit for.

“And you don’t know where he’s gone?”

Mary shook her head.

“He rode out with another man just before you arrived; I’m sure Ezra was holding a gun on him.”

Vin cursed. They had been that close and they had wasted a good fifteen or twenty minutes more talking to Mary. Now Ezra was out there with vengeance on his mind and a blood debt to pay. Vin hoped that the next time he saw the gambler that he wouldn’t be swinging at the end of a hangman’s noose for murder.

“We’d have been a here a lot sooner if Chris’ horse hadn’t pulled up lame. We had to switch between riding double and then spelling my horse by walking some.”

Chris rose and looked out of the window into the street.

“He hasn’t gotten too much of a head start. Feel like doing some night tracking, pard?”

Tanner sighed heavily and stood up.

“It’ll be like finding a tick on a grizzly but I’m game. You’ll need a fresh horse first.” He squeezed the woman’s shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t worry. You did the right thing.”

Mary nodded, not sure if Tanner referred to her helping Standish, unburdening herself to them or both.

Whatever his intent Mary had every confidence in these two men. If Ezra was to be found then they were the ones to do it; she just hoped they wouldn't be too late to prevent a calamity.

Ezra leaned forward in the saddle resting one arm on the pommel to ease the pain across his shoulders as he surveyed the campsite ahead. The cowboy, whose name he had discovered was Tad Webster, had at least been truthful in that; of course the fact that he was disarmed, hands tied to his saddle horn and that Ezra had threatened to cripple him by shooting out his knees might have had some bearing on the result. Slowly, his eyes still on his captive, the Southerner reached for the bottle of opium tucked in his saddle bag and drained the last ounce of the tincture, surprised that he had emptied the bottle so quickly during the ride. Ruefully he tossed the empty bottle to the ground ignoring Webster's taunting laughter as he urged the horses forward. "Guess it's hurtin' bad now, huh? Jed sure mussed up that pretty hide of yours and that's no mistake."

Ezra wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand and reined his horse in to allow Webster's horse to pass in front and provide cover. In truth he was feeling the combined effects of fatigue, pain, alcohol and the narcotic in his system.

"Any tricks, Webster and you're a dead man."

The gambler straightened painfully, drawing a ragged breath and followed the cowboy into the silent moonlit camp. If Jed was here as Webster had suggested then there was no immediate sign of him but Ezra was already certain that he was being lured into an ambush so Jed's convenient absence came as no great surprise. The fire had burned out and the whole site had a forlorn and abandoned air to it. A saddle rested on its horn with a bedroll beside it, and the makings of a meal remained congealed in a pan next to a scorched and battered coffee pot. Slowly dismounting Ezra looped the reins of his horse around a low bush and crossed to where Webster slouched easily in the saddle. Keeping his Remington trained on the cowboy he unfastened the bindings around the man's wrists and the saddle horn then gestured for him to dismount. Webster slid fluidly to the ground massaging his wrists and stretching out the kinks in his cramped shoulder muscles. Ezra glanced quickly around the clearing and cocked the short-barrelled revolver delivering a chilling smile which failed to reach either his eyes or his voice.

“There’s no one here, Mr. Webster and it would appear that this camp has been abandoned for some hours. I do believe you have brought me here under false pretences.”

“Oh, Jed’s here all right,” countered Webster, “Just follow me and I’ll show you. He’s not much for company.”

Ezra kept a reasonable distance behind the cowboy intermittently shaking his head in an effort to clear his blurring vision. Weakened by the cumulative effects of blood loss, pain, exhaustion and the too frequent draughts of opium he had consumed, he knew he had to both keep his wits and maintain the upper hand otherwise Webster would be on him like the scavenging coyote he was. A few feet into the brush Ezra stopped, the skin on his scalp tightening in response to the scene before his eyes. Webster crouched beside his partner grinning broadly.

“Jed, we have a visitor. Say hello to the gentleman.”

Twining his fingers into the man’s hair he pulled Jed’s head upright and Ezra looked straight into the cloudy and sightless eyes of a dead man.

“Dear Lord,” breathed Ezra, taking a step back as Webster began to cackle maniacally, “You killed him?”

The front of the dead man’s shirt, Ezra could see now, was covered in thick black blood and on reflection he realised that in his single-minded pursuit of the two men he had ignored the most basic tenets of self-preservation -- trust no-one and believe nothing.

“I wasn’t planning on coming back, mister, till I met you again that is. You see Jed and me had a fallin’ out.”

“Might I hazard a guess that it had something to do with the hundred and twenty-one dollars you stole from me?” The gambler was almost surprised to hear that his voice remained quite steady, for his throat had unaccountably constricted and the dryness in his mouth threatened to rob him completely of speech.

Webster laughed and again addressed the corpse.

“Did you hear that, Jed? This gentleman knows you tried to steal my share of the money and he’s very angry. In fact he’s so angry he might even shoot you for the low-down thief that you are.”

Ezra felt a sudden shiver of fear travel along his spine; for in his plans he had also failed to take into account the fact that his rival was completely and utterly mad. He took

another step backwards as if distancing himself from this insanity would somehow make it go away. Finally overtaken by inexplicable sense of futility Ezra allowed the gun to fall to his side and tried to remember why it had been so important for him pursue his attackers so intently that he, for once, disregarded his own personal code of conduct and neglected his own safety. His mother would be most disappointed in him for allowing such a lapse -- but then what was new?

“Keep the money. It’s of no consequence to me now.”

Abruptly Webster was on his feet, a Colt .45 in his hand which he had managed to surreptitiously purloin from his dead partner pointed directly at Standish.

“Mister, you’re a dead man! You killed Jed and now you think you can kill me.”

For a moment the Southerner frowned in confusion then the last piece of the puzzle clicked into place in his brain and in those few words Ezra finally recognised the method in the man’s madness. Webster certainly intended to kill him and lay the blame of Jed’s murder squarely at his feet; that way he would escape with both the money and his life. The premise was reasonable, after all he had pursued Webster and his partner with vengeance on his mind. Even Mary Travis would attest to that and the barkeep at the Silver Dollar had witnessed his exchange with Webster in the saloon. Ezra had sealed his own fate the moment he had agreed to accompany Webster to the campsite. He had been set up and if he didn’t die by Webster’s hand he would likely end his days dancing on the end of a rope. Tearing through the fog in his mind the snick of the hammer being cocked sounded deafening in the still of the night air yet in recognising at that instant the sound of his own imminent demise Ezra forced his unco-operative muscles into action and raised the Remington in his own defence but before he could fire a shot a bullet tore into his right bicep knocking him backwards a full pace and rendering his gun arm immobile, the Remington dropping from his nerveless hand to the ground. He couldn’t recall hearing the sound of a gunshot but nonetheless his arm hung uselessly at his side as blood welled from the wound and tracked down his arm to drip from his fingertips into the dust. Surprisingly he felt little pain, that he knew from experience would come later -- if indeed his future was destined to encompass a later. The grinning, triumphant face of Webster, his extended arm slowly lowering as he recognised the gambler’s almost certain defeat rekindled a dying flame in the Southerner’s psyche. The self-assured cowboy took a step forward raising his gun once

again to administer the *coup de grace*. In a perfect moment of clarity Standish raised his blazing green eyes to fix the other man with an unwavering stare and by the time the cowboy realised that he had seriously underestimated the wounded gambler it was too late. In a single movement Standish smoothly brought his left hand up to the shoulder rig, deftly hooked the stubby Colt with his thumb and in a blur of motion reversed it, aimed and fired. Webster, momentarily recovering, raised his own weapon and pulled the trigger. The two shots rang out an imperceptible millisecond apart, the sound reverberating through the still night. Standish dropped bonelessly to the ground his left leg shot from under him as Webster tottered several steps, a look of wide-eyed astonishment on his face, before he too crashed to the earth, fatally shot through the heart.

Vin Tanner dismounted and motioned for Larabee to do the same before quickly signing for silence. Larabee nodded once confident enough in the former bounty-hunter's skill and judgement to unquestioningly accept his direction. The tracker had managed to pick up Ezra's trail a few miles out of town and from there it had been a relatively simple matter to follow what for him was tantamount to a signposted highway. Now Tanner signalled for Larabee to stay put, delivering his horse's reins into the gunfighter's care, as he crept forward. The last thing he wanted to do was alert either the two men or their horses to his presence. Before he had moved five yards a gunshot rang out the sound galvanising both men into action.

"Hell," hissed Tanner anxiously, drawing his weapon, "Looks like maybe we're too late." Chris, gun in hand, hurriedly looped the two sets of reins around a branch and moved quickly towards the sound of the shot following in his friend's wake. Tanner signalled that they should separate, the two men skirting the perimeter of what seemed to be an abandoned campsite in opposite directions. The pair broke cover almost simultaneously, weapons cocked and ready, as gunfire ripped through the night a second time only to discover that they were indeed too late. The bright unforgiving moonlight illuminated the bloody tableau; the motionless protagonists sprawled untidily in the dust -- a pair of marionettes without strings. A third body rested against a tree, sightless eyes staring into endless nothingness. Forcing himself to move Vin first walked cautiously towards the motionless cowboy lying in the dust secure in the

knowledge that Chris would in turn attend the fallen gambler. He looked down at the crumpled form nudging the body with his booted foot, his mare's leg cocked and ready, but there was no danger; the man was already dead -- centre shot.

"Nice one, Ezra," he whispered in grudging respect.

Turning, he holstered his sawn-off Winchester and directed a single shake of his head at Larabee confirming what he had found. Slowly he moved to the second man, knowing this one was already dead. The blackened blood covering his chest was hours old and Vin guessed he had been shot some time in the morning. Holstering the sawn off Winchester Vin sighed heavily and turned to join the others. Chris knelt beside the pale yet still very much alive Southerner and Vin noticed as he approached the concern etched on his leader's face as he quickly tied his bandana around the freely bleeding wound in Standish's arm. Raising his head he addressed the injured gambler.

"Ezra, I think the bullet's busted your arm."

Wincing, Ezra bit back a curse as Chris tightly cinched the makeshift bandage around his upper arm.

"I do believe you may be correct in your diagnosis, Mr. Larabee," he slurred, his voice not quite steady, "But tell me: to what or whom do I owe this visitation of good samaritans? Your timing gentlemen, is truly impeccable."

Tanner crouched on Standish's left side and quickly duplicated Larabee's actions by tying his own bandana around the gambler's mid-thigh, eliciting further invective from the injured man but in doing so managed to reduce the bleeding to a slow ooze.

"We were worried about you," pronounced the bounty-hunter, quietly impressed at Ezra's composure given his current physical state.

Ezra laughed shortly, his disbelief evident.

"Whatever your reasons -- Mr. Larabee, Mr. Tanner -- I am in your debt. It would have been even more fortuitous however if you had arrived a few minutes earlier or at least seen fit to have Mr. Jackson accompany you on this particular excursion."

Larabee and Tanner exchanged curious glances as Standish began to laugh, quietly at first then showing signs of escalating with no apparent cause. Suddenly Chris pulled the injured man into a sitting position, peering closely into his unfocused eyes.

"Damn it, Ezra. How much laudanum have you got in you?"

Standish's laughter ceased abruptly and he allowed his head fall back as he sighed heavily, his eyelids closing lazily.

"Not enough I fear, Mr. Larabee. Not enough by far."

Vin moved to support Ezra's injured arm as the gambler's head and shoulders suddenly slumped forward, casting an anxious look at the grim-faced gunfighter.

"He's in bad shape, Chris," he murmured quietly, "There's no way he'll be able to ride."

After a pensive moment Larabee nodded in agreement.

"He can double with me."

Tanner rose sinuously.

"Let's get movin'. Time's a wastin'." His eyes strayed to the bodies lying several yards away. "Then I reckon I should stay and...uh, fix things up here."

Larabee met the bounty hunter's intent gaze immediately understanding the unspoken implication of his words.

"Ezra!" The injured man raised his head, instinctively responding to the tone of command in Chris' voice. "You've got to try and stand up. Can you do it?"

"Give me a moment, gentlemen." Inhaling deeply Standish braced himself against the two men then nodded, indicating his readiness.

Vin grinned in spite of himself at the colourful string of expletives that Ezra managed to utter as he was brought to his feet.

"God-dammit man, you can cuss better'n anyone else I know."

Standish managed a wry smile, struggling to regain both his balance and some element of dignity.

"A Southern gentleman is never at a loss for words, Mr. Tanner, whatever the circumstances."

"So we noticed," muttered Chris as he adjusted his grip on the smaller man, "Now if you could just ease up on the talk we might be able to get somewhere."

Once Tanner had fetched Chris' horse the process of manoeuvring Standish into the saddle proved an interesting challenge for both men and beast alike. Several attempts later an ashen-faced and trembling Ezra at last sat astride the animal, swaying slightly as he struggled to maintain a tenuous grip on consciousness. Smoothly, Chris swung up behind the exhausted Southerner and without pause gathered the reins wordlessly sketching a salute to Tanner as he kicked the horse into a canter.

Mary Travis sat quietly, maintaining a vigil at Ezra's bedside that had begun almost the moment a weary Chris Larabee had brought the injured Southerner back to the Mason's house many hours before.

Mary, somewhat self-consciously, had been recruited to assist a more than competent Lilith as she stripped an increasingly agitated Ezra down to his drawers, both women finally completing the task with help from Chris. John Mason, a skilled former army surgeon, had then mercifully rendered the distressed gambler unconscious with ether before attempting to remove the bullets still embedded in his patient's body. That accomplished he had finally set and splinted the broken arm. She shuddered involuntarily as she recalled John asking first about the rough bandages around Ezra's torso then progressively revealing the extent of the damage inflicted by the whip as he systematically removed the strips some of which were the remains of her lawn petticoat. With the full extent of the damage exposed Mason had begun a lengthy tirade against the inhumanity of flogging as he began to clean and stitch the worst of the lacerations. Chris had maintained his silence but the expression that she read in his eyes had frightened her and she realised that if the perpetrators were not already dead there was a distinct possibility they soon would be. Shortly after they had moved Ezra into one of the two spare rooms and there she had remained in constant attention.

She glanced up as the door creaked open already guessing the identity of the visitor.

Chris moved soundlessly across the room to stand behind her chair.

"How is he?"

Mary continued to absently stroke the hand which lay resting on the coverlet.

"He hasn't woken up yet."

"Waking up isn't one of Ezra's best skills even when he's not been shot up," commented the gunfighter wryly, "I reckon he won't stir for a few hours more yet."

"I can't help but feel that all this would have been avoided if I had just ..."

Mary felt Chris' hand squeeze her shoulder and stopped mid-sentence.

"Don't go down that road, Mary," he said quietly, "It's not your fault and no matter how much you think about the 'what ifs' and 'maybes', it still won't change a thing. I know -- I've been there."

"He'll be all right won't he, Chris?"

"I reckon it'll take more than a couple bullets to slow Ezra down, though he's gonna be mighty testy when he finds he can't shuffle a deck of cards for a while with that busted arm."

Mary managed a smile, aware that Larabee was making a determined effort to lift her spirits.

"Oh, I'm sure he'll find a way."

"Why don't you get some sleep, Mary? You've been up all night. I'll spell you for a while."

She shook her head.

"No. I want to be here when he wakes."

Chris' eyes travelled from the blonde woman to the man -- his friend -- lying in the bed and nodded slowly in understanding.

"Just call if you need anything."

Vin looked up from where he was sitting on the porch steps at the sound of booted feet on the verandah. Chris slowly crossed the wooden boards with a heavy tread, sat down beside the tracker with a heavy sigh and lit up a cheroot. Neither man spoke for several minutes, each content to be alone with his own thoughts in companionable silence. It was Vin who, sensing his friend's disquiet, finally interrupted the stillness.

"You don't always find what you go looking for, pard."

Larabee exhaled a cloud of pungent tobacco smoke and stared off into the distance.

"Or you find more than you expected."

Tanner leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees.

"You can be sure of one thing, if Ezra has anything to do with it nothing will be straightforward."

Chris smiled in spite of himself. The Southerner certainly did have a penchant for complicating the simplest issues.

Vin continued when Chris showed no more inclination to speak.

"Do you think the Sheriff believed us?"

Chris shrugged.

"Long as you buried that body good and deep I don't see as he'll have any choice."

"Ain't no-one gonna find that son-of-a-bitch in a month of Sundays."

Larabee nodded, sure that what Vin said was true. Sometimes the quiet Texan surprised even him but knowing that the sharpshooter still had a bounty on his own head for a crime he did not commit made his actions easier to understand. Tanner was not about to let Standish swing for murder knowing he was blameless. Had things gone according to Webster's plan Ezra would be dead alongside the unfortunate Jed, and Tad Webster would have pinned the blame for Jed's killing on the innocent Southerner. Even in death Webster had almost managed to exact revenge on Standish but Vin's quick thinking had probably saved the day and Ezra's life.

"I reckon Ezra owes you big time for this one."

Vin grinned.

"You bet."

Ezra surfaced reluctantly from the depths of sleep. As consciousness returned by degrees he became aware of increasing levels of discomfort. Lord! He hurt in more places than he could count. He tried to cling to the last remnant of sleep, reluctant to open his eyes and admit himself once more to the land of the living but he found it was impossible to ignore the dull throbbing in his arm and leg or the keener, lancing pain in his back and shoulders. An experimental flexure of his injured leg prompted a quick intake of breath through gritted teeth followed by a speedy decision that it was a bad idea to move too quickly.

"Ezra."

A soft voice, very close and tantalisingly familiar, lured him still closer to wakefulness but the effort necessary to break through continued to elude him, his eyelids heavy and unresponsive. The sensation of a gentle hand touching his face finally brought him to full consciousness and he opened his eyes to find it was Mary Travis coaxing him awake. He blinked slowly trying to piece together the elusive fragments of his memory and come to some reasonable conclusion as to why the blonde woman should be sitting at his bedside. It puzzled him further to discover that he was unable to move the hand on his uninjured side until it registered that Mary held it captive, her fingers anxiously clutching his. At that moment he felt a reassuring squeeze, her grip momentarily tightening as she leaned forward to bathe his face with tepid water.

"Welcome back."

Ezra struggled for a moment to find the right words.

“How long...?”

“How long have you been asleep? Almost a day and a half. Chris brought you in before dawn yesterday.”

A series of disjointed images flashed through his mind and his brain finally made all the right connections and he recalled the events which had led to his present condition. It suddenly seemed right that Mary should be there, after all he had been responsible for enlisting her aid at the start. Gently disengaging his fingers from the confines of Mary's grasp he raised his hand to brush a stray tendril of hair from her face.

“You are a most extraordinary woman, Miz Travis.” He shifted his gaze to look beyond Mary as the door opened and a man he did not recognise filled the doorway.

“Ah, the patient is awake!” He strode to the bedside and made a cursory check of the splint around Ezra's upper arm. “I reckon you'll be as good as new in a couple of weeks, young man, though I doubt you believe it right now.”

Mary, reading the confusion in the injured man's eyes, intervened.

“This is Doctor Mason. He's the one responsible for patching you up.”

Standish inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“In that case I owe you my sincerest thanks.”

Mason leaned against the window sill and folded his arms.

“Save some of those thanks for the two men who rode after you and fetched you back here, else you might be looking at an entirely different future -- and that, I can guarantee, would have been no future at all. As it is that pair have been keeping the Sheriff and some awkward questions at a distance but I have a suspicion that Sheriff Randall will be wanting to speak with you presently.”

Standish wearily closed his eyes. *How could I forget I killed a man?*

“But,” continued Mason, “I don't think you're quite ready for questions yet. Although I do believe you might be up to having a couple of visitors.”

Standish opened his eyes again as John Mason straightened and signalled Mary to accompany him out of the room. As if on cue as Mary and the doctor exited, Larabee and Tanner entered, the two men taking up station on either side of the bed. Chris immediately took the chair that Mary had vacated and Vin leaned easily against the wall.

“Shoot, Ezra. Thought you’d finally dealt your last hand this time,” grinned the Texan.

“You were not alone in that belief, Mr. Tanner,” replied Standish, a lopsided smile on his face as he awkwardly raised himself on his good elbow, “and I am given to understand by the good doctor that this whole unfortunate affair is not finished yet.”

Chris leaned forward his voice deliberately low.

“There were dead men at the campsite, Ezra. Want to tell us what happened?”

“I suspect the nefarious Mr. Webster had already disposed of his partner in crime before coming back to town. Evidently a disagreement regarding the division of spoils. I believe my reappearance was not part of his plan and that he intended for me to meet a similar fate to that of his former associate.”

“Which you almost did,” interjected Tanner, who received an eloquent raised eyebrow from Standish in response.

“I assure you, gentlemen, the man was well and truly dead when I arrived on the scene.”

Tanner and Larabee exchanged glances and Chris nodded slowly.

“That’s what Vin reckoned.”

Even in his debilitated state Standish’s inherent ability to read from people what remained unspoken did not fail him.

“You thought I killed them both?”

The resignation in his voice did not go unnoticed by either man; Standish -- in spite of evidence to the contrary -- maintained an unshakable belief that the rest of the group thought him untrustworthy.

“If your behaviour over the last few days is anything to go by, then yes, I was just about ready to believe anything,” barked Chris showing his anger and frustration, “but as it happens the idea that you had purposely gone after two men to kill them in cold blood seeking revenge didn’t fit the Ezra I know.”

Standish grimaced, shifting position again to find a comfortable compromise between the injured parts of his anatomy.

“But I did come here seeking revenge, Chris,” he admitted quietly, “And I wanted to extract my pound of flesh.”

Larabee nodded in understanding. He had been travelling that road himself for a very long time.

“The sheriff will want to talk to you. Vin had to bring the body back to town. We gave him the story.”

“Body?” Standish latched on immediately to Chris’ use of the singular.

Vin moved forward and crouched by the bedside.

“There was only one body, Ezra. Right?”

“One body,” repeated Standish, dully.

“There was no-one else just you and Webster. There was a gunfight. Webster shot you first and you had to kill him.”

Ezra lowered himself back onto the bed and closed his eyes for a moment trying to absorb the implications of what the bounty hunter was telling him. That Vin was coaching him was obvious -- this was the story they had manufactured for the Sheriff. Tanner had evidently taken it upon himself to dispose of the second body to avoid him being held accountable for two deaths and being charged with murder. The enormity of the gesture overwhelmed the Southerner as he realised the lengths the Texan, and Chris, had gone to protect him from the possibility of the gallows. He fixed the buckskin-clad man with his green eyes.

“Mr. Tanner, I believe I owe you a debt of gratitude that I may never be able to repay.”

Vin reached out and squeezed Standish’s uninjured shoulder confident that the gambler understood.

“Aw, hell, Ezra. Just let me win at cards once in a while!”

It was another day before Bitter Creek’s lawman finally approached the recuperating Standish. The conspiracy to protect him as long as possible had extended beyond Tanner and Larabee to include both Mary Travis and John Mason. Mary had been in almost constant attendance, and had proved a most capable assistant to the doctor prompting the Southerner to comment that she had missed her vocation as a nurse and was wasted at a printing press. Now, freshly bandaged and sitting up in bed, the still tired-looking Standish patiently answered the Sheriff’s questions. The investigation was cursory to say the least. Webster it seemed, notorious locally for brutality and a penchant for thieving, would not be greatly missed. In fact Standish couldn’t help but think that the lawman was relieved that someone had done him out of a job in ending the man’s life and with it, his burgeoning career as an outlaw. Pleading ignorance and

maintaining his most ingenuous “poker face” when the subject of Webster’s associate, Jed Bryant, arose Standish was nonetheless relieved when Mary intervened and suggested politely that the lawman should end the interview and let the injured man rest. Won over by Travis charm, Randall quickly concluded his questions and finally, wishing the Southerner a speedy recovery, made his departure.

Ezra slumped against the pillows, the Sheriff’s questioning having taxed him physically and mentally more than he cared to admit. He was beginning to realise that the work done by Larabee and Tanner in the previous days to allay the lawman’s suspicions had made the story he told more plausible than it might have been under closer scrutiny. Even with his gift of smooth talking he knew that he may have had difficulty in convincing Randall of his innocence with no witnesses in his favour and a perfectly good motive for murder. For once he was glad to have Mary fussing over him and uncharacteristically he permitted her attentions without even a token protest.

Hatless and coatless, shirt open at the neck, Ezra sat on the Mason’s front porch relaxing in the mid-morning sun with his injured leg elevated on a stool and his right arm in a sling. Forced inactivity was certainly proving to be no burden to the gambler as he used the time allowed him to hone his already impressive card management skills. In his left hand he deftly manipulated a well-used deck of cards, as dexterous with one hand as most other people were with two. He had spent several hours doggedly practicing single-handed dealing, flicking the cards from the top of the deck with his thumb, until he was at last satisfied with the outcome. Equally gratifying to the Southerner was the fact that he could still deal with ease from the bottom of the pack. He dealt a mock hand.

“I reckon there’s nothing this side of the grave that would put a stop to your gaming, Ezra.”

The gambler smiled and looked up as Vin energetically cleared the steps in one stride and dropped into the chair beside him.

“Care for a friendly game, Mr. Tanner?”

Vin raised an expressively sceptical eyebrow.

"I'm thinking it should be easier to beat you seeing as you only have one hand an' all but somethin' tells me it ain't going to make a blind bit of difference."

"May I take that as an expression of acceptance?"

"Depends. What do you mean by friendly?"

"I mean, Mr. Tanner, that at present I am financially embarrassed and as a result would be prepared to forego any wagers on the outcome."

Vin tilted his head to one side and pushed back the brim of his hat.

"You? Play for nothin'? This I got to see."

"I am devastated, Sir, that you see fit to cast such aspersions on my character," he retorted in mock offence.

"I wish you'd speak English, Ezra. Sometimes I wonder what in hell you're talkin' about."

The gambler merely grinned and held up the cards.

"I'm certain that you'll have no difficulty understanding this language, Mr. Tanner."

The former bounty-hunter pulled his chair forward and delved into his coat pocket.

"And I guess you won't have any trouble with understandin' this." He tossed a sizeable wad of greenbacks onto the table in front of the Southerner. "Ante up, Ezra."

If Tanner was expecting any kind of reaction it was certainly not the one the sight of the bankroll engendered. Standish slowly placed the cards on the table and stared at the roll of bills in front of him, his expression an odd mixture of suspicion and loathing.

"Where did you get this?" The timbre of his voice suggested that he would rather not know the answer.

"It's yours Ezra. It's what you almost gave up your life for."

The gambler was silent for a moment and when he finally spoke the bounty-hunter was surprised by the bitterness in his voice.

"You think you know me, Tanner. But you're wrong - this was never about money." He started to rise, his movements slow and awkward hindered as he was by his injuries. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Vin half rose and easily pushed Standish back into his seat, keeping his hand on the Southerner's shoulder as he spoke.

"Listen Ezra, I'm sure as hell not the one to go laying any blame or makin' any judgement and I don't even pretend to know what you're thinkin' or feelin', I'm just returning what's rightfully yours."

Standish resisted for a moment then Tanner felt some of the tension drain away under the pressure of his fingers and the gambler's shoulders slumped forward.

"Forgive me, Mr. Tanner. Such churlishness on my part was uncalled for. I should be offering my profound thanks."

"Shoot, Ezra. If it makes you feel better to get mad at me then go right ahead. But it's you who's wrong - I do understand. Damn it, I've carried my own share of demons around on my back for long enough. Sometimes you just gotta do what you think is right, even if it turns out to be for the wrong reasons. My guess is right about now you're now weighin' up the cost of a man's life against a hundred dollars..."

"A hundred and twenty-one."

"...and your own worth."

Standish allowed himself a wry smile.

"For a man who generally doesn't have a lot to say you can be surprisingly articulate, Mr. Tanner."

"Yeah, well, not everyone has the time to take ten words to say what three will do."

Standish picked up the roll of money and turned it over in his hand before tossing it carelessly back on the table and fixing Tanner with an even stare as he picked up the deck of cards he had earlier put aside.

"The game is draw poker, dollar ante."

"What happened to the 'friendly' game?"

"Due to a recent reversal in fortune I am now in a position to engage in a more competitive and, dare I say, stimulating enterprise."

Tanner shook his head slowly, ducking his head to conceal the smile that tugged at his mouth, wondering if he would manage to hold onto at least some of last month's pay as he pulled a few crumpled notes from his pocket and signalled the one-handed gambler to start dealing.