

A PEARL AMONG SWINE

“Two-hundred dollars?”

“Yes, sir. We took up a collection, and it’s all we have. Everyone had to sacrifice to just come up with that amount.”

“What you’re asking isn’t something I ordinarily do.”

“I understand, sir, but we want to get her back.”

“Two-hundred dollars, huh?”

“Yes, sir. Will you do it?”

“Mmm ... agreed, Revrund.”

“Here’s her description and everything else we know about her.”

“If she’s still alive out there, I’ll find her,” said Tyler. “She must be pretty important to you, Revrund.”

“They are all important, Mr. Graves,” replied Reverend Wall.

While he gave Reverend Wall a confident response, Tyler had to do some serious thinking that

night in his hotel room. He had been plying his trade as a bounty hunter for a long time. He had spent a great deal of time studying outlaws' habits and their ways of thinking. He often used a certain predictability to his advantage. But this was different. He wasn't even sure if there was any outlaw mind involved with this young woman.

Before heading out in the morning, he needed to have some idea which direction to go. The main trail through town lead to the plains going east and to the mountains going west. The railroad ran north and south. Ten miles or so to the north, the Missouri River provided passage to the Mississippi. Plugging the mind of a teenage girl into a possible outlaw profile with that many exit scenarios almost seemed too challenging. And he had to get some sleep. When the morning came, Tyler was no more sure which way to go than he was the night before. He ate a hearty breakfast at the diner and headed to the livery.

Before climbing into the saddle, Tyler grabbed a piece of straw and put it into his mouth. He always thought better with straw. Looking east and then west, he saw a train loaded with coal pull into the station to take on water. He took the straw out of his mouth and shook off a couple of dead

leaves that still clung to the straw. Watching the wind carry the leaves to the west, Tyler made his decision and rode west out of town towards the mountains.

A two-hour ride produced nothing he could call a clue. He took a break underneath a small grove of trees. Hoping the trail would yield something of value soon, the bounty hunter fell asleep. About an hour later, he continued west. A half mile up the trail, Tyler noticed a brown branch on the wall of green that lined the trail.

“Whoa there, Fargo,” said Tyler, pulling back on the reins. “What do we have here? A broken branch and hoofprints ... it’s tight, but you could easily fit through that gap.” Getting down off his horse, the bounty hunter looked closer at the hoofprints. “Looks like four, maybe five, horses, boy. I think we should see where it leads.”

Making it through the gap, Tyler followed the prints for a while until the path became rocky. While he lost them at that point, there was only one way to go, so he continued on. At the peak of a little rise, he looked out into the distant forest where a small column of smoke became visible.

“I’d say there was definitely somebody up there, boy.” Pulling a spyglass out of his saddlebag, Tyler scanned the area near the column of smoke. “Yeah, looks like a cabin. You game to check it out, Fargo?”

Fargo nodded and neighed.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Fargo and Tyler went about another fifty yards when they came to a group of tall boulders on the left. Tyler got off his horse and tied him to a tree behind the boulders. He pulled out his bullet bag and grabbed his rifle off the saddle.

“Can’t be too careful, boy. I gotta get a little closer.”

Working his way to within about fifty yards of the cabin, Tyler stopped behind a rock and lifted the spyglass. He saw four horses in a makeshift corral and a wagon just outside the cabin. A man came out of the cabin, turned back towards the door, and started yelling at someone in the doorway. Three other men followed the first man out. All four now engaged in a heated conversation, but it was a little too far away for Tyler to make out what they were saying. Finally, three of the men

headed for the barn, and the fourth man stayed in front of the cabin.

“Well, I’ll be doggone. That sure looks like Frank Cody. I wondered if I’d ever pick up his trail again.”

Then a girl came out the cabin door. She started talking to Frank when he pointed back to the cabin and raised his hand. The girl cowered and turned back to the cabin. Frank kicked her in the rear as she went back inside.

“And that girl matches the description of Rebecca.”

Frank headed for the barn and went inside. Tyler watched the whole scene for a half hour, but no one came back outside. He made his way back up to Fargo and reached inside his saddlebag. Pulling out a handful of wanted posters, he found the one he was looking for.

“Yeah, boy. That was him. Frank Cody, alias Buffalo Rogers. One-thousand dollars—dead or alive.”

The bounty hunter needed a plan. Four of them and one of him. And then there’s the girl. The odds were against him, and he had no backup

buddies to call on. Leaning on the saddle, he started consulting with Fargo.

“Well, boy. We gotta figure something out here. I’m thinking the best way to go is to get the men separated and take them out one at a time without alerting anyone else. Then we get to the girl and get her out. I’m liking that wagon by the cabin. It’d be good to haul out live men tied up or dead men laid out. We could hook up two of the horses to the wagon and trail the others behind. No, I wouldn’t make you stay with them. You could carry the girl. Well ... whatta you think, Fargo?”

Fargo nodded and neighed.

“I thought you’d like it.”

As Tyler continued thinking about how he could separate the men, he noticed a little skunk coming out of the bush. He kept heading for Tyler, apparently unaware that the horse and man were there. The little skunk stopped when he ran into Tyler’s boot. The bounty hunter had spent a lot of time outdoors and was quite aware of a skunk’s capability. But this little guy didn’t take any defensive posture. He sniffed Tyler’s boot and looked up. Tyler reached into his saddlebag and pulled out a small piece of jerky.

“Would you like some of this, little guy?”

The little skunk snatched it right up and then looked back up at Tyler.

“You know, if I invest too much in you, you’re going to have to work it off.” Tyler looked back down at the skunk and started thinking. “Yeah, that just might work.”

Tyler reached back into his saddlebag and pulled out an old shirt and two pairs of handcuffs. Then he grabbed two pieces of rope that hung from the saddle and tore the shirt into strips. Snatching up the little skunk in his arms, he headed back to the cabin. When he got closer, he took out his spy-glass and scanned the area around the cabin and the barn. Nobody was outside, so he made his way to the back of the barn. He heard voices inside the barn, but he couldn’t tell how many. Near the back corner of the barn, he saw a big enough gap in the siding to look inside. All four men were still inside the barn. Then he crept over to the corral and set the little skunk down. Pulling out another piece of jerky, he let the skunk smell it, and then he tossed it into the corral. The little skunk ran over to get the piece of jerky, making the horses nervous and voice their displeasure. Tyler ran back to the edge of the barn.

“Jesse, go see what’s going on with the horses,” said Frank.

“Okay, boss.”

When Jesse came out to the corral, Tyler was waiting for him.

“Say a word and it will be your last,” warned Tyler. “Unbuckle the gun belt and set it on the ground.”

When the outlaw did as he was told, Tyler continued, “Good. Now get on the ground, face down with your hands behind your back.”

Tyler put the cuffs on him, used a strip of the shirt to gag him, and then wrapped his feet with another strip. He dragged Jesse behind the barn and waited.

“Where is that boy?” bellowed Frank. “Billie, go see if Jesse needs some help.”

Billie got up and went outside to the corral. He met with the same fate as Jesse.

Inside the barn, Jake said, “Frank, I don’t like that Jesse and Billie aren’t coming back. I’m going out to see what’s going on.”

“I’ll be right behind you in a couple of minutes,” said Frank.

When Jake got to the corral, he saw where the others had been dragged off. He pulled his gun and looked around. When he saw Tyler out of the corner of his eye, he wheeled around and started firing. Tyler placed a bullet in Jake’s right shoulder, knocking him down. He grabbed Jake’s gun and turned towards the barn, fully expecting Frank to come out firing. Tyler let loose a couple of rounds into the barn door. When Rebecca came outside the cabin, Frank ran towards her.

“I’m not going to tell you again,” hollered Frank as he ran and shot. “Get back inside the cabin.”

Tyler had to make a quick decision. He always tried to bring in his bounty alive whenever possible. If he let Frank reach Rebecca, he might try to use her as a shield or as a bargaining chip. Either way would put her in more danger. He aimed at Frank’s boots and fired. The first two shots missed the fast-moving target. The third connected with Frank’s right foot, and he went down just before reaching the front porch. Tyler ran over to the moaning outlaw and slammed his rifle butt into Frank’s chin, knocking him out cold.

“You’ll probably thank me for that later,” said Tyler to the unconscious outlaw. “At least, you won’t have to feel the pain in your ankle for a while.” He yelled to Rebecca inside the cabin, “You can come out now, Rebecca. It’s safe.”

The girl slowly opened the cabin door and looked at Tyler. Then she broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. Tyler gave her some time and finally asked, “You are Rebecca, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you ready to go home?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Back behind that rock is my horse. His name is Fargo. Bring him down here.”

“Okay.”

They hooked up two horses to the wagon and tied a third behind. The other horse that was in the corral ran off. With the gang loaded into the wagon and Rebecca on Fargo, they found another path through the brush that the wagon could make. As they made their way on the trail back to Rebecca’s home, Fargo kept abreast of the wagon right next to Tyler in the seat, so he and Rebecca were in close talking distance.

“Did you leave home voluntarily or were you kidnapped by this bunch, Rebecca?”

“Please call me Pearl, Mr. Graves. It’s my middle name and the name I like.”

“Will do, Pearl.”

“I left on my own. I guess I just wanted to see more of the world than our little town. I just wanted some adventure. I ran across Frank and his boys on the trail, and they seemed genuinely interested in helping me at first. But then when they kept me in that cabin and wouldn’t let me go, I realized I had made a terrible mistake.”

“Have you seen enough of the world for a little while?”

“I didn’t really get very far, but all I want now is to go home to my little town. I’m thankful you showed up.”

“I’m glad I could help, Pearl. Looking for you was a little different for me. In hindsight, it almost seemed like pure luck that I found you ... or maybe some divine intervention through an east wind ... I’m not sure. Do you know what I do for a living, Pearl?”

“Are you a marshal or something?”

“Oh, I spend much of my life hunting down the likes of these guys, but it’s not as a law officer. I’m a bounty hunter.”

“You mean like you collect money to bring in outlaws?”

“Yeah.”

“Did somebody pay you to find me?”

“Yes, your family and the whole congregation of your little church.”

Pearl remained silent for quite a while, but then she said, “I guess they really care about me.”

“Yes, they do.”

“How much did they pay you?”

“They haven’t paid me yet, but it doesn’t really matter. I’m not gonna take it, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Well, somehow, I don’t think the good Lord would look too kindly on me, if I did.”

Pearl looked at Tyler and smiled.

“Besides, even if I split the reward money for these guys with you, I’ll still have plenty to go in my pocket.”

“Why would you split the reward money with me?”

“You helped me load them into the wagon, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but ...”

“And your dress is torn. If you have to go into town and buy a new one ... well, I have no idea how much that would cost, and a pearl should always look like a pearl.”

Pearl just smiled, and Fargo nodded and neighed.