

*An Excerpt from  
The Sacrifice of the Sage Hen  
by Susie Schade-Brewer  
Published by Swimming Kangaroo Books*

PROLOGUE

Deep in the woods, a scream pierced the night, making its way through the trees and lifting high toward the sky. It was shrill and enduring, a scream of pain and agony. Minutes later, there came another scream and then another. They bounced off the snow-capped mountains like echoes in a canyon, to finally be swallowed up by the denseness of the pines.

With each outcry, the timid and frightened deer stopped their late-afternoon feeding, lifted their heads, and flitted their eyes in nervous uncertainty. Squirrels halted only long enough to acknowledge the unfamiliar sound, then returned to their raucous harvesting. Overhead, an eagle mocked the sound and circled cautiously, his eyes fixed on the ground and everything happening there.

None of these wilderness sojourners had ever heard this sound before, and chances were good they never would again, so they regarded the screams with only passing wariness. For Micah Fremont, though, who rushed on moccasined feet through the forest, dodging obstacles to maintain steady footing, the mission was different. Caution be damned—he couldn't get through fast enough. Darkness would cover him soon.

Inside a cabin built of sturdy cedars and insulated tight against the mountain's elements, an orange glow from a hearth cast across the room. Over the dying flames hung an untended coffeepot. Steam rose from its spout until finally it emptied, and the smell of burned chicory filled the room.

Several feet away, in a bed pulled into the warmest corner, a woman's breathing quickened. She looked anxiously toward

the coffeepot she could not get to and panted through the mounting pain. "Please hurry, my husband. How will I do this without you?"

Fremont squinted through the heavy underbrush and to his relief saw the yellow light from the cabin's only window. Never slowing, he wheeled halfway to ensure his companions were still behind him. Three sisters, women from the Arapaho village, followed close on his heels. Their muffled steps fell in rhythmic unison. In their arms they carried bundles of blankets and provisions for the woman alone at the cabin and the baby who would soon make its appearance.

Fremont finally reached the front entrance and flung the door open. The three women hustled inside and immediately began ministering. One reached for a large empty pot and shoved it at Fremont.

"Nibi," she directed, and her voice demanded immediacy.

"Water?"

"Yes, nibi!" She waved him toward the door.

Another woman tended to the coffeepot. With a hearth-glove, she set it aside and then stoked the fire with sticks of locust from the wood box nearby. It was clear in her manner there was no time to waste.

The third rushed to the bedside of the panting woman who, with her knuckles white, clung to the bedposts. A multi-colored quilt blanketed her sweaty body up to her waist and sank low between knees pulled up and propped apart. Beads of moisture glistened over the laboring woman's face and arms, and she chewed at her bloody lip.

The Indian caretaker pulled the quilt away. Fremont, still holding his pot, paused at the door to glance back. His wife's exposed belly, swollen and purple, was stretched tight as a buffalo skin over a teepee. Below her nakedness, water and blood saturated the bedding. When her frightened eyes found him, Fremont froze where he stood. How could he leave her? She needed him, and he started back toward her .

The Indian, reading his eyes, shuffled toward him. "No, nibi!" she said, and opening the door, she impatiently shoved him through.

Fremont heard the latch board when it dropped into its iron cradle. Oh god, they were going to make him stay out. And the blood—there was so much more than he'd expected. Before he had been anxious. Now he was afraid.

Though he trusted the savvy and wisdom of the Indians—twice they'd saved him from near death—his most precious possession was in their hands. She was the only woman he had ever loved; the one he bragged was the best woman-flesh God had ever fashioned. How he hoped they knew what they were doing.

He raced toward the running stream and dished up the cold water. Following its delivery to the house, he was promptly locked out again. Near panic, he shoved his thumbs into the waist of his buckskin britches and paced the porch.

Above the spirals of wood smoke, a glistening crescent moon settled in for the night, but Fremont paid little mind to its beauty. Nor did he notice when the wind picked up slightly. The wolf howls on the summit held no special meaning. Instead, worry plagued him, as well as guilt for not coming home sooner. Even just one day. What was so important about a few more pelts that he couldn't get back in her most important time?

But how could he have known? What did he know of women? The only birthings he'd ever seen were those of wolves and mules.

\* \* \*

The ensuing minutes seemed like hours. Hours became like days. The screams of his beloved were becoming harder to endure than the terrifying blizzard of '35. As with it, what else could he do but wait it out? He was anxious to see his first child. Taking a seat in his wife's slat-backed rocker, he knew there would be no sleep tonight.

Before long, a delicate light mist arose from the earth, allowing only the dark forms of the crystalline trees to shine through. It carried a sweet fragrance of pine to him. He glanced eastward at the mottled horizon where a bulging red sphere began slicing through it. As often as he'd watched this scene unfold in the top of these mountains, he had never tired of its majesty and beauty.

He stood and walked to a clearing east of the cabin, allowing his thoughts to be temporarily drawn away from the drama going on behind him.

The air became still and quiet. Even the wind through the trees hushed as if commanded to. "God, are you out there?" he whispered. God had been on his mind a lot lately.

Another scream penetrated the stillness, but this time more subdued. He turned and stared toward its source. He hoped his wife's ordeal was winding down. She sounded near the end of her endurance.

Walking a little further, he found a rock to sit upon where he could watch the sunrise, but not so far away that he couldn't hear the noises from the cabin. His mind reflected back to the day he had married his beautiful Quaker wife. A pleasurable smile covered his face.

Her father hadn't liked him at all, mountain man and unsteady wanderer that he was. He'd thought Fremont way too old for his young daughter. Several other suitors had been much more to her father's liking. However, the young woman's eyes had been only for him.

A tear touched the corner of his eye. Of all the bounteous gifts God had ever bestowed upon him throughout his full life, she was the very finest and most prized.

Behind him just then came a rustling in the underbrush. From the corner of his eye, he saw movement, not an arm's length from where he sat. Slowly, so as not to startle the visitor, he turned his head.

A sage hen wandered into the clearing, perhaps in search of food. She stopped beside some blackberry bushes a few feet away, pulled one foot up into her brown marbled feathers, and

peered cautiously about. Then slowly, she put it back down and proceeded forward. Behind her came another hen and then a third, much smaller, which walked with a limp.

In single file, they continued past where Fremont sat, oblivious to his presence, or at least not caring, and through some underbrush to another clearing ten feet away. Fremont watched as they joined several others. These were larger, roosters with majestic head plumes that pricked abruptly up and with bright orange pouches on their breasts. Where they'd come from, Fremont didn't know.

For a few moments, the roosters stood curiously still in their places. Then, becoming excited by the presence of the females, one of them spread his tail feathers. His wings lifted and unfolded slightly, and the long black plumes at the back of his neck pricked upward. The large orange sacs on his breast thrust forward and up several times, emitting loud pops.

Noting the advances of the rooster, one of the hen's wings drooped and she walked forward, circling him as if she had chosen him.

Spellbound, Fremont watched, until suddenly he heard a beckoning from the cabin, and he jumped to his feet.

The sage chickens fled.

Fremont could not run fast enough. An excitement tempered with dread infused him. Before the doorway, he saw one of the Indian women. She waved him inside. As he entered, he saw the other two beside his wife's bed in the warm corner. One held a small, tightly wrapped parcel in her arms. Both turned toward him, their dark eyes expressionless.

It was the lack of blissful excitement in their faces that frightened him most.

His wife, her eyes seemingly glued to the ceiling, was pallid and covered with sweat. Taking her hand in his, he sat on the bed beside her. It was so cold.

Her gaze moved lethargically toward him, and she managed a weak smile.

"My darling husband," she whispered through torn lips. "I have given you a daughter to love."

A tear found its way down his cheek when he noticed the way she spoke with practically no breath at all.

She coughed, struggled to get her words out. "You must love her as much as you have loved me."

Her eyes closed, and in the deathly silence of the room, her last breath left her body.

## *Chapter 1—Charlie*

Eyes ablaze with anger, a burly six-foot farmer looked past a crowd of shoppers in the General Store and roared at a man near the back wall.

"Grant West," he bellowed.

The wiry store owner glanced up from his scales and past his customer at the sound of his name. His eyes widened when he recognized the man who had earlier stormed out without buying anything, upset about the price of an oil lamp, but who now was suspending the same at the end of his fingers. Hoping to save his last precious lamp, West lunged forward.

The farmer raised the lamp high then flung it to the floor. Shards of glass scattered in every direction.

The gaping crowd pulled back as the storeowner slid to a stop before the angry man. "What the..."

"Where I come from, we don't cotton to them that horn-swaggles good honest folk." The farmer wrenched a handful of Grant's shirt into his fist and lifted him to his toes. He doubled his other fist, preparing to exact his retribution. At that moment, Charlie, the shopkeeper's wife, five-foot-five and slender, stepped through the front entrance. Immediately, her gaze fixed on her defenseless husband dangling at the end of the big man's grasp.

"Ira Pritchard!" she screamed. "What in the Sam Hill..." She dashed through the shoppers to her husband's aid and grabbed hold of the man's shirtsleeve, jerking back hard.

As she did, Ira's fist came down, missing Grant but sending her flying to the floor, petticoats aflutter.

"Why, you no-account southern cracker," she swore. In one motion, she was back on her feet and lunging again at Pritchard.

Grant wheezed, caught in the grip that tightened his collar into a noose. His eyes bulging, his lips turning blue, he lost his footing and stumbled sideways into the scattering crowd.

Pritchard stumbled, too, his low-crowned hat tumbling off his head and rolling away.

Seizing her opportunity, Charlie vaulted atop Pritchard's back. While her legs tightened around his trunk, her hands laced across his eyes, and her fingernails curled in.

"Scratch 'is eyes out," boomed a thunderous voice from the front door. "Blind the plug-ugly varmint!"

With the screams of several timid young women, Charlie only half heard the voice.

Pritchard dropped the storekeeper like a load of coal, bellowing loud enough to shake soot from the chimney. He stumbled forward, twisting and wheeling, pulling at the fingers gouging at his eyes.

West scrambled away on all fours. He snatched a shovel from a nearby display, rose unsteadily to his feet, and swung it up and over his shoulder.

But Pritchard was on the move. Unable to dislodge the fiery-eyed woman, he headed for the wall.

Terrified, Charlie closed her eyes and braced for a pounding. Just then, an explosion detonated the ceiling above her as if dynamite had hit it; chunks of plaster and plank wood fell over her and Pritchard, bringing their spin to an abrupt halt.

Charlie's eyes opened. As she attempted to peer through the thick white smoke that swirled through the room, she heard the same booming voice.

"Put that woman down," it ordered. This time she recognized her father's voice.

Pritchard's gaze found the tall man with long gray hair at the door.

Charlie saw him too, as well as the double-barrel shotgun aimed at Pritchard's mid-section. Releasing her grip, she slid to the floor and moved back quickly.

"You get yer sorry hide outta here, Ira," Micah Fremont demanded.

The farmer's jaw set firm, and he stubbornly planted his feet.

"Now," Fremont demanded again, arcing his shotgun toward the open door, "afore this second barrel rearranges yer middle!"

"I don't take orders from nobody, Fremont. Not even you!"

"Best reconsider this one time, Ira, for the sake of yer health."

The farmer turned sideways to find Grant. "This ain't over, store-man. I ain't done with you." Then he barreled toward the door, pausing before Fremont. "Ner you neither, Fremont! You best keep an eye over your shoulder."

"Bring it on, farmer boy, anytime you've a mind to. Keep one thing in mind, though. You ever try to harm my daughter again, it'll be the last time you see daylight. Now, git!" He shoved the double barrel against Pritchard's chin.

The big man stormed out the door. No sooner had he crossed the threshold than Grant rushed forward with renewed fervor. "Yeah! And don't you never come back into my store again!"

Charlie spun him by the arm. "What in heaven's name did you do to start that ruckus, Grant?"

"Ah, he was burning about the price of the lamp."

"I told you raising prices would start trouble."

"How I set my prices is my business, Charlotte. You can keep your opinion to yourself."

Charlie wagged her head. "Every spring I warn you..."

"Any good businessman knows you make your money when folks's willing to buy. Spring is when the overlanders come in. Anyhow, I reckon I'm man enough to handle trouble if it happens."

"Like you just did? If it hadn't been for my pa..."

"Ah, your pa. I get tired of hearing it."

Fremont had waited by the doorway, ensuring the troublemaker did not return. Once the farmer's buckboard disappeared around the corner, tilting wildly on two wheels, Fremont turned back to his daughter.

"You all right, Charlotte?"

"Yeah, I'm all right, Pa. Pritchard was just mad, and rightly so, I figure." She glared again at her husband.

Grant pointed to the back room. "Instead of complaining, you need to be sweeping up this glass."

"Me? It was you that made Pritchard mad."

"Just do as I say, woman. I got no time for your contrariness, too." Straightening his apron, he again plastered a smile across his face and returned to his customer.

"Gawd almighty," Charlie said. "All that man ever thinks about is money. He ain't figured out he's probably losing customers to the other stores."

"I hear'd him." Fremont scratched his beard, glancing back at the store's patrons returning to their shopping. "But I don't

allow he'll be losin' any customers. They've all raised their prices too. Now settle down afore you have a heart seizure."

"You're as bad as Grant."

She huffed toward the back room to find the broom. Near the door, an elderly woman counted brown eggs into a peck basket.

"That was a most unpleasant way to start a morning, Mrs. West," she consoled. "But we all know nothing comes second to business with that man of your'n."

"I reckon I know that, Mrs. Nyby."

"Course," the woman peaked one eyebrow, "whenever there's trouble, a wife must at least consider if she is the cause."

Charlie stopped abruptly. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, dearie. The Lord put womenfolk on this earth for one reason—to serve our menfolk. Take it from an old woman, life is a whole lot simpler if you'd just let your man make all the decisions."

"Mrs. Nyby, why would the Lord have given gals a brain if it weren't to be used? Or a mouth to speak with if she was just to keep it clamped up tight as a wolf trap? I thank you for your concern, but my lips flap about as well as any man's."

The older woman's jaw dropped as Charlie brusquely left her to find the broom.

Indeed, Charlotte Mary Fremont-West had a reputation for being a little too outspoken for her own good, with a goodly portion of gumption thrown in. That was okay by her—she believed she had come by it honestly.

Her father in his younger years had achieved legendary status as a hard-living mountain man and trapper. When he later took a job in the southwest territories to scout for the Army, he fought the Apache.

Eventually a quiet and reserved Quaker woman named Charlotte Mary tamed him. Fremont called her "Best", for as he said when he married her, she was the best thing God had ever fashioned.

Several years later, Fremont took his daughter, his new "Best", and moved to civilization where she could get schooling. The skinny green-eyed child quickly became the progeny of the good Christian folk in town who aimed to see her raised up proper.

Now she was married and had been for four years, since the age of fifteen, to a merchant who had accepted a barter from her father to acquire security for her. To hear her tell it, her life nowadays was tedious, uneventful, and intolerably boring.

After cleaning up the mess that Pritchard had left, Charlie left her husband to his work and slipped outside to the front porch. With a stiff breeze whipping her long hair across her face, she found a sunny spot near the front steps where she could view both directions down Main Street.

For several weeks, fervor had consumed their town. Folks bustled through the streets and crowded all the shops. Since Independence was an embarkation town, every spring the city swelled with pioneers buying up everything from food and tools to black powder and firearms. Not only was the town located near the Missouri River, but also where both the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails originated.

Schooners sold as fast as wainwrights could construct them. Older wagons were double-canvassed and made stronger. No sooner would John Deets, the livery owner, obtain new beasts of burden than they were re-sold.

Watching the bustling activity stirred Charlie's imagination. How exciting for them to be preparing for the most thrilling adventure of their lives, she thought. At the end of their

journeys, a new life awaited them in the breathtaking Willamette Valley, with its majestic timbers, glistening rivers, and towering mountains. For years to come, their families would speak of it all. Books would be written.

If only she could be a part of it, stand on the buying side of the scales rather than the selling.

She longed to see the mountains again; whether they were the beautiful snow capped peaks of Colorado or the summits of Oregon didn't matter. Such had been the zenith of her dreams for years, ever since her father had taken her from the Rockies and transplanted her into the city.

Countless times, she had tried to convince Grant to go west and share in building the new land. She had highlighted the advantages, appealed to his sense of adventure. Yet, his reply was always the same. "Profits of the store are exceeding expectations this year. Why would we want to go to all that trouble when we do such good business here?"

The man was about as adventuresome as old hay.

To add to her anguish, this year some of her best friends and their families would be leaving. To Charlie, this just wasn't fair. Not only would she be losing them, but they would be living her dream.

Grant exited the store and came toward her. "Charlie, you need to come back inside now. There's work to be done."

"Did you ever think that there might be more to life than work, Grant? Look out there. Can't you just see the excitement in those peoples' faces?"

"Yes, and I think it's insane. Every spring we go through this. We're not pioneers, Charlie. We're merchants."

"You're a merchant. I'm just a merchant's wife."

"You'd be a whole lot happier if you'd get those dern fool ideas of going off somewhere outta your head."

Charlie raised her finger, ready to debate, when she heard a gunshot, and something whizzed past her ear. When it thumped into a post behind her, she screamed and dove behind several barrels.

Grant landed on top of her. "Who's shooting at us?"

"Maybe Ira Pritchard came back and is gunning for you," she said, her heart pounding.

"Cripes, he'd kill a man over two bits?"

"I told you, Grant. Didn't I tell you?"

Curiosity always overcame good sense with Charlie, and she inched her eyes over the barrel rim.

What she saw in the street not only doused her curiosity, it ignited her ire like a match to dynamite. A red-haired boy, all of seven or eight, wearing tattered pants and an oversized suit jacket, stood holding a smoking rifle as tall as his little body.

Charlie snapped upright, sending one of the barrels toppling. "Why, you little street urchin!"

"I'm sorry," the boy shrieked. "I'm sorry!" Tossing the rifle into the dirt, he darted toward a nearby alley.

"You come back here." Hurdling the three front steps, Charlie raced into the street, quickly overtaking him and latching onto his collar.

The terrified youngster screamed as his legs buckled under him.

Charlie held tight and jerked him to his feet. "What in tarnation, boy? You nearly shot my head clean off my shoulders!"

"I didn't mean to—it just went off accidental-like!"

"Where's your pa? Where'd you get that rifle anyway?" Her gaze swept through the throng of people who had quickly gathered. "Who owns this boy?"

"Aden," a frantic voice called from the crowd. A young woman in a torn mantle dress emerged. "Aden, how did you git aholt of pa's rifle? Did he hurt you, ma'am?"

"Is this your boy?"

"No, ma'am, mah little brother. He's Aden, an' ah'm Jolie McCoy."

"You got parents?"

"Pa's in the wagon." She gestured toward a bedraggled prairie schooner parked beside the livery corral. "Ain't got no ma."

"Well, you best go get him."

"I cain't rightly, ma'am." The girl kneaded her hands. "He's feelin' kinda poorly."

Charlie then noticed the scowls of some in the crowd. She let go of the boy's shirt and bent forward to scoop the rifle up out of the dirt.

"I reckon nobody got hurt. You can be on your way, but I'm keeping this. You tell your pa if he wants it back he can come see me."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am." Rushing to her brother's side, the young woman draped her arm over his shoulders and hustled him away.

Rifle in hand, Charlie strutted back to the store. Her husband stood at the top of the steps.

"Now wasn't that a fine spectacle?" He crossed his arms. "Picking on a little boy and the whole town looking on."

Ignoring his remark, Charlie started up the steps. As she passed by the column that had stopped the stray bullet, she paused to push her finger into the cavity.

"The way you talk, it sounds as if you have more concern for that little guttersnipe than your own wife. Or was it the business you might've lost had I spanked him like he deserved?"

"Lower your voice, Charlotte. You're always making such a ruckus. Why can't you be more like Mother was, God rest her soul? She knew a woman's place."

Charlie wagged her head and proceeded into the store. "Be more like Mother was. That'll be the day."

## *Chapter 2—Dirks*

Under a canopy of red sky, Dirks Braelen slowly climbed the back stairs of the Diamondback Saloon. Several long weeks on the trail had left him stiff and tired. Even a nap earlier that afternoon had not helped, nor had the bath that the hotel clerk strongly suggested. At least now that his belly was full of steak and potatoes from the diner, the hunger that had nagged him all the way from Texas had been quelled.

Worry about how bad he felt, however, paled in importance to the plan that had gone wrong.

Ever since he had ridden into Kansas Territory several days earlier, the rolling green knolls had appealed to him. Only occasionally had he crossed paths with a homesteader, even rarer a whole community. Mile after mile of lush prairie grass waved him on, until all of a sudden the small town of Pleasant Gap sprang from out of the earth.

What folks he'd met here seemed polite and welcoming. Mostly they were farmers and ranchers with a handful of town folk to run a store, a hotel, and a diner with a bar. The man who operated the mercantile boasted their population had reached seventy-six with the newest baby, enough, they believed, to warrant a peace officer, and they had elected one just a month before.

Dirks had noted that fact right off. The sheriff's office sat between the hotel and a small yellow house with a doctor's shingle hung on a post outside a white picket fence.

This town was just what he'd been looking for, the perfect place for a man seeking a fresh start. He even planned to check out the town's outlying countryside, hoping maybe to find an abandoned farm or homestead. Heh, him a farmer. Who'd have ever thought it?

Life had never dealt Dirks Braelen a fair hand of cards, though. Only his first day in town, and already he had been recognized by some young men at the diner. By morning, word of his presence would have spread throughout town, and everyone would know who he was. Peace of any kind would be hard to come by then.

As he neared the top of the staircase leading to his rented room, he tenderly fingered a pink scar on his left temple. It reminded him of the life he had left behind. Peering through the banister posts toward his door, to his relief he saw that the piece of straw he had wedged near the top was still where he had jammed it. He pulled his key from his vest pocket, aimed it at the lock and turned it. Right now, all he wanted to do was barricade himself behind this locked door and get a full night of sleep, the first in a very long time.

From below him in the alley came a noise. His body stiffened instinctively. Before he could react, a man's voice boomed up at him.

"Slithering away to your snake hole, Braelen?"

Cautiously, he glanced over his shoulder. The same two young men who had taunted him at the diner stared back at him. The older of the two—Dirks figured him to be about twenty-one or maybe two—stood with both thumbs hooked over his gunbelt.

The one standing beside him was younger. Long, curly blonde hair cascaded down his back and over his shoulders. In his hand was a long-barrel revolver.

Dirks wagged his head, and his gaze shifted momentarily toward a handful of curious townspeople who had begun to gather. "It's like I said before, kid. I'm tired, and I'm going into my room."

"I think you must not have seen this revolver in my hand."

"I saw it, boy." Dirks's left hand rose to cover the doorknob, but his right hovered over his revolver.

Antsy now, uncertain of what to do since his prey was not intimidated, the boy's face reddened. "The name is Warlon. Billy Warlon, and no Warlon ever pulled a gun without looking his man in the eye."

Dirks slowly turned the knob. The door creaked open on its own. Before he stepped into the room, his eyes moved once more over the crowd, and then circled back to his taunters. In anticipation of the next day, he decided he would prepare these observers. "That your brother, Billy?"

"Yes, that's my brother. His name is Clete. Don't reckon you remember either of us, do you?"

Dirks spoke loudly, ensuring his voice would carry. "Nope, and what's more, I got no intention of fighting you. Not tonight, tomorrow, or any other time. Best you two head on home to your ma now. She'll be right glad I spared you."

Holding his breath, hoping his tactic had worked, he stepped over the threshold, into the room, and pressed the door closed behind him. Inside the haven, he sighed with relief. He hoped his last words had diffused those boys' exhibition, for that's what it was: a show, a game to prove dominance and power.

In wonderment, he wagged his head again. Why must boys always play with guns?

Years of training beckoned to him, and he glanced at the door across the room, the one that opened into the interior

hallway, to see that the piece of straw he had stuck in it also remained undisturbed. No one had come calling while he was out.

Stripping off his jacket, he dropped it with his hat onto the bureau beside the door and started toward the double bed in the middle of the room. As he sat, his holstered pistol nudged the bed's iron frame. He decided he would leave it on for the time being. Those boys, whoever they were, might still be a problem.

Curiously, they acted like they knew him. One said his name was Warlon. He had never known anybody by that name that he remembered. As he pulled off his boots, cringing after each, and threw them aside, he wondered how or where they knew him. If they were local boys, it was not likely. He had never been to Kansas. But if they had come from Texas...

Each sock he peeled off also drew a wince. "Dang new boots." He fingered his blistered digits. "I really hate widening out new boots."

At least he'd managed to get supper before trouble found him. Now he wanted whiskey, but that would mean going out again. Avoiding trouble was becoming as hard as deciphering the moods of a woman. He'd managed to avoid it today, but what about tomorrow?

Stretching his arms above his head, he expended a long breath and lay back across a billowy pillow. The padded quilt felt good under his tired body, a rare treat for a cowboy, and his eyelids closed.

He didn't know how long he had been asleep when a noise brought him out of his slumber with a start. Raising on one elbow, he looked toward the interior door. Someone was in the hallway, and they were treading softly, too softly for his liking. As his hand brushed across the Colt Dragoon still belted around

his middle, his gaze fixed on the glow of lamplight that lined the base of the door.

A shadow passed through it, and a floorboard creaked. A woman giggled and then a man. A door with rusty hinges squealed, and again the woman giggled. Dirks heard the door latch close, and all was quiet.

Dirks waited before lying back. A bead of sweat broke free of his forehead and rolled down across the bridge of his nose. His heart beat loud in his ears, and he realized he had been holding his breath. Agitated by his weakness, he swiped his shirtsleeve across his brow.

"You've become like a scared old man, Braelen," he whispered in the dark and dropped back into the pillow.

At only twenty-four, he was not old, though the life he had lived might have made him seem so. His mind reminisced back to the life he had lived; on his own since he was fourteen, he had survived by becoming hard and tough. By the time he reached eighteen, he was collecting wages from a powerful politician in the newly declared State of Texas to inflict pain on anyone considered a threat to the empire. True, brutality and suffering comprised a large part of Braelen's job. But he judged he had earned respect.

Then one day his imagined reverence began to dissipate. One day while riding through the streets of Las Mesas, a young mother dashed out of her house and snatched up her small child, hustling him inside and hurriedly closing the door. For days thereafter, the fear he had seen in her dark eyes haunted him. All too frequently, he noticed that men, upon seeing him, would block their families or rush them away to safety.

This he did not like. Fear was not respect.

Weeks later in a dream, his departed mother visited him. At first smiling, she opened her arms wide to embrace the son she

loved. As he came closer her face and demeanor changed. Like the young mother in town, her eyes revealed fear, and she began to back away. "Devil! Devil!" she screamed before running into the darkness.

For weeks the dream troubled Dirks. Though he didn't believe in omens, the nightmare forced him to look back at his life. If his mother were alive today, would she be proud of the choices he had made?

He decided to leave Texas—start fresh somewhere new. Seven hundred miles he had ridden in search of that place. Now, thanks to the Warlon brothers, he could cross Pleasant Gap, Kansas off his list. Wyoming Territory might not even be far enough.

Pushing thoughts of his past out of his head, he pressed against the mattress and sat up in the bed, glancing toward the window. Gray lined the edges of the pulled window shade; it must be five or five-thirty. Most of the town would still be sleeping. If he were smart, he would leave town now. The Warlons had promised they would finish what they had started. But he had never been given too much credit for being smart.

His stomach growled, serving notice of more immediate concerns. Laying his hand upon it, he arose and dressed.

Outside, the muted first light spread its soft glow like a warm blanket over the weathered buildings. A cool breeze brushed across his body, bringing to his nostrils the scent of a river nearby. He smiled for the sweet fragrance conjured up pleasant memories of his boyhood home on the Rio Grande.

By the time he reached the bottom of the stairs, the breeze was carrying another smell to him—bacon and fried potatoes.

In the street, heading toward the only building with a light and an open door, his trepidation increased. He kept his chin up, his eyes alert and moving. Probably the Warlons had not done as

he suggested and gone home to their ma. More than likely, they had gone somewhere and gotten drunk. If that was the case, and they were still passed out sleeping it off, he might get a peaceful breakfast after all.

"Morning, Braelen," a voice broke through the stillness.

Dirks spun; by reflex, his hand dropped to his pistol.

"Easy, big fella," the voice warned.

Dirks relaxed when he saw the star on the young man's vest. "Morning, Sheriff."

The sheriff's gait fell into rhythm with his. "You're up early. Worried about the Warlon brothers?"

Dirks's brow wrinkled. "Nope, just heading toward the smell of breakfast."

"Well, Sam Boyd's Diner serves the best in town."

"That's good to know," Dirks said, keeping his gaze straight ahead. Still, his curiosity kept prodding him. "Been sheriff long?"

The young sheriff nodded proudly. "Since the last election."

Dirks figured as much. He wouldn't be much help in a gun skirmish.

The sheriff paused by the door of Sam's Diner, allowing Dirks to pass through first. Dirks's gaze quickly scoured the room.

Only two people were inside: a young woman of about seventeen who stood over an open hearth in the middle of the room fanning white smoke from a skillet, and a hunch-backed old man with one suspender and a pipe who sipped coffee at a nearby table. Both glanced up when their visitors came through the door.

"Smells mighty inviting, Sam," the sheriff called across the room.

Dirks walked to a table facing the front window and sat.

The old man waved his arm. "Come over here and palaver with me, Conter. Got a funny story to tell you. Barb here, she ignores everything I say."

The young woman winked and smiled. Then, wiping her greasy hands on her behind, she shuffled toward Dirks's table. "What can I get for you, mister?"

Dirks took off his hat and placed it at the edge of the table. "Bacon smells good. I'll have that and three or four eggs with some potatoes and coffee."

"Coming right up," she said and whisked back to her fire.

The sheriff stayed with the old man for only a few minutes, laughing in the end at the old man's witticism. Dirks hoped he would stay over there. He was in no mood for company. After yesterday's ruckus, though, that was not likely. Sure enough, no sooner had the laughter died down than the sheriff headed toward Dirks's table.

"Never introduced myself," he said and sat uninvited. "Name's Ashbell, Conter Ashbell."

Dirks nodded curtly. If he didn't get too friendly, he thought, the kid might go away.

"Dirks Braelen, huh?" He leaned his chair back on two legs. "What're you doing in these parts?"

"Just drifting."

"Never even heard of you 'til yesterday. After the trouble last night, I checked my posters. Couldn't find anything on you, though. Guess you're clean in Kansas."

"No posters on me anywhere, Sheriff. I told you, I'm just a drifter."

"Well, whatever you are, trouble seems to have followed you. But I don't like trouble in my town. So, as honored as I am to have a man of your apparent renown among us, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to move along."

"Already figured to." Dirks glowered with annoyance. He had never liked speeches.

"Good." The sheriff brought his chair back onto all fours and leaned forward. "As long as we understand each other. Soon's you have your breakfast, you'd best get your stuff together and get gone."

The waitress stepped up with two full steaming plates, still crackling from the fry pan. One of them she placed before Dirks, the other before Ashbell. "You want coffee, Conter?"

"No, I'll be taking mine with me, Barb." Ashbell pushed back from the table and stood. "Will you get another plate ready for the prisoner? I'll be back in a little while." Before stepping away, his eyes lowered portentously. "Remember what I said, Braelen. Within the hour."

Dirks grabbed his fork and dug it into the mountain of browned potatoes. As he shoveled the first forkful into his mouth, he watched the tail end of the sheriff pass out the door. He knew he was in no danger of being thrown in jail if he didn't leave within the hour. He had done nothing worthy of jail time. However, even more than speeches, he disliked rookie lawmen telling him what to do. He would leave town, but only because that was what he intended to do anyway.

He caught sight of movement beyond the sheriff. Two men were exiting the double doors of the hotel. One of them carried a whiskey bottle to a low-rung chair and sat. He tilted it back against the wall and crossed his boots on the slatted banister. The other strolled to the edge of the porch and leaned against a column. Pulling a knife from its scabbard, he commenced to whittle on a short stick.

Sheriff Ashbell paused before them and said something, balancing the plate of food in one hand. Dirks watched as the

man with the whittling knife raised it and pointed it threateningly at the diner.

The sheriff spoke again, this time gesturing wildly with his free hand. Then he turned and passed out of Dirks's sight.

Dirks used his last piece of biscuit to sponge up some grease and egg yolk on his plate. As he swallowed it down, he turned and inspected the back of the diner and a door at the end of the hallway. This might be his way to avoid trouble.

"Anything else you want, mister?" Barb came back holding the coffee pot. "I'm getting ready to leave for a few minutes."

"Yeah, I wanna know where that back door leads."

The waitress' face crimped. She glanced briefly out the front window toward the Warlon brothers, and then her stare came back to Dirks. "The door goes to an alleyway. You can't go right or left, only straight back until you pass the doc's house. When you get to the end, look left, and you'll see the livery across the street. But that's all open space, mister, and they might see you."

The waitress' words hit Dirks cold. She must think he was afraid of the Warlon boys and wanted to run to save his skin.

"Much obliged, miss." He pushed his chair back and stood. "Those two boys over there, they got a ma round about? I'd hate to be hurting both her sons on the same mornin'."

Barb shrugged. "Don't know, mister. Ain't seen them around before. You planning to shoot 'em?"

Dirks tossed a few coins on the table and reached for his hat. "That's up to them, ma'am, but I suggest you wait a while before you leave to run your errands."

***-End of excerpt\_***  
***The Sacrifice of the Sage Hen***  
[www.swimmingkangaroo.com](http://www.swimmingkangaroo.com)