

Chapter 1

"Whoa, mule," James coaxed in a voice barely above a whisper, bringing the wagon to a gentle halt.

He looked at Rebecca, her chin resting against her chest as she slept sitting up on the rock hard wagon bench. Their son, Walter, slept soundly in her arms wrapped securely and lovingly in his soft blanket.

The ride from Fort Davis, where Walter had been born, had been the dustiest and bleakest part of the long, long journey. As he looked out over the green New Mexico valley James thought back to the conversation in Mineral Springs when he had first told Rebecca about their new farm. James could see himself standing across the tiny kitchen while Rebecca twisted at her apron and fidgeted with frustration.

"How do you know you won't like New Mexico? So far as I'm aware, you've never been out of Arkansas?" James questioned.

"I can't believe you went out and bought some place in the desert you've never even seen," Rebecca responded, exasperated and choking back tears.

"There's plenty of good farm land around here," she added.

James no longer felt smug. He had almost laughed, but that impulse retreated when he saw that his wife was about to cry.

There had been no way to explain things to her. James couldn't talk with his wife about the war he had known as a Confederate officer. He was unable to tell her about the horrors of death and gore he had witnessed and been traumatically overwhelmed by. He couldn't admit to anyone how those memories haunted him unceasingly. James lived in constant pain produced by unbearable images. And for him flight was the only cure.

Going to Texas or Oklahoma would not be a change drastic enough. He absolutely believed a new life in New Mexico would heal his tortured soul.

Rebecca cried and worried about moving someplace she had never even heard of, somewhere so far from her family and other people. In the end however her love for James proved to be stronger than her fears.

Rebecca's eyes opened when she heard her husband's warm voice, strong and gentle at the same time.

"We're here," he announced.

"The journey is finally over."

Rebecca peeked into Walter's blanket to make sure he was safe and comfortable. Then she looked into the valley and saw the Little Hatchet Creek for the first time. She watched the clear mountain spring water bubble along, rippling over the rocks. Seeing green grass instead of brown sage and cactus lifted her spirits. Rebecca turned her gaze toward James and smiled her approval. Her husband pointed to a stand of mountain pine growing sixty feet tall on the next ridge.

"Those will make a fine cabin," James predicted.

Soon with Walter dozing in the desert sun James and Rebecca began building their cabin and rebuilding James' war wounded soul. The Oakleys' new home and their new life came together quickly. People from Santa Fe to El Paso talked about the Oakleys' unique ranch.

While everyone else struggled with cattle or goats in New Mexico's high desert, Arkansas pigs wallowed in the mountain valley mud of the Little Hatchet. Those southern hogs rooted and multiplied until soon they stood beside newborn New Mexico pigs. In a few years soldiers, town's people and travelers were eating bacon from the Oakleys' Little Hatchet farm.

Work became a part of Walter's life early. As soon as he could walk Walter chased after James as he worked.

"I can help," Walter proclaimed confidently to his father.

"Hold this steady then," James responded.

"What is it?" Walter asked.

"It's a plumb line," James explained.

Walter learned quickly. Everything he built with his father was plumb and level. Before he was five Walter would sit on the porch at dusk, his legs dangling over the edge as he carefully and determinedly worked the file on the edge of an ax or shovel.

"That's it, son," James would say.

"Keep 'em sharp so the tools will do the work."

James had a special file he used on each tooth of the giant two-handed saw. There was no mill, so James and Walter used that saw to cut lumber from pine logs. The strength to cut

the lumber came from James' arms, but it was Walter's eight-year-old hands and arms on the saw's other handle that kept the blade straight and always in the cut.

The two worked in perfect rhythm. The blade never skipped out and it never stopped moving. Walter's keen eye and concentration held the saw true.

Along the Little Hatchet Walter developed a special strength men would speak of all his life. As a man in his seventies Walter would amaze people at chopping contests held at county fairs and church picnics. He would watch quietly while his youngest and most skillful opponent chopped through an iron-hard cedar post with ten or even eight ax strokes.

Then Walter would remove his jacket, but not his tie or vest, take the ax in his hands and make four cuts so perfect a giant knife could have shaped them. And always at the end of the fourth stroke two equal lengths of cedar, perfectly angled, faced one another on the ground.

When Walter was eleven it was James' turn to ask for help. Walter sat in his usual place on the edge of the porch, sharpening tools. A late fall freeze was in the air.

"I think Harry is old enough to help mother look after the younger children, don't you?" James asked.

Walter was not so sure, but he did not contradict his father.

"There's more bacon than I can handle this fall. I need you to drive the new wagon for me this year," James explained to his son.

A few days later eleven-year-old Walter drove a wagon ahead of his father as the Oakleys took two wagons filled with Little Hatchet bacon to El Paso. The trip took eleven days each way.

The journey was the biggest adventure of Walter's young life. Seeing El Paso for the first time left James' first child speechless. He had always lived exclusively in the tight circle of his family. Seeing a whole town full of people kept Walter gawking most of his waking hours.

"Don't stare at people," James would caution.

"Is El Paso the biggest city in the world?" Walter asked, his voice filled with wonder.

"No, I suppose London is," James answered, controlling an urge to laugh.

Walter thought back to some of the stories he had read about London, then

remembered the geography lessons his mother taught at night by the fire.

"I remember now" Walter chimed excitedly, giving the impression that he might just have come up with a great discovery.

"New York is America's biggest city."

James took joy and pride in his son's moment of inspiration.

But at the same time Walter's father revisited a frequent regret, that there was no school close enough to the Little Hatchet farm for his children to attend. James' regret was, however, balanced against the pride he felt that Rebecca had taught each of the children to read the *Bible*, when they became old enough. She also taught spelling, grammar, geography and American history. James made time to teach arithmetic to all of the children and had begun teaching Walter algebra.

"We have one more stop to make before we start back," James told Walter.

In a moment he walked beside his father through the door of Vernel Robertson's store.

"Morning James," the man behind the counter called cheerfully.

"Morning Vernel," James replied, smiling as he spoke.

Walter was still standing in the door. His mouth was open and his head was moving slowly as his eyes tried to take in all the things he saw on shelves and hanging from the store's walls and rafters.

"See anything you like, son?" Mr. Robertson chuckled.

"Mr. Robertson, this is my eldest son Walter," James said.

"I'm afraid he's never been in a city before. He's a little overwhelmed by the sights and excitement," James added.

"Walter," his father called gently when he noticed his son had still not moved out of the doorway.

"Could you walk over and shake hands with Mr. Robertson, please?"

Walter's feet began moving, but his eyes continued to scan the clothes, hardware and the hundreds of other things that filled the store.

"Sorry sir," Walter apologized to Mr. Robertson as he took the store owner's hand.

"I've just never seen so much stuff."

"Good to meet you, Walter," Mr. Robertson told Walter as they shook hands.

The two adults enjoyed another laugh at Walter's inexperience with civilization. Then James got to his business.

"Do you have those things I ordered from San Antonio, Vernel?" James inquired.

"Yes sir. Everything's all boxed and ready to go. If you'll bring your wagon around back, we can load it up," Mr. Robertson suggested.

Walter did not speak again until the wagons were loaded and rolling out of town.

"What's in the boxes?" Walter called back to his father, almost screaming so he could be heard over the clatter of the hooves and bouncing wagon wheels.

"Mostly stuff for the house," James answered.

"Curtains, milled shutters, nails and other hardware. Then there's a box with a surprise or two in it," Walter's father taunted, a broad grin seeming to cover his face.

Walter knew that the Christmas presents came back from El Paso with his father each fall. But this was the quickly maturing young man's first year to help deliver them home.