

One

Clayton Colorado, 1940.

They carried Levi Perkins's coffin in the rain. He had made folks miserable in life and he saw no need to change things up now. He would be content to know he was making his mourners miserable even in his death. Miserable and extremely wet. Lilly Perkins, the sorrowful widow, which was an assigned role to be played, was shepherded from the church door, down the steps through the driving rain and into the awaiting auto.

Bartholomew Travis, believing Charles Burton's Studebaker ambulance was still in the garage and would be unavailable to carry the casket, stood at the ready with his horse drawn hay wagon. A short and polite argument broke out as to who was to carry Levi Perkins to his grave. But Charles Burton prevailed, the town's ambulance served as a hearse when needed. It was the oldest auto in the procession, but today was promising to serve without failure.

Men rushed to automobile doors and held them for wives and children. Umbrellas partially provided protection, but the ladies hairstyles, hats and dresses all came under assault from the wet elements. Engines were gunned and gears engaged, the procession moved away from the white clapboard church.

It was a short drive to the graveyard but it might as well have been located on another continent. The paved road gave way to the unpaved as they neared the Clayton graveyard. This unpaved road was always an item on the town council's meetings and the improvement of it was always postponed. Perhaps it was common for people to neglect preparations for their appointment with the grave; the city council of Clayton followed suit and delayed funds for a route not traveled on a daily basis.

At one time, Clayton had been Claytown, but the name was shortened by someone who had no name to be remembered. Now, the town was reminding its citizens of its birth name; the unpaved road gave way to dark, red clay. *Wet*, dark red, clay. The rains had turned this unpaved portion of the road into a bath of mud. Autos became stuck in the deep red goo; exasperated men pushed, pulled and shoved; some were loosed from their hold while others were not.

The ambulance was one of the unfortunate ones that found too deep a rut to overcome the increasing treacherous mud. Levi Perkins's coffin had to be offloaded from the stuck hearse and into Bartholomew's hay wagon. This brought no small amount of satisfaction to Bartholomew and plenty of speculation from others that Levi, even in death, was now opposing his dismissal from their lives.

Abraham Larkin, an eccentric elderly man, who still refused the automobile's replacement of the horse, ferried men back and forth on horseback. Women were transferred to the more fortunate autos; when available seating ran out, a few were left to throw up their hands and walk the remaining distance in the rain. These women refused to be comforted and marched like mad, angry, wet hens, not to be trifled with; they had endured greater hardships than this

and the thing was to get Levi Perkins into the ground and pray to Jesus that the ground would not spit him back out.

Reverend Hawkins held his small Bible under the protection of an umbrella held by deacon Shaw and read in a voice that attempted majesty under the weight of misery. The sound of the rain competed for the hearing of the mourners and Reverend Hawkins seemed content to let the roar of the rain wind out. He dutifully read the selected passages and then prepared himself for a short eulogy that might be offered up, but it was akin to walking through the horse pasture. When walking through a horse pasture, care is taken with each step, lest something unpleasant is stepped in; Reverend Hawkins carefully chose the words to be spoken. The strong effort to be kind was not lost on the hearers and a few snorted when the effort to be kind was a bit excessive.

Finally it was time to lower the box in the ground. Men held ropes and payed them out slowly as Sally McCrager sang Amazing Grace in a cappella in such a fine and mournful way as to make the whole affair almost worth the effort. Even the rain paid tribute to the fine rendition of the song as her voice rose in the air. The downpour dwindled to a fine mist and it seemed as if all of nature gave more attention to the hearing of Sally McCrager's voice. At the conclusion of the hymn Reverend Hawkins uttered the final words that must be spoken and three symbolic shovelfuls of dirt were delivered to the top of Levi Perkins coffin. Lilly remained stoic and dutifully sorrowful but the mourners hardly required even that from her. Words of comfort were offered to her like bouquets of paper flowers; small gifts that matched the degree of loss that her heart might be obligated to feel under the circumstances. It was the degree of loss that had to be considered and it was hard to imagine that the wound of Levi's loss ran very deep. But still, there was a kindness due to widows that must be displayed. Lilly received it all bravely and kindly.

As the mourners moved out of the graveyard two things happened that caused the whole entourage to look up simultaneously. First, the sun broke out of the confines of the lead gray sky and secondly a large black crow passed overhead and made for the horizon in a slow, lazy flight. That this would be an ingredient in bedtime stories for years to come, was a fact that no one could doubt.

Once the sun had made its appearance, Lilly informed her well-wishers she wished to walk back home. The time alone and the sun to dry her garments would do her well. Everyone agreed with varying degrees of understanding and not a small amount of relief. Any thoughts of providing food for a wake could be dismissed and that was no small thing. Especially since it was Levi Perkins who had greatly contributed to their financial miseries.

The crowd moved to their autos; the hay wagon free of its burden carried the stranded. Their departure was back the way they came. For Lilly, her departure was to cross the empty fields, the tall grass parting at her coming. Lilly was victorious in this way as they watched her depart; she remained poised and did not provide any outward expressions of great relief or absence of sorrow.

Two

“She is glad to be rid of him; I will venture you that. And no one at this table can find fault with that small thing,” Molly Alexander said matter-of-factly, knowing the arguments raised against her proclamation would not stand up to the smallest amount of scrutiny.

“True, but now is her situation any better?” Loretta asked, surveying the four other women seated at her table. She took a long sip of her tea and waited for their assessment.

“By God’s green acres she is better! She is not a poor widow, Loretta! Levi emptied out half the bank accounts of our hard-working folks and robbed the other half. She will sit on her little hill like the Queen of Sheba, she will!” Becky Sanders replied, emphasizing her assessment with a none too gentle rap on the tabletop with her knuckles.

“Aye, that’s where you’re wrong Becky. I have seen Lilly at Henry’s Mercantile. Buying secondhand material on the installment. He gave her no money for clothes, but when it was time to shop for the food, he was right at her elbow and not a penny found its way to any small comforts we might enjoy. He has hidden his money from her and taken the secret to his grave. I will crawl my way all the way back to Dublin if I am wrong on this account,” Marlene McCrager said with a quiet firmness that discouraged any debate on her observation.

“Marlene, your daughter sang like an angel, just like an angel! You have it right though; he loved his money far above Lilly. But you know she can tear that place apart and perhaps find his stolen wealth. He was greedy and mean, I saw the bruises. Just once. She kept them hidden, but I’ve seen them. Just once, I did.” This was from JoAnn Pottersbee and she always had dire predictions and dark revelations at her disposal.

“She will search her property and find Levi’s riches. She will soon be buying all the silk and satin from here to Boston,” Becky decided, then added, “A very fortunate widow indeed, if you ask me.”

“Yes, but for how long, do you suppose?”

All the ladies at Loretta Saggert’s table gave the tall red-haired Irish girl their full attention, some with question marks still holding to their expressions, a few with understanding dawning slowly upon their faces.

“Right now, every yank and plowboy are scheming on how to wed the unfortunate Lilly Perkins. She is still young and pretty and she comes with a hidden chest of stolen riches. Every unwed male from ten to ninety-two are drawing up plans for courtship. We will be lucky our men don’t dump us like dirty rags for a shot at becoming Lilly’s next husband.”

The hush and gasp of Marlene’s prediction was sharp and instantaneous, but it was Joann; who wished she had brought that thought forward; who brought a reply.

“After Levi, I dare say she is done with wedding some hopeful fool. Riches or not.”

“True, but that won’t keep them from coming a knocking upon her door, now will it?” Marlene asked.

“No, it won’t,” Becky intoned, trying to imagine herself in such a predicament. “They all will come; Lilly with her riches is too big a prize to let get away. They are probably lining up right now for their chance at her.”

“The money is hidden. You know Levi. He hid it like his soul depended on him keeping it tucked away. Poor Lilly, she will be scraping and scratching to just get by until it is found. Perhaps only God can find it,” Molly said sadly.

“I would hold off on the pitying for now Molly. Who knows what whirlwind of calamity is brewing up for this town,” JoAnn murmured darkly. The minds of the women gathered at the table all held varying imaginations of what that whirlwind might look like, or what shape, it might suddenly take.