



## D. M. Clark / ABOVE TWO FORKS: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11TH, 1917

Frankie wasn't sure they were actually shots, ensconced as he was in the barn, warmed to a lull by the animals. The snow and wind muffled the sounds anyway. But there were three spaced plops, like shoes falling on a carpet. He put it down to something on the wind; a loose board banging, rats above in the hayloft, a frozen towel snapping on the line. Anything but what they really were.

He forked hay closer to the milk cow, and spread it over for the horses. Then stroked the appaloosa's nose, musing. Her rubbery lips flipped back from the gross yellow teeth in a grotesque smile.

He brushed his hand slowly across the dappled haunches, and felt the welts. Her ribs still bore the scars from the last time she'd been ridden. Because at that time Earl had been too drunk to sit her properly, and she threw him.

It was the second day his mother was back from the asylum, and she wasn't better, and treated them all as strangers. But because they were all watching, Earl rose in rage from the dust and snapping her head back, flung himself into the saddle again. He clung to the horn, and lashed her insanely with the reins. He bloodied her with his spurs.

The beast, smothered by terror twisted across the parched, packed earth, trying to jar him loose. Then back again. She buckled and screamed, still Earl held, shouting and cursing. Next, she rolled heavily sideways into the bars, crushing Earl's leg. He screeched with pain and stumbled from the saddle onto the rails. He doubled for several minutes, shaking his head and moaning with pain. The mare danced out of reach, still trying to toss the saddle, spitting at the bit. Pink froth bubbled from her nose and lips.

Earl hollered at him to grab her, then hobbled painfully across the dirt, rubbing his leg. With his free hand he stripped the heavy belt from his pants. Then with Frankie's help he lashed her tightly to the hitching post.

"I'll teach her!" he howled, "Dammit, I'll teach her!"

He lashed out with his feet and the belt, and once, stumbled with his shoulder into her head. She jerked back, catching his chin, slamming his teeth onto his tongue. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

"Jesus!" he shrieked, and brought the large silver buckle down across her eyes.

Twice the big mare went to her knees. She rose both times, only to have Earl start in on her again. Finally, as though her spirit had been sucked away, she stood and with each stroke of the studded belt, only quivered. Earl whipped her harder, and the tears streamed from Frankie's eyes. He wished he could kill Earl then. His three half-sisters had fled to the house.

Zoe, Frankie's mother, had cried to Earl from the fence, but Earl was deaf. She quickly dodged through the poles, and spurted across the corral to clutch at his arm, pleading, "You're going to kill her Earl! Stop!"

He tossed her away from him, and she fell in the dust onto her knees, "Keep away from me you bloody, crazy cunt!" he shouted at her. "What do you care about anything!"

"God damn you, Earl!" she hissed. She was ugly with hate, and Frankie was frightened for them all. It was like the night his mother had slugged Earl between the eyes with the stovewood and he had nearly killed her. Then had come after them, Frankie and his sisters, but they fled to the bedroom and locked the door, and Earl soon gave up trying to kick it in.

When Earl finally dropped the belt it was to stagger back and mop his brow with his sleeve. His barrel chest heaved, his purple face twitched. He called to Frankie, "Clean her off then, sissie, an' put her away. Or shoot her, I don' give a fuck!"



He limped backwards, threading the belt through the pant loops.

Since that incident, Earl had been persistently cruel to the animal. Even in passing he couldn't resist plunging his boot up into her ribs, or punching her hard on the soft nose. Once Frankie caught him systematically driving his fist into her ribs and counting while he did it. She was stabled and Earl stood on the stall boards reaching over, pounding her. He was embarrassed when the boy caught him, and his excuse was, "Goddam bitch nipped me!"

Earl Hayes was too fat, old and alcoholic now for the show rodeos. Before he got so drunk he became mean, or just passed out, he bored them with repeated stories of his Wild West Show days. Displayed innumerable times his gunshot scars and flashed the pistol — a gift from Buffalo Bill he claimed — carelessly. Zoe had hidden the bullets. All the same, during her lucid moments he was apprehensive, for she could not discover all his secreted liquor bottles either, and there could well be cartridges hidden somewhere she was unaware of.

The times she was confined to the asylum were always the worst for the children, for there was no protection at all for them from Earl then. But somehow they had survived, and had the good sense to stay out of Earl's way when he was drunk, which was nearly every day.

Frankie slowly wound the scarf around his neck, buttoned his worn jacket, and left the barn. The wind was wild and jerked the door from his hand. The sky held a metallic light; more snow was on the way.

Holding his face from the wind, Frankie peered southwest. That was the way out. He wished he could mount old Earl's horse and ride that way forever. Five miles down he could cross the Two Forks. There was no other crossing this time of year. The water was not frozen enough to walk on, and still too deadly cold to wade, no matter how shallow in spots.

So now, despite hearing the frozen towel snapping in the wind, and knowing something was inherently and horribly wrong, Frankie dallied. Despite it, or because of it. Only there was no towel on the line, he noticed that. And those noises had come from the house. Still, he shrugged it off to keep the terror from clutching him forever just a little longer.

The snow drained over the top of his boots. His socks were soaked, and his feet were becoming numbed. He dreamed of the river: of riding through the barren trees along the snowy bank on that handsome, scarred appaloosa. He'd cross the river at the bridge five miles down. Wave his hat to the Huffmans, the last house in the valley and shout good-bye to them over the wind.

And their daughter, Hannah would be stunned by the handsome figure he cut on the horse. He'd steal Earl's fur collared, red mackinaw. The one Earl had for twenty years and was nearly worn out now. Still it was a handsome coat, and Earl used to wear it to the fall rodeos like a big shot. Now he couldn't button it across his paunch any longer, and it hung in the back porch, dusty and full of moths. And Earl's shiny rodeo boots, of course. Then, if he could manage it without being caught, he'd take the Buffalo Bill pistol as well, and strap it to his waist.

Dreams he knew. Somehow connected with the horse, and all those thoughts he'd had of becoming something different than his stepfather, Earl, or his mother, who was so crazy sometimes she forgot to feed herself and them and didn't go to the bathroom properly.

His heart pounded as he saw himself sitting on the big horse, her gorgeous ass peppered with islands of white. A rider wearing the gun, the boots, and even the old worn, red mackinaw, on such a horse could knock the sun from the sky.

He killed time, kicking the snow with his feet and found a shovel Earl had punched him on the back of the head for losing last fall. He threw it still further into the woods. Then spied a small, snowy trail leading from the woodshed. Having gone there in the first place to have another look at Earl's cache of daily depleting whiskey. And maybe pee in another bottle. Then thinking since he was on his way to the house, may as well take an armload of wood with him. The first time in his life he'd ever done that voluntarily. Waylaid now by this trail, and half-interested, he followed it.

It led nowhere much, just as he'd suspected; into a thicket of blackberries near the slough. But he'd known when he first saw it, it was only a hare's track. A doe perhaps who'd thought of setting her nest in the woodshed. Tucked in a chink between birchwood and wall, then thought better of it. Maybe rattled by fat Earl, rooting out another jug. Sagging back against the piled wood to greedily gulp it, and moan with relief as the first burning draught — Frankie's pee and all — scorched his throat.

Maybe that. Maybe another reason.

Frankie searched along the edge of the blackberries, looking for more trails, more ways to kill time. And had turned to pick his way back when he heard the final shot.

This time it broke through the wind like snow driven inside the collar of his shirt. Was too much to ignore any longer, and leaping through the knee high drifts he ran for the house, sobs catching in his throat.

Just outside the back door, by the stand his mother used to hang out the wash he heard a muffled scream. It went on and on. A bottomless terror gripped him, and he felt already dead. Even the cold wind affected him no longer, and he tucked his face to it as you would a mother's breast.

He turned quickly. He would return to the barn and saddle the appaloosa, and defy the cold and oncoming blizzard. But the back door of the house banged open in the wind and his mother shrieked.

As he turned she slumped to her knees at the open doorway, that big woman, her bloodied hand clawing at the latch. He could barely see her through the veil of tears the wind forced to his eyes. And thought, Jesus Christ, why is it always so damn, damn cold. For now it was again, and he felt it penetrate his clothing and burn into his lungs. Knifelike and twisting. Why not the middle of summer with the searing heat, and the cottonwoods in the lowland glowing with the evening sun. When bloody old Earl was up in the mountains with his horses, and his mother in the hospital, and there was peace in the house, and he and his sisters looked after themselves.



For then he could cope. Would know what to do, what action to take, where to run. But not now. Not now. With his hands frozen into claws inside his gloves and his arms withdrawing from the fabric of his sleeves because of the cold. And his legs becoming stumps because of the damp rubber boots clamping his icy feet.

"My God, Frankie!" she screeched through a mouth bubbling with blood, "God Frankie; He's shot us all!"

The bitter wind skewered him again, the air fairly snapped, and the fine appaloosa mare waited. Not skittish and nervous when he came near. Not terrified of him, the way Earl had made her of everyone else. Soon now, the blizzard would be upon them, and it would be too late to leave then. He'd never make it past the river.

But now his mother on her knees in the frozen doorway, with a wind-driven curtain of icy snow making her vanish and reappear. But even so, even so, you could see the blood running along her chin and onto the bib of her dress.