

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a weathered wooden barn wall. The wood is dark brown and shows signs of age and wear. In the center, there is a window with a wooden frame and a wooden shutter. The shutter is closed and has two horizontal wooden bars across it. In the foreground, a single stalk of dried grass or a weed is visible, extending upwards from the bottom center of the frame.

# J.D. Lavelle

## MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

A widow, an orphan, and a veteran...all caught in the grip of war. To survive, they must count on each other.

Thank you for reading this book.

*My Brother's Keeper*  
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# Chapter 1

“So this is how the newest chapter of my life will unfold.”

The young woman looked about her, filled with unpleasant thoughts.

“An uncomfortable wagon, an interminable stretch of road before us, and God only knows what else.”

Rebecca Farmington heaved a heavy sigh, then caught herself. Her husband didn’t appreciate any such negative thoughts or actions. She risked a sideways glance at him, and heaved a quieter sigh of relief.

“Good,” she thought. “He’s not paying attention. To me, at least.”

Rebecca tried to think of the good things in her life. It helped, some.

“At least I’ve got a husband who will support me,” she thought.

Their country was still at war, and amidst all of this chaos and upheaval, her husband had decided to leave their comfortable home in search of new fortunes.

“This fighting is going to be over soon,” he told her. “And business won’t be the same. Things are going to be messy too. There will be lots of change. Some of it good. Some of it bad.”

Their country was indeed being torn apart by a great civil war, but the conflict hadn’t been a burden for everyone. Rebecca’s husband, for example, had made large sums of money trading with the enemy – a war profiteer – and now he had decided to gather up his earnings and his wife and head out west.

While the war raged between the North and the South, Rebecca felt torn apart by her own inner turmoil. There was no doubt that her husband was a good provider, and she did feel genuine affection for the man, but his first love was for himself and material gain. She had always come second. Her one comfort in the face of this hardship had been their well-furnished home where she could entertain her family and friends. Now she’d been taken away from her home and was faced with the prospect of making her way in the world with a man who treated her well, like he did all of his possessions, but couldn’t see past his own greed to notice the beautiful woman who was his wife.

Rebecca sighed again, this time a little louder, and rose slightly, catching hold of her seat. “Jonathon,” she said. “I’m going to call on the Clarks. One of their boys looked taken with

illness this morning.”

The man grunted. He didn't offer to stop the wagon or hand her carefully down to the ground. Instead, he nodded, and let his wife make her own way down off the slow-moving vehicle.

Glad to be quit of the uncomfortable conveyance and on her own two feet, Rebecca gathered up her skirts and watched as her husband's wagon kept moving, and said softly, “Maybe things won't be so bad after all.”

It was a lie. And she knew it.



“Mr. Clark,” Rebecca asked. “I understand there are risks to be had as we travel, but...” she paused to search for the words. Mr. Clark was a quiet, patient man. He waited for her to find the words.

“How much danger will we really face?”

Again there was a pause as he considered the matter. It was something he'd given a great deal of thought, and tried to be as honest with himself as he was with his wife and children. Because it was not only his own life that he risked but those of his family as well. As a married man, he had to take everyone and everything into consideration, including those in his traveling party.

“I think we're going to be pretty safe. We're headed west – away from most of the war – and that's a good thing. But...” He paused to consider his words carefully. “We might run into some trouble. Most folks think the war is being fought in the South, but there's quite a bit of fighting - a lot of it nasty - taking place here along the Missouri-Kansas border. Lots of bitter folks. Once we get further along into Kansas, we'll be clear of most of the war trouble.”

Rebecca gulped. She appreciated the man's honesty, but wasn't sure she was ready to take in such a heaping portion of truth just yet. Rebecca was still struggling with leaving her family and friends behind.

“But you think we're pretty safe for the moment?”

Mr. Clark smiled at Rebecca. He didn't want to frighten the young woman with his worries. She was a pretty young creature with a pleasant disposition. There was no need to fill her head with such concerns.

“We'll be fine,” he reassured. “As I said, most of the war is being fought back East, and every mile we make takes us farther and farther away from the fighting.”

## Chapter 2

John Farmington pulled up on the reins. A group of riders blocked his path. Their clothes were dusty from the road, and their faces were hard.

They claimed to be members of the 11<sup>th</sup> Confederate Partisan Rangers, but most were ne'er-do-wells, common criminals who assiduously avoided real military service in favor of highway robbery. Farmington surveyed them with caution. He wished that he'd had enough sense to carry his rifle across his lap, instead of behind him. It was within reach, but turning to retrieve the Henry rifle would mean taking his eyes off of those assembled before him. Farmington knew that would be folly.

"Where you folks from?"

It was a loaded question. Especially in this part of the country. Farmington was fairly certain that he'd better choose his answer carefully. In this part of the country, where tensions ran high, claiming Northern or Southern sympathies could spell trouble. It was best to try to remain neutral.

"We're headed west," Farmington said. "Along the Sante Fe Trail. Looking for a new life. Away from the fighting."

There was a long pause as the man on horseback considered the wagon train before him. His right hand toyed with the gun he wore at his waist - thumb and forefinger tapping. Farmington saw it, and he knew that it was meant as a threat.

"You didn't answer my question," the man said. "I asked you where you was from."

Farmington smiled at the man.

He knew he had to act. There weren't going to be any negotiations. There wasn't going to be a discussion.

"I'm from St. Louis," Farmington said. "I was in textiles. The fabric business. I'm bringing some of my wares out West to set up a new business. The war wasn't very good for profits. Here, let me show you." He turned, risking taking his eyes from the threat, and reached for his Henry rifle.



Rebecca Farmington stared in disbelief when the men on horseback started shooting.

“Oh my God, John!” she thought, fear knotting her belly as the riders kicked their horses forward and started shooting. She gathered up her skirts and began running for the lead wagon. Suddenly bullets were flying fast and furious. She ducked at the sound of lead splintering wood, eyes wide with panic, but didn’t stop. The riders surrounded the wagons, whooping with excitement and bloodlust.

Heedless of the danger, Rebecca ran to her wagon.

“Jonathon!” she cried out, praying for her husband’s safety.

But as she pulled herself up into the driver’s seat, she quailed at the grim sight before her. Her husband was slumped backwards in the seat, eyes blank and staring. His shirt was stained red.

“Oh no,” Rebecca whispered, then a bullet cut through the air, narrowly missing her. The sound jarred her. There was no time for grieving at the loss of her husband. Rebecca reached for the Henry rifle, which still lay behind her husband, and decided in that moment that she would live.

“Please God,” she prayed. “Help me...”

And the boys. Rebecca suddenly remembered the Clark boys, especially Jeremiah. He was ill - taken with fever - and no doubt terrified at the sudden violence.

Without so much as a backward glance at her husband, Rebecca turned and mostly fell from the wagon, her ankle twisting painfully on landing. She winced at the hurt, then started hobbling towards the Clark’s wagon, fearing the worst.

Her eyes widened as she saw the worst. A small form running pell-mell up a small rise. Alone. Rebecca didn’t hesitate. There was no telling what had befallen the other brother or the parents, but she couldn’t leave the young boy to his own devices. He would surely perish. She said a silent prayer for the rest of his family and ran after Jeremiah.

The grim-faced leader of the horsemen barked, “Somebody go kill those two.”

One of the marauding men, not entirely deaf to commands, even though he was caught in the fever of killing, spurred his horse after Rebecca.

Tears streaming down her face, as she moved uphill, Rebecca Farmington saw the oncoming rider and finally succumbed to panic.

“Jeremiah!” she screamed. “Run.”

Gasping for air, Rebecca lurched forward, crying out, “Somebody help us!” She cried out again, not even considering the futility of her forlorn plea.

“For God’s sake, somebody help us!”

## Chapter 3

Sergeant Claudius Sears - formerly of the Army of the West - lay on the ground, eyes closed against the pain. The heat from the sun drew beads of sweat from the man's brow and he groaned. Vomit was caked on his lips, and his mouth was whiskey-dry. He cracked an eyelid and looked at the tiny blades of green grass that filled his vision as his head continued to pound. Another groan escaped his dry lips as he closed his mouth and tried to swallow.

A familiar sound broke the silence with its staccato popping. Gunfire.

The man struggled to his hands and knees.

He closed his eyes as the crackle of gunfire sent sharp pains, like someone holding his head with white-hot pincers, coursing through his temple. Sears made it to his feet with considerable effort, swayed unsteadily for a moment, then sighed as the world settled.

Screams joined the crack of rifles. Not the screams of men filled with the joy and panic of war, but the screams of innocents - women and children. Sears stood still, listening to the sounds of battle. There was no trembling of excitement or fear knotting in his belly as he listened. These were familiar sounds. Sounds that he knew and remembered well. Without thinking of the consequences, the man shuffled forward, lurching towards the sounds of war which seemed to be coming from just the other side of a hill.

The veteran crested the rise and looked down at the carnage before him. Four wagons, caught unawares on a lonely road, and unable to turn about into a protective circle against the onslaught, were festooned with the dead and dying. Sears surveyed the tableau with a practiced eye, noticed the bodies strewn about, some of them small, and felt nothing.

He also noted the disheveled female form running toward him in a fair panic. She was in hot pursuit of a small boy, and a rider followed them both and was about to overcome the woman.

The rider caught sight of Sears and immediately changed course - and his aim. He pointed his revolver at the lone figure.

With eyes still squinting against the pain, the retired soldier whispered, "Don't do it. I've had my fill of killing."

The revolver jerked. A bullet kicked up dust at Sears's feet. He didn't flinch. The man on horseback cursed in frustration.

The grizzled veteran of bloody battles reached for his sidearm as he began walking toward

the threat. Rebecca checked her flight, Jeremiah all but forgotten, and watched in amazement. Sears strode toward the rider, pulling the trigger as he went. The rider was surprised too. His second and third shots missed their mark.

Sears didn't miss, and a bullet jerked the horseman off of his mount. Rebecca stared.

Another rider saw Sears cut down his fellow bushwhacker and broke off the attack on the caravan to dispatch the new threat.

The veteran holstered his side arm as he continued to walk toward Rebecca.

"Get the boy and give me your rifle," he said.

Slack fingers gave up the Henry rifle easily. Rebecca was in shock. He took the weapon as if he were going to inspect it. Not in any hurry, even as the wheet of a bullet sang past his ear. Still with a measured pace and no trace of panic, he carefully took aim and pulled the trigger. The .45 caliber slug jerked a rider from his perch. Sears drew another bead.

"Wait for the shot and make it count," he told himself. Sears took a deep breathe, exhaled, and pulled the trigger.

Another attacker fell.

Rebecca Farmington looked on in wonderment. Moments before it had seemed as though death was imminent and yet hope had seemingly sprung forth in the form of this awful-looking avenging angel. Had God answered her? Was this strange man an answered prayer?

Two more riders broke away from the main attack and whipped their horses toward the new threat. Sears drew a bead and pulled the trigger again. One horse caught a bullet in the chest and went down, taking his rider with him. The man fell to the earth, cursing as his mount trapped his leg.

The remaining rider suddenly had reservations, and hauled on the reins of his mount, unwilling to draw closer. He leveled his revolver at Sears. Instead of flinching, the veteran pulled the trigger first. There was another empty saddle.

During his time in the service, some soldiers got swept up into a fight, forgetting all else save cursing and firing as fast as they could. Claudius Sears was a patient soul, inclined to calm, once he got used to men dying. He walked toward the surviving horseman, who still struggled to free his leg. The man grimaced as he tried to reach for his weapon, but the revolver was just beyond his straining grasp. Sears stooped to pick it up and cocked the hammer. The downed rider expected no mercy and would have tendered none himself were their roles reversed, but he took small satisfaction in knowing his death would be avenged.

"I'll see you in hell soon enough," he said.

"Probably," Sears said. "But not today."

He ended the man's struggles, and then looked at the remnants of the marauders. They



milled about, their leader desperately trying to rally his men. Their attack was faltering in the face of determined opposition by the remaining settlers, this one new player, and, of course, their own disorganized incompetence.

Sears decided to try to break their spirits by killing a few more of them. He leveled the Henry rifle and drew a bead on the one rider who seemed to be barking out the orders.

“Cut off the head...” Sears whispered.

He pulled the trigger. The rider jerked, clutched at his arm, but did not fall. It was enough, however, for their leader to call off the attack. Still holding his wounded arm, he wheeled his mount and galloped away, followed by the other riders.

Sears watched the retreating forms of the bushwhackers and grunted with satisfaction. Sobs of relief came from the remaining settlers. The grizzled man looked about him, taking in the carnage. It was nothing compared to the killing fields of the war where thousands lay dead and dying after combat, but for some, the shock of death, up close and personal, was too much to bear.

He turned to Rebecca Farmington who still remained frozen. The sudden losses had shaken her world.

“Don’t you worry, ma’am,” he said. “I think the killing’s done with for now. Good thing too. I’ve had my fill of it for one day...and for a lifetime too.”

## Chapter 4

Sears picked his way amongst the wagons.

“These people are going to die,” he thought. “They got no business being out here if they don't know how to survive. You can't just sit and cry. You got to keep moving. Keep fighting. They're not even looking after their wounded.”

The survivors were in shock. Loved ones lying dead or dying was too much for most to bear. For his part, Sears knew that this was neither the time nor the place to set back and mourn the lost. The veteran had little pity remaining in his breast. Service in the Union Cause had left the man with numerous scars, and even more practical wisdom on survival.

“Dead folks, Secesh or not, don't mean much to me.”

Yet the man methodically moved along the length of the wagon train, checking for any survivors. It wasn't so much that he cared, but rather it was reflex, a leftover habit from the war he'd so recently left.

As the veteran moved down the short line of wagons, he heard a voice.

“Water... I need water.”

Sears found a young man lying on the ground, clutching at his middle.

“You don't need water, son,” Sears said, shaking his head. Visions of soldiers lying about field hospitals, clutching their bellies as they waited for the surgeon to see them flashed through his mind. Such wounds left the doctors with little alternative besides liberal doses of medicinal alcohol or opiates to ease the pain. It helped some, but not much. Most times soldiers shot in the gut lingered for days, their suffering intense, before passing on.

“You're already dead,” he said. “You just don't know it. Water will only make your dying harder.”

Sears looked more closely at the young man. Eyes widening slightly, he turned to find Rebecca Farmington nearby, still watching him. He motioned for her to come closer. Jeremiah clung to her skirts.

“Is he one of yours?” Sears asked.

The young woman stepped forward and looked at the prone figure. She shook her head.

Sears drew his revolver and pulled the trigger in one smooth motion. The report was deafening as the young man jerked, a look of surprise flashing momentarily. Rebecca stood

motionless, her mouth agape in silent horror.

“You shot him...” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sears agreed. “I did. That’s what he needed.”

“But how could you...” She searched for the words. “...in cold blood.”

He didn’t expect these people to understand or accept. They were civilians and didn’t know any better. Fighting had taught him otherwise. He looked at the woman, trying to fathom the thoughts tumbling through her mind. It was mystery to him. He groped for the words, trying to make her understand.

“That boy needed killin’ for what he done to you and your people. That might have been cold-blooded, but it was justice. Plain and simple. Besides that, the boy was gonna die. No doubt about it. Just a matter of time and pain - his pain, not yours.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. And truly she didn’t understand. The young woman had never experienced violence before. Certainly she had read newspaper reports of the violence men did to each other on the distant battlefields of the Civil War, but this was different.

“The boy was already dead,” Sears said, “and he needed dying sooner than later. So I took care of it.”

Rebecca could only stare. One moment she had been plodding along, heading for a new life away from the war, and the next she was confronted with whooping devils and death, sending her headlong into a world of violence. Then, as quickly as it began it was over, the bloodshed punctuated by this callous stranger.

The man was unkempt, unshaven and he reeked of vomit and alcohol. Sears was not a very pleasant sight to behold. And yet, in her dazed state, she knew he had saved their lives. But at the moment, Mrs. Farmington was not considering her debt to him.

“Who are you?” she asked. “And where did you come from?”

“Claudius Sears,” he said. “From Tennessee.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I didn’t mean your place of birth,” she said. “How did you find us? Do you live nearby? And what on earth happened to you?”

“I think I tied one on,” he said, smiling for the first time.

His manner, dress, and odor were entirely repellant. And he seemed not altogether sane. Yet, there he stood, grinning like a fool, seemingly nonplussed by the turn of affairs.

“I would venture to say that you have done considerably more than simply tie one on, sir,” she said. “It looks as though you tied several.”

## Chapter 5

“So this is how the newest chapter of my life will unfold...”

The young woman looked about as her mind was filling with unpleasant thoughts of death and dying. She was not prepared, emotionally or physically, to face her own mortality. Nor was she prepared to face her future without a husband.

“...with suffering,” she thought. “And uncertainty.”

There was an interminable stretch of road in either direction, and the young woman was at a loss as to how to proceed.

“Should I head back to my old home?” she wondered. “Or press onward? And face what?”

For his part, Sears was having much different thoughts. He stared at Rebecca. She was worth staring at, even in her disheveled state. With her long dark hair, bright blue eyes, and pale skin, she was a stark contrast to his dirty, lean, and flinty self.

“She’s trouble,” he told himself. “But she’s the kind of trouble a man could get used to.”

Against his better judgment, he asked, “Who’s in charge?”

The woman’s expression told Sears that she hadn’t the slightest clue about leadership.

“What does it matter?” she said.

Sears was of the opinion that folks in trying times needed leadership, otherwise they were likely to get themselves killed.

“So more of you folks don’t die out here,” he said. “And unless someone is willing to take the reins and yell ‘hee’ and ‘haw’, so’s you know which way to turn when the bullets start flying again, I’d say your chances of survival are pretty slim. It could be anybody. Hell, it could be you. I seen a twenty-four year old take command of an entire brigade, lead it into battle, and successfully carry an enemy position. Another time, we had a man twice his age crack under the pressure of leading a single company. Most times, you just can’t tell how people will fare once they’re in charge. A blundering dolt might turn into a right proper field commander when faced with the responsibility of men’s lives and a calm, cool-headed gentleman might turn yellow at the distant rumbling of a cannon.”

“Are you listening to me?” he asked, when she continued to look at him with a blank stare. I don’t know you people from Adam and I really don’t plan on stayin’ ‘round long enough for us to get close as two coats of paint, so you better start thinking what you’re gonna do with yourself

- then do it.”

“I don’t know...” Rebecca said. “My husband...”

“Is dead,” Sears finished for her. “Am I right?”

She nodded.

“Well, you can take care of the dead, if you’re of a mind, but it’s easier to just leave ‘em.”

This last bit of hard-to-swallow gristle gave Rebecca a handhold to grasp. The idea of who was in charge was too new and strange to get her head around, but taking care of the dead, especially her own dead, was something that needed proper tending to.

“Surely you can’t be serious? You suggest leaving the dead as they are? Without the benefit of a proper Christian burial?”

Sears eyed her coldly. “I don’t give a damn what you do,” he said. “But you better start acting like you got some sense.”

Mrs. Rebecca Farmington, newly blooded, finally managed to swallow the large dose of reality she’d been force fed in the last few minutes. It was a strong portion to stomach and it was this awful man’s words that helped to wash the burden down her gullet. She was a widow, perhaps even an adoptive mother to Jeremiah, embarked upon a perilous journey westward with at least half of her traveling party lying dead or dying. The woman suddenly looked older, aged by the weight of responsibility so casually thrust upon her slender shoulders.

Sears saw it and grunted in satisfaction.

“I’ve no one to look to but myself,” she whispered.

The woman considered her future, and whispered an unladylike oath under her breath. For his part, the confused, scared and half-witless survivors of this senseless attack reminded Sears uncomfortably of raw recruits. There was a strong pull to put on his sergeant’s stripes again and make these settlers dress their lines and pull together in good marching order, otherwise, they would all end up dead.

“I’d be a fool to hang around these parts much longer. I should grab some mules and be on my way. But that woman...” Sears shook his head, considered his own future, and thought, “There’s bound to be trouble with her.”

## Chapter 6

“There’s bound to be trouble,” Rebecca thought. “Quite a bit of it...but what choice do I have?”

The course of action she was considering was distasteful to say the very least. She would ask Claudius Sears to see them to the next town. As repugnant a figure as he might be, Sears was a steady enough gun under pressure. And probably the one person who could see them to safety. Surely, the next town wasn’t too terribly distant. She would only have to endure his company for a day or two at most.

He snorted at her request, and then asked, “Do you even know where your going?”

“No, damn it! I don’t know,” Rebecca shrilled, “but I’ll be damned if I turn around after I’ve come this far.”

“Wonderful,” Sears spat. “You’re going to end up dead like your husband and the boy’s family.”

She caught her breath, eyes widening at the cruel barb. Only for a moment though. Her eyes hardened, looked Sears in the eye. “You can’t scare me. Not after what I’ve been through.”

The veteran smiled sardonically, shaking his head. She said it with such seriousness too, which made her defiance all the more comic. What on earth could this young creature have suffered that compared with his own years of scarring on the battlefields of the war? The very thought was absurd.

After a few moments, Sears asked the woman, “How far along you aim on takin’ the Trail? All the way to Santa Fe, or maybe you’ll break north and head to Colorado or even Utah? I heard them Mormons could use some extra wives.”

He was trying to goad her, make her angry enough to turn away and give up her foolish notions of independence. Sears eyed her, no reaction. It was time for a flank attack. “Okay,” he offered. “Maybe you’ve no mind to play junior wife to one of the Mormon elders. Well then, let me ask you this: you plan on farming once you settle or is ranching more your style? Personally, I think you’d make a dandy farmer. I’ll bet the last time you wrestled a team through a field was just this past spring.”

Rebecca counted slowly, under her breath, waiting for her cheeks to cool. She knew the man was only being trying to make her reconsider. It was not going to work. Too much of her life

was already lost. There was nothing for her back east, better to lie beside her husband and wait to join him. No, there was no question about it. Returning from whence she came was out of the question. She and the boy couldn't very well strike out on their own, not with devils on horseback running rampant. And white men hell-bent on the torment of innocents regardless of political persuasion were not her only concern. Indians, unfamiliarity with the terrain and the fact that she was a woman traveling alone were all causes for concern. Women, unless they were of somewhat dubious character, simply didn't wrestle a wagon across the prairie with an orphan in tow; then again, she had little to lose.

She hesitated, looking at him sideways and squinting, "I can pay you. If it's money that you need. My dearly departed husband had some money stashed away, a nest egg. It's mine now and I'll do with it as I please. I'm more than willing to offer payment for your services. Simply name your price."

Sears laughed again, shaking his head. "Lady," he managed, "you got me figured all wrong. I'm not some Indian scout sent down from above to guide you through the desert like some damned Moses. I'm just a poor drunk heading out west. I don't need or want your money or your company. Besides," he smiled, "I could put a bullet in you and take the money once your friends are gone. I don't have much problem killing folks."

"That much is obvious," Rebecca agreed. "And I couldn't stop you. It would only save me the trouble of being killed by Indians or more bushwhackers." She looked at Sears. Their eyes locked, unwavering, neither of them backing down.

The veteran finally shrugged.

"Do whatever the hell you want," he said, "as long as you leave me the hell alone. You want to die out on the prairie? That's fine with me. Just leave me alone. I'm in no mood to argue with some crazy woman."

"I could simply follow you."

Sears had to admit that the lady was stubborn and not entirely unattractive, but he simply couldn't abide the thought of extra baggage. He'd done his good deed for the day, driving off the marauding men. There was no cause to add to his woes by taking on more responsibility. It just wasn't going to happen.

"You try to follow me and I might shoot you for the hell of it. And take your gold."

Rebecca snorted in derision. "Why would you shoot me after having gone through the trouble of saving my life? You must be joking."

## Chapter 7

“I’ll be taking my leave now,” Sears said quietly. He gathered the reins for his mule train and started to move off.

“Not with those mules you’re not,” a man - one of the survivors - stated flatly. “Or the woman and child.”

He stepped forward, took hold of Rebecca’s arm, and said, “You don’t move a step unless I say so. Do you understand me? I won’t have some headstrong young lady break apart our party. Your husband might have put up with your ways, but I certainly won’t - nor will any man that’s left in our party. You can’t simply walk off with some stranger. You’ve seen what he’s like. Why, he might kill you and the boy as soon as you leave our sight. We need to support each other.”

The man was also thinking about the wealth that Rebecca had just inherited from her husband. It was not inconsiderable.

“I’ll take my chances,” she hissed, struggling to free her arm. “At least Mr. Sears knows how to use a gun, unlike you, Mr. McPherson. Perhaps my husband would still be alive if more of you were similarly inclined.”

The man struck her across the mouth with his free hand.

“Shut your mouth,” he said. Jeremiah sat atop the wagon, eyes wide with fear, while Sears took stock of the rapidly deteriorating situation. The remaining pioneers were gathering, curious to see how the man’s efforts to save Mrs. Farmington from her folly were resolved.

“God help me...” the veteran whispered, with a grimace. Knowing full well he was going to regret his actions, he stepped towards the other man, swinging. McPherson reeled from the haymaker, but didn’t fall. He held fast to the woman’s arm, reaching for his sidearm as two others moved forward to help, faces grim with determination.

Their intended prey drew and fired twice at the ground. They skittered back, yelping, as Sears turned his attention back to McPherson. He raised his revolver, this time not simply to warn, when Rebecca screamed, “Stop it!”

Men, women and children all froze. A slow smile spread across Sears’s features. The man stood shaking. A small but deadly derringer was planted firmly under his nose, held by the widow Mrs. Farmington. She said calmly, “Drop your guns, all of you! Or Mr. McPherson



joins my husband in the hereafter. Do you understand? Drop them!”

“Do as she says boys.” McPherson added, then shut up as she pressed the gun harder against his upper lip.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Sears snorted. “It looks like the lady had a holdout. Remind me not to play poker with you, ma’am.”

Her voice tight, Rebecca responded. “I claim no expertise with cards.”

“Seems as though you’re holding the ace right now, don’t it?” he said surveying the crowd, eyes crinkled with amusement. It took quite a bit of sass to pull a stunt like that, Sears had to give credit where credit was due, but now both their bacons were flung into the fire. He sobered slightly, stared at the woman, shaking his head.

“What are you gonna do with that hand?” he asked. “There’s lots of different ways this deal could play out.”

“Rebecca listen...” McPherson started, between pressed lips, then quieted when the lady renewed pressure.

“Have a care, sir,” she warned, “I think it would be best if you remained silent.”

The man wisely blinked acknowledgment.

“Here’s a fine little standoff,” Sears thought. “The woman’s gone and burnt her last bridge. I can’t very well leave her to the tender mercies of these folks, especially this one. It’s doubtful that things will remain cordial.”

And it was true. Nerves were frayed and emotions were running amok in the wake of the near massacre and now Mrs. Farmington had just added an armload of dry kindling to the fire. The veteran sighed, a long-suffering sound.

Rebecca looked directly at him, ignoring the other men who stood, nervously fingering triggers. “I told you before,” she said, her voice shaking. “The boy and I are headed west and no one’s stopping us.”

The veteran swiveled sharply, bringing his revolver to bear. One of the pioneers was feeling brave. “Easy there, son,” Sears warned.

McPherson, waving his arms frantically, vainly attempted to yell through pursed lips. Rebecca pressed again with the derringer until McPherson quieted, then turned to see one of her erstwhile traveling companions step forward, hand shaking as he leveled a revolver.

“Careful with that now,” Sears warned again. “I didn’t shoot all those bushwhackers just so’s I could have the pleasure of gunning you down.”

“Put the gun down, John,” Rebecca said, adding her own plea. The boy’s frantic eyes darted between Rebecca and Sears, his pride clamoring for a moment. The youngster hesitated, considering his odds, then Sears saw his shoulder tense. McPherson saw it too and fairly

shrieked. The veteran drew a long breath, relaxing as he exhaled. It was better to get off a quick shot, fluster the boy, then finish him, but this was liable to get him killed. Mrs. Farmington's derringer under the nose of their leader was not a sound insurance policy against more brave souls. Sears simply wanted to avoid the whole mess and be on his way, and he would have if it weren't for this godawful, stubborn, deceptive and rather attractive young woman.

The young man looked at Sears, really looked at him for the first time and quailed. There was very little fear in those eyes, no tightness in the chest at the thought of death - only an icy stare coupled with a heavy revolver. These two factors did much to cool the fires of heroism and the entire wagon train heaved a collective sigh as the young man lowered his gun. Sears just shook his head. That tore it. The lady, much trouble as she was bound to be, couldn't be left alone with this crowd. No telling what they might do to her.

"Most men don't need much prodding to turn feral and start doing terrible things to one another," Sears thought, remembering a vision of a soldier lying dead, a bayonet driven clear through his open mouth, staked to the ground. This act provoked the extreme ire of all soldiers who passed by the gruesome display and saw to it that the Rebs were paid in kind at first opportunity. These folks here had been provoked plenty of late. Sears didn't even try to argue with himself over the matter, as he put little stock in human kindness or Christian charity.

"I guess she'll be coming with me then, at least for a spell," he thought, then to his new traveling partner he added, "I'd keep that little gun under his nose for a bit. We don't want these others to get any ideas."

"Why don't you come with us, mister?" Sears said, indicating the lady's prisoner, then to Jeremiah, he added, "Son, why don't you take the reins of that wagon your settin' in and start driving it along the trail? You and your new kinfolk are coming with me, at least until the next town." The boy nodded, obeying. Rebecca smiled, heaving a sigh of relief, finally able to breathe again.

The foursome moved along for several hundred yards before their prisoner spoke again. He pled his case with a small gun planted firmly against his skull. McPherson could at least speak now without having his lips bruised. "Why are you doing this, Becky? Do you want to die out here on the prairie with some strange man? At least think of Jeremiah. He's been through enough without you dragging him off to die." Then he argued his case to the boy. "Jeremiah, do you really want to leave your friends? I've known you since you were a babe. I'm willing to adopt you and raise you like my own son."

The boy thought for a moment. Up until now, the man had hardly said two words to him throughout the entire journey, except to complain of his noisemaking or lazy habits. He didn't much care for McPherson or his proffered adoptive siblings. They were mean-spirited and cared

only for their own company, shunning most of the other children in the caravan. Mrs. Farmington was a nice lady, his mother's friend, and she was pretty. These were strong inducements to stay with her, even if she was leaving the safety of numbers - not that the numbers were always handy once the shooting started. Some men had frozen stiff with fear at the first gunshot from their attackers. The only men who weren't paralyzed at the bushwhacker onslaught were the first ones killed. Jeremiah's own father had taken up a rifle immediately and charged to protect his family and paid the price. The riders had concentrated their fire on any man, woman or child who offered up any firm resistance.

The idea of traveling with Mr. Sears didn't faze the lad in the least. The veteran of the Civil War was a curiosity, so unlike any of the men he had known in his life. Aside from the foul odor that seemed to hover about the man and his equally foul disposition, Jeremiah almost liked him. He didn't talk like the others, wasn't afraid of guns or hostile horsemen, and he could shoot straight. Besides, Mr. Sears didn't seem to take much to Mr. McPherson and that was another good reason to like him.

"I want to stay with Mrs. Farmington."

The lady smiled. The caravan was a few hundred yards away; far enough so that Sears could pick off anyone who ventured too near and besides, the veteran was tired of listening to McPherson's prattle. He moved forward, gently taking the reins from Rebecca, and said softly, "Easy now. Let's rest a spell and send this gentleman on his way."

Rebecca looked at Sears expectantly, unsure of how one turns a captor free, especially an erstwhile traveling acquaintance. She still held the derringer pointed at the man, wondering what to do next.

Sears looked soberly at the woman, sizing her up. She was certainly headstrong and willing to take risks, but privately he hoped there was some chance that she might return to her old life. "You sure you want to come with me?" he asked. "I can lead you as far as the next town, after that we part ways. Might be better to stay with folks you know."

Her eyes narrowed in distrust. She was not about to be swayed by some new argument. "I'm not going back with this one," she indicated with her derringer. "And I doubt they would have me back."

"Now, that's not true, Rebecca," McPherson protested. "After all, we've..."

She stepped closer, pressing the weapon against McPherson's ear. "Not another word," she cautioned. He held his tongue.

The matter was settled, not exactly to Sears' liking, but it was settled. "I come out west," he said miserably, "to leave the fighting behind and I end up killing more folks. If I don't kill 'em," he cursed emphatically, "I adopt 'em!"

These two were a terrible intrusion on his solitary, alcoholic ways and he hoped to see signs of civilization soon. "I just know," he thought, "that this little firebrand ain't through making my life difficult, no matter what her claim of only temporarily hobbling me. Any woman who carries a holdout can't be fully trusted."

"What do I do now?" she asked.

"What do you want to do?" he returned, cocking an eyebrow.

Eyes narrowing, she said, "I'll not be going back with this one."

"You heard the lady, sir," Sears drawled. "I'd step lively too, if I was you."

"Why?" McPherson asked, backing away, eyes moving between Sears and the woman.

"Cause I think the lady owes you for that slap on the face you dosed her with. In my book, that's reason enough to shoot a man and I don't need much proddin' to shoot you right now."

It was a lie, of course, as Sears was in no mood to continue the recent spate bloodshed, even if he thought the race would be improved by McPherson's death, accidental or otherwise. The other man, however, needed no further inducement and began jogging towards the knot of wagons. The veteran pondered his gait and thought a little encouragement might be in order. He remembered the Henry rifle he'd returned to Mrs. Farmington. "That repeating rifle is about a fine a weapon as a man could want for," he thought. "A damn sight better than my own lost Sharps. That blasted thing was just a mite testy for my tastes."

The Henry was a different breed altogether. With a fifteen round capability, the weapon was the prized possession of a select few soldiers, the Enfield musket being standard issue, with the capacity to inflict terrific casualties against an unlucky foe. Sears considered it a fair trade for his earlier good deed.

"Ma'am," he started, "why don't you fetch that Henry rifle of yours here."

"Why?"

"You aim to follow me, then I want that damned rifle - a woman like you ain't got no business carrying it anyhow. Besides, you don't know how to use the damn thing. Simple as that."

She fished it from the confines of the wagon, handed it over. Sears smiled at the feel of the weapon, its weight and craftsmanship. Without a word of thanks, he turned to face the retreating form of Samuel McPherson and hollered, "I changed my mind, mister!"

"What on earth..." Rebecca managed, before the rifle report went off. Earth sprayed up near his target's feet. McPherson turned, eyes wide with fear, and started running. "...do you think you are doing?"

Sears smiled at her, drawling, "Ma'am, all I got to defend us with is this here revolver at my side. You see some Johnnies come riding over a hill, hell bent on our destruction, then I'm

gonna have to wait ‘til they’re real close before I hit one of them. With a rifle, I can bring ‘em down from afar. Like this.”

He cranked on the lever, chambering another round, and raised the rifle to fire again. Before she could intercede, Sears fired the weapon. He missed.

“Damn. My aim must be a touch off.”

“Really, sir,” she cried indignantly, “I think you should leave well enough alone.”

“Leave well enough alone is right,” he said. “You need to let me be. All I’m doin’ is throwin’ a little scare into the man. It’s the least he deserves.”

This stopped her cold. She thought for a moment, feeling like she was in a barrel fast approaching a falls. There was little time to turn back, and once the decision had been made to go on over, it was just a matter of holding on for dear life and praying for safety. The moment seemed to stretch. Rebecca Farmington, standing on the cusp of her own waterfall, thought fleetingly what the ride was going to be like.

“If you would be so kind then, sir,” she said, sweetly, “as to give him a little something from for me. A farewell, if you will.”



“Now see there, boys,” the man announced triumphantly, “that weren’t nearly so bad as all that.”

Captain Hogan surveyed his men’s handiwork, pleased with their efforts. Only one dead member of his party, and another slightly injured - he’d fallen from his horse while trying to grab at the traces of a mule team.

“We’re showin’ these Kansas Jayhawkers our mettle.”

The members of the 11<sup>th</sup> Confederate Partisan Rangers continued their plundering of the mule train, whipping animals into a frenzy; sending the wagons filled with goods careening across the prairie. Some wagons were set ablaze before being turned loose. Five wagons, loaded with supplies, heading west along the Santa Fe Trail, had been destroyed, along dead or dying teamsters. The ones that hadn’t been killed outright were dying, but the attackers were so overjoyed with their success that they left the survivors to their suffering.