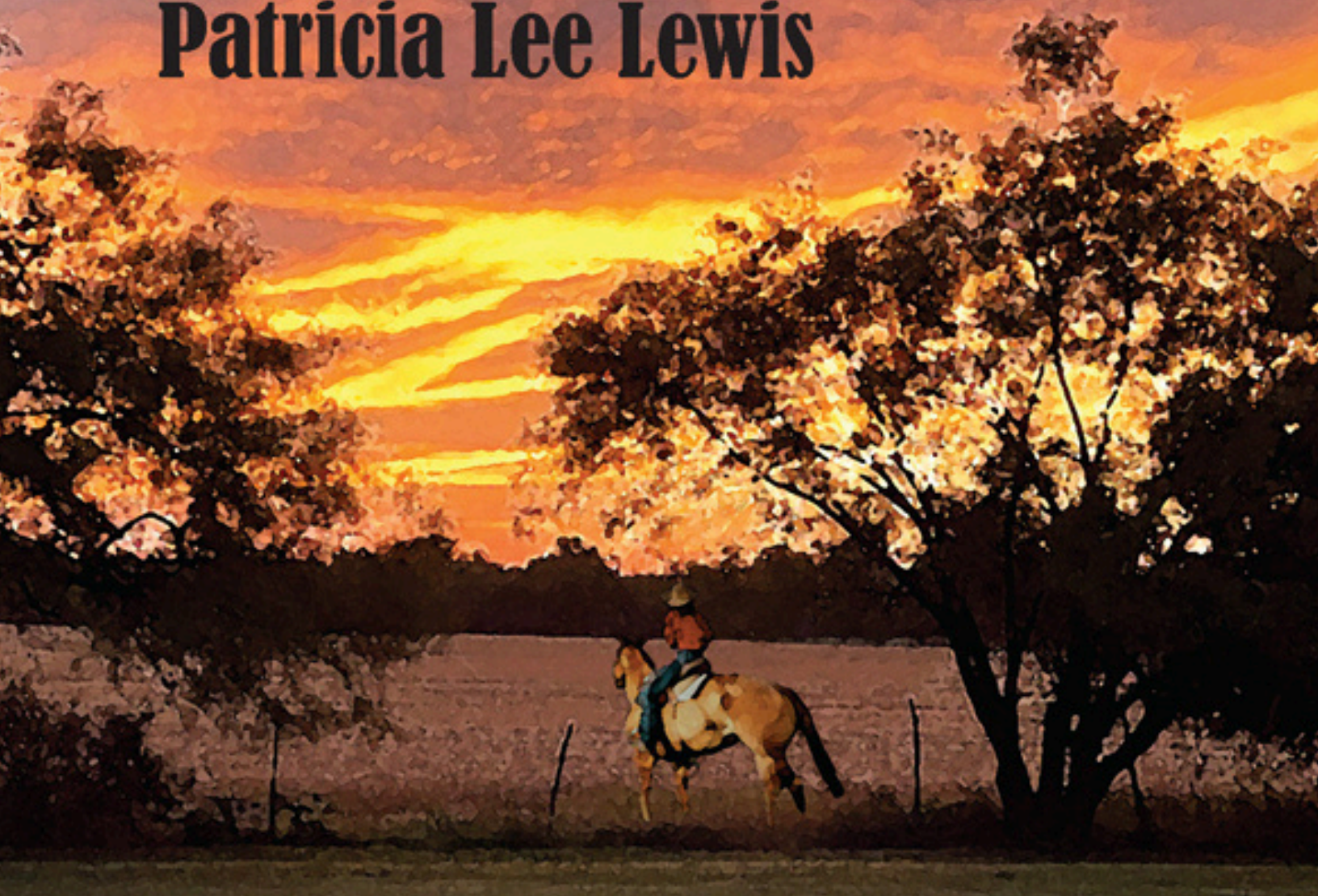


Thorns of the Mesquite

*She chose justice — a West Texas tale of
defiance, refuge, and unyielding hope*

Patricia Lee Lewis





THORNS OF THE MESQUITE

PRE-PUBLICATION EXCERPT

BY PATRICIA LEE LEWIS

Disclaimer

While *Thorns of the Mesquite* is set in a carefully researched part of West Texas of 1938, drawing on period newspapers, historical society reports, and firsthand accounts, this novel is a work of fiction. A wild west story told from a feminist point of view, it includes challenging topics and emotions concerning racial, sexual and domestic violence and may not be suitable for some readers. All characters, their names, dialogue, and the events and places depicted are entirely imaginary and are not intended to represent specific historical individuals or actual occurrences. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or to actual events, is purely coincidental.

Pre-publication Excerpt

© Patricia Lee Lewis

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Published by Levellers Press, Florence, Massachusetts

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-965664-23-0

Author's Note

I was born and raised in Austin, Texas, and though I moved to New England with my family many years ago, the spirit of the Lone Star State—as they say—has never left me. My early childhood was marked by visits to my grandparents' ranch in West Texas, and the powerful images from that landscape and life have infused my writing for decades.

It was while I was leading a writing retreat in Ireland that the seed for *Thorns of the Mesquite* was planted. An image of my great-aunt Dona, whom I'd met only briefly at age five (but I remember to this day how she called the chickens), appeared to me, walking a dirt road on that very ranch. I was compelled to follow. What resulted, years later, is a novel born of deep personal roots.

How to order

Visit Levellerspress.com or scan the code below.



This little excerpted book is to say thank you for your wonderful support of *Thorns of the Mesquite*, and me.

Please stay in touch at patricialeewis@gmail.com through www.writingretreats.org or by texting [413 320-1824](tel:4133201824)

Cheers! Patricia



Patricia Lee Lewis (aka Pat Sackrey) was born and raised in Austin, Texas. After she moved north with her family, she lived for forty-three years on a little mountain at Patchwork Farm Retreat in Westhampton, MA, where she led hundreds of creative writing workshops and retreats, and seventy writing & yoga retreats in ten countries.

Patricia has dedicated much of her life to advocating for women, civil rights, peace and democracy, a healthy environment, small farms, rural communities, and the arts. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA from Smith College (Phi Beta Kappa). She is the author of two acclaimed books of poems: *A Kind of Yellow*, which won first prize in poetry from Writers Digest International, and *High Lonesome*, published by Hedgerow Books.

Currently residing in Northampton, MA, Patricia serves on the advisory council of Straw Dog Writers Guild, where she was also the founding president. At age 88, *Thorns of the Mesquite* is her first novel, a work fifteen years in the making, and is a testament to her heritage and lifelong dedication to storytelling.

CHAPTER ONE

DONA ROSE WILLIS LOVED TO WALK, especially on the first day of April, when all the living things on the ranch sang out, exultant in the sun. She felt proud to have been born at the start of a new century, thirty-eight years before, and on this day, the air coming down from the Panhandle swirled around her like river water, cool and clear and running light. As she walked, her old cotton dress, the same color as the dried-up road, grew feather-light and soft. A dust-brown bird with buttons up its breast floated along the dusty road toward the high pastures.

The trembling came inside her neck, the wind of her body moving. It happened like that. A voice hummed, and it was not her voice. Alongside the road, live oak trees and cedar scrub echoed the gentle sun. Jackrabbits darted between clumps of cactus, searching for safety. Pods of the mesquite, dried at the end of last summer, rattled against each other like castanets. What else to do in such beauty but let the voice open.

I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses. And the voice I hear falling on my ear the Son of God discloses. And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known.

Why would this old hymn come to her in the lightness of an afternoon? Roses did not thrive on dry, hot ranch land. It was hard enough to raise winter wheat and maize. And she was pretty sure she didn't belong to Jesus. But still, there was joy to share. No denying it.

It was a rare day. Noontime's dinner was over, dishes put away, the wash hung to dry in the sun, and she had swept the kitchen and porches extra well. Nobody could fault her for stretching her legs a little.

Her husband, Roy, and brother, Luke, had gone to town to meet Roy's son, Joe Bob, at the feed store. The men never walked if they could help it.

They rode in trucks or on horses nearly everywhere. According to them, walking was for sissies and poor people—the Negroes and Mexicans. Well, she was merely a woman, which didn't count for much either, as far as she could tell. And she worried for the colored folks, some being her friends, hearing of the troubles that seemed to hang always over their heads.

She walked uphill, toward the only high ridge on the ranch, auburn curls escaping the shade of her straw hat, and her long legs reaching. The road carved through cactus and rabbit brush, and rose into the limestone flank of First Butte, tough and sharp under the heels of her boots. As a child she'd found fossils of sea creatures, pictures made by the fairies. That the plateau was once an ocean—that the dry, rough, sun-bleached home of her heart had been a watery land—well, that gave her hope. Everything changes. Including people.

She left the trail and made her way across limestone ledges toward a thicket of live oaks.

Lots of creatures sought shade from the sun on a ranch in West Texas. Some were not a person's friends, like scorpions and rattlesnakes; and some were, like centipedes and horny toads and jackrabbits. Horses and sheep and people and cattle sheltered under trees and inside tangles of cedar and oak and mesquite. It took a careful person to navigate the territory and not get in somebody's way. Like in the way of a bull's long horns, or a Tom turkey fleeing his ground, or a momma buzzard on the nest.

And Dona was careful. She grew up on her pony, helping her daddy and his brothers round up the calves for branding and the steers for market. She'd paid attention to how they found shade to eat their dinners and take a swig from their canteens. She'd flushed doves and tanagers from the cedar brakes and taken their place in the cool, tangy shadows. In the high pasture, where trees grew in patches, holding on to dry rocky ground by main force, the sun cast mirrors in her brain, and, as she took refuge under the live oaks, Dona said, thank you. Though she had no real notion whom she thanked, on an afternoon like this.

And she begged of the live oak trees, “How on earth, can a woman like me rise up?”

After she walked back to the ranch house and washed up at the trough, after she changed her walking boots for scuffs, put the pot on for coffee, stirred up the cook stove and started supper, she opened the letter lying on the kitchen table. The envelope smelled of saddle soap and leather mixed with stale tobacco. Her brother, Luke, had brought the mail in from the box by the main road from town. A sign that the clouds often darkening Luke’s spirits had lifted, for a spell.

In wavering handwriting, on paper as pale and pink as her soft cheeks, the letter from Dona’s Aunt Jeanette read, “*Dear Dona, On Annalou’s birthday you always sent presents. She is thirteen. I have done my best to care for her this past year. I am getting old. You have no children. She can be on the train from Dallas on April 15. Please, will you take her in?*”

Annalou Rose Willis was the only child of Dona’s younger brother, Lon, and his wife, Sugar, killed almost a year ago in a car crash. Dona had not seen her since the funeral. It frightened her to think about caring for a girl. So much could happen to her. So much had already happened. But, of course, she would say yes.

IF ONLY SHE HADN’T SAID YES TO ROY TEN YEARS AGO. The weather had been partly to blame. Rain in early spring on a ranch like hers in the almost-desert of West Texas brought riches greater than any diamonds. Scrawny weeds that hadn’t bloomed in fifty years were out there busting their britches, breaking loose with yellow and red and orange blossoms bigger than the plants. Anything would grow, with a little rain.

“Time to rejoice,” Reverend Andrew MacMurray had said to his congregation. “Time to give thanks for the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies.”

And they sang that familiar hymn. When they got to the end, where everybody, from moody Luke, to crotchety Mrs. Simpkins, sang a little louder than usual, *Lord of all, to Thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise,* why, Dona thought she might have to run out of the church and stand

under the live oak tree by the graveyard and cry for happiness. But instead, Roy Fergus Turn, sitting so handsome and straight beside her in the pew, reached over and squeezed her hand. She held her breath as something new and thrilling moved between them. In that moment almost ten years ago, she gave in to the life of a rancher's wife, instead of the life of a rancher.

After her mother and daddy had moved into San Angelo, the county seat ten miles away, and her sister, Daisy, had died of pneumonia, and nobody in her family had wanted to take over, this had been her ranch. At least, before she married. Now Roy had taken charge, Texas ways being what they were.

She had liked running the ranch herself. She was good with cattle and pigs and chickens, and she liked being with the sheep and goats. She looked forward to working with the men and women from Mexico, who would appear one day at her back door and disappear another, months later, as silently. And when Negro men and women would catch her eye on the street in town in front of the general store, she would ask if they would like to help her out with the haying or the plowing, and they would. Some, she got to know pretty well.

But even after her brother, Luke, had said, "I'll stay and help you, Dona, but I ain't gonna be in charge a nothin';" even when she could count on Luke's help, she had not been so good at selling the cattle off to the stock yards in Fort Worth, or the horses or pigs at auction, or making sure the crops of maize and oats brought the best price, or knowing how to fix the wagon shafts, or the tractor when things went wrong.

Since grade school, Roy had had a crush on her. She liked him because he was smart and polite and sweet. But in high school Dona wasn't interested in boys so much as in books and horses, and she'd gone on to college. So, after a few years, Roy married another girl. Their son, Joe Bob, was no more than five when Lucille, Roy's wife, up and died of pneumonia and for the next two years, little Joe Bob was raised mostly by Josie Mendez, the Mexican woman who took care of Roy's house, and sister to Juan Carlos, Roy's top ranch hand.

Roy had a head for business and handled machines and cattle better than most. He'd been raised on a ranch before his daddy died from drinking and gambling and who knows what, and little Roy and his momma went to work for other ranchers. Maybe they would be a good pair. Maybe they could make the ranch green again, like it had been when her daddy bought it, before the drought set in — when peaches ripened on trees irrigated by the river, when there was more grass than cactus, more pecan and oak trees than mesquite and cedar.

They were married in the First Presbyterian Church in June, 1928, with little seven-year-old Joe Bob; Dona's grandmother, Myrtle Rose Cunningham; her mother, Ophelia Cunningham Willis; her sisters, Myrtle Sue and Unity Ann; her brothers, Luke and Lon; her Uncle James, sheriff of Comanche County; her second cousin, Edward, the lawyer; and everybody else, on both sides, present. Ranch families from Mertzon, with their fierce blue eyes, cattle raisers and cotton growers from Lipan Flat, east of town, and their towheaded children; hardware store owners, farmers, doctors and seamstresses from San Angelo, Comanche and Brownwood, squeezed onto straight-backed wooden pews and fanned themselves with their hats or scripture-embossed fans, provided especially for the occasion.

In the back of the church, in the last pew, sat six people, the likes of whom had never been allowed to worship in that fine establishment — Josie Mendez and her brother, Juan Carlos Hernandez, members of the Santa Lucia Catholic Church; and Samuel and Maisie Washington and their two little boys, members of the African Methodist Church on the edge of town. All had been specially invited by the bride. And since this was a wedding and not a regular church service, why, nobody could say a thing against it, much as they might want to.

CHAPTER TWO

SUNDAY, APRIL 3RD, DAWNED HOT. To a restless congregation in the church where Dona married Roy ten years before, Reverend Andrew MacMurray preached about honesty. “It is an eye, Brothers and Sisters,” he said, using his holier-than-thou voice, “and it never has to close. I exhort you to make it your guide in life.”

Dona was itching to get back to the ranch for a long ride on Duke. Josie would have dinner ready and Juan Carlos would have finished the morning chores, so she’d be free. But when the Reverend preached about being honest, she sat still and closed her eyes.

Lord knows, she tried to tell the truth, but lots of times she wasn’t sure what it was. She didn’t really mean what she said, not entirely, like when she said she loved Roy. Well, she did, of course; he was her husband. But sometimes, when he’d been at the whiskey a bit too much and his temper flared; or when it had been a month since they made love; when every night he came back from the cattle so tired he could barely shovel in the supper she’d kept for him on back of the stove; when he stunk like a bull or worse and didn’t take a bath even on Saturdays; when he yelled at her because the bacon wasn’t crisp or the coffee wasn’t strong; or the sow’s eyes were oozing and Dona should have noticed when she slopped her and the piglets; or when he seemed not to see her at all, but only what she did for him and the ranch, and then that wasn’t good enough, either — well, whatever love was supposed to feel like, she didn’t feel that.

Really, she didn’t have any stronger feelings for him than she did for her brother, Luke, with his unpredictable ways. Or for her brother, Lon, bless his departed soul. Or for Melvar Sinclair, her childhood friend. Why, she’d lots rather spend a morning with Josie Mendez, hanging heavy work

britches on the clothesline, than ride to town with Roy in his truck with nobody saying a word the whole way — in case it should cause him to find fault. Why on earth did he get mad at her so much?

Sure, she wandered off from time to time, riding Duke up the high pasture to the Shepherd's Hut, where she could look out over the ranch all the way to Jesus. And what on earth did she mean by that? Jesus. Well, she wished she had known him. The one who had saved the prostitute from getting stoned to death. She didn't like what her church had done to him. Like making him the only savior of the world, and if you didn't sit in that hard pew and listen to Reverend MacMurray turn his face scarlet over "all you sinners who thought there might be another way to believe..." Oh, how on earth had she gotten herself off on that subject again?

Her conscience, that's what hurt, and Dona felt it, right between her ribs. A snake that lived coiled up in her stomach, asleep most of the time; but disturbed, like now, it flicked its tongue and muscled its way up her chest, through her throat and stared from her eyes. It didn't like what it saw, and sometimes it would strike when she was the one at fault. That's when she turned on other people, with venom. And why? Because she was afraid. Afraid to look at how awful she really was, a liar and a false witness. So, she lashed out at the nearest person, usually somebody weaker.

And even though she loved him, and raised him like her own, her temper made young Joe Bob wary of her, and maybe it was even why her own brother avoided her when she was upset. Maybe that's what happened to Roy, too. Maybe he felt bad about himself. She could see how a guilty conscience could have fangs, how it could strike back, and sometimes she imagined how its bite could be fatal.

Dona opened her eyes and her stomach tightened. She was in church. Reverend MacMurray had ended his sermon and the deacons were walking down the aisles with collection plates in their hands. Time to pay up.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY CAME GLADLY FROM THE barn the next morning, the hens, queens and princesses, the old king, Buster. They waddled and scurried, they pecked and squawked; younger ones held back a little, so not to be overrun by their betters.

Dona loved that moment best, to stand in the dust of the barnyard, to hold her apron, heavy with feed, by its two corners. To call, “here chick, here chick, here chick chick chick.” To dip and fling, to dip and fling, the circle reaching wider and wider, hens’ frantic scratching growing steady with the plenty; and Buster, tail feathers high, chest gleaming emerald, copper, bronze, strutting the perimeter of his subjects, too proud to grovel with the rest.

On mornings when the last star rose over the ranch at dawn, Dona came there. In that sanctuary, those were her holy ones. From beneath the live oak tree, their beauty rose divine.

She sighed and whistled for her horse. In one week, the girl, Annalou, would come. And would the mornings ever be the same as this bright one?

A long way off gleamed the white faces of Hereford cattle. Dona clucked to Duke and they slipped and slid down rock ledges toward the cedar brake at the edge of the river pasture. The breeze blew cooler there, and what with the kingfisher diving from willow limbs, pairs of mallards passing through, and the stately green heron, it was probably lots more interesting for the cows, too. They could mosey over to the river to drink, and how many times had she seen their cloven hoof prints in the mud, and cow pies on the shore.

Dona admired cows, their eyes like deep pools, the way they chewed side to side, as though they had all the time in the world for eating. And

they were nearing their death. Not the heifers, not yet; but the mommas, after a few years of bearing their calves, with other cows as witnesses, they wouldn't be far from being shipped to Fort Worth to the slaughterhouse. Like Dona's brother, Lon, and his wife, the beautiful Sugar, no one was ever far from the slaughterhouse.

"Let's take a walk through here, old boy; take a look at those mommas and babies."

Dona counted on Duke's understanding. How he seemed to know her mood, her will, her opinions; and he was not like his name. Not haughty, not too serious. She stroked his withers. "Why, Duke," she said, "you are plumb wonderful."

Ahead at the edge of the cedar trees, early Indian paintbrush blossoms had found enough soil on that dry, rocky ranchland, to make a carpet woven like a Chinese tapestry; like something she would stare at in her *National Geographic* magazines.

"Look here, Duke. I haven't told you yet, but my niece Annalou is coming to live with us next week. Let's come back to this place with her. There's so much we can do with a child at this ranch, besides work. Like what we used to do with Joe Bob, when he was little. Why, we can lie down and take a nap. We can squint and see a school of salmon flashing between the sun and those clouds. We can pretend we see elephants and ostriches. We can say we don't have any worries in the world."

Duke snorted and Dona laughed. "Too silly for you, old boy? Okay, let's see what's happening out here on the real ranch, where we will not see elephants, but maybe we'll come upon an armadillo with ruby eyes."

They trotted along the sheep fence between the river pasture and the McGregor ranch, and Dona, watching the graceful flight of a scissor-tailed flycatcher, felt light as a girl. But when she turned toward the earth, there hung a fawn with its front leg twisted between strands of barbed wire, its eyes infested with maggots.

"Oh, Duke. We are not to feel too much joy, are we?" She dismounted and knelt by the fawn and released its legs. "This poor little baby, follow-

ing its mother, trying to jump the terrible fence.” Dona’s grief for the fawn and for her brother’s child rose from the well which has no bottom. “How can young Annalou bear it?”

“Duke, the buzzards are already gathering and they have to live, too. But we can do something. See these figures in the rocks? These are the bodies of creatures who lived in the sea that covered this whole ranch and all the ranches between the hills. They died, like this little fawn, and this land is their graveyard. It will never end, this dying.”

She circled the tiny, speckled body with limestone rocks to tell its place, for later there would be no sign it had ever lived.

CHAPTER FOUR

TWO DAYS LATER, THE JINGLE of the peddler's cart filled the barnyard. Dona dried her hands, flung the dish towel on its hook over the drain board and fairly ran to the back porch.

Sure enough, hailing the house from his wagon, with Molly his mule leading the way as she had when they headed off last November, Melvar Sinclair, the peddler all the ranch women waited for — perhaps because of his wagon-load of fabrics and household goods, perhaps because of his exotic good looks — was making his first springtime round of the ranches.

“Melvar,” she called as she pushed open the screen door. “I’ll be right out.”

Dona pulled on her barnyard boots and skittered down the steps. She stroked Molly's long ears and found the place under her chin where she loved to be scratched.

Melvar climbed slowly from the wagon's seat. How like a mountain lion he seemed, graceful in his power.

She swallowed and remembered herself. “Molly will want a drink, I reckon. I drew fresh water this morning from the windmill tank into the trough.”

Molly thrust her muzzle into the mossy water and drank like she'd been thirsty for days, which she probably had. Melvar sat on his haunches under the old mesquite tree, leaning into its shade.

“I have coffee from breakfast. May I bring you a cup?”

“Yes, ma'am, that would be fine.”

She ran back to the kitchen and before she grabbed one of the big speckled cups, she wrapped her arms about herself and hugged from side to side. “A new dress,” she said to Josie, who added kindling to the cook stove, “I am going to make a new dress.”

As she pulled tops off the biscuits, slathered some of her fresh butter over the bottoms and spooned a pile of peach jam onto a tin plate, she sang a song she'd learned during the war. "*How ya gonna keep'em down on the farm, after they've seen Patee? la la la la....*"

Josie grinned and Dona chuckled. "Maybe I'm the gal on the farm, and the cotton calico I'm hoping Melvar has in his wagon is Paris." She whistled the tune again. "Well, a new dress would be good enough to dream in, surely."

Melvar stood as Dona came around the house. His life must not have been easy, brought to West Texas from Persia as a boy of thirteen by a missionary, Reverend Arthur Sinclair, nearly thirty years ago. She saw how he shone, with his deep brown hair and eyes, and skin the color of pecans. Sinclair had said that the young boy was an orphan begging his living on the streets of Tehran when he spotted him. And that he had something God-given about him, as though a light fell on him from above, as he sat cross-legged before a table of wooden wares.

But most people in the congregation had shunned the child whom they called simply "Sinclair's boy." He looked like a Mexican to them; the kind of boy who would have lice and ribs that showed through. He arrived with a language they couldn't understand any more than most people in her church could understand Spanish. And of course, everyone knew you couldn't trust a Mexican.

"After you've had your coffee, maybe you'd show me whatever yardage of calico you brought."

"I think I have something you will like very much. It will make a beautiful dress. Let us look at what I can offer from my wagon."

"Thank you, Melvar. I've long admired the formal way you speak your perfect English. You're a blessing. It's your calico to be sure, but it's also your kindness. I mean, you take time to have coffee and visit. Would you please tell me something I've wondered about?"

"I will try."

“When the Reverend Sinclair asked you to leave your country and come to Texas with him, why’d you say yes?”

“Oh, my, that is not a hard question. He did not ask my permission.”

“What?”

“No, he did not. He asked if I would like to go and see my mother. You see, I was not an orphan, but my family, though loving, had been made poor by war and lived in another part of Persia. When I was ten, and strong for my age, my grandfather brought me to Tehran, our big and magical city, to learn a trade. To help my family, back in the country. It was many years before I saw my family again.”

“But Reverend Sinclair said you were begging on the streets when he found you.”

“I was not. I sold small tables on the street, things I had made as I learned my trade. I was by then thirteen years old and had taken with joy to woodworking and the lessons of my teacher.”

“But why on earth would Reverend Sinclair lie?”

“I think to make a sympathetic story. He wanted me to return to the United States for reasons of his own.”

“Oh, Melvar. I’m so sorry. And your family? Did they find out what happened to you?”

“I returned to Persia after Reverend Sinclair died. I found my family, but that is perhaps a story for another time.”

“I’m sorry to pry, but I’ve known so little about you all these years. You were away for a long time.” Dona observed her hands folded in her lap and said, “Is Melvar your real name?”

He took in a breath. “My name is long. My family called me Melvar, the name you know.”

“It’s a beautiful name and the fullness of it is perfect. And now, how about we find the perfect calico for my dress?”

“The bolt of fabric I have in mind is wrapped in a quilt from my mother’s hand, and it is waiting for you on the seat of my wagon.”

Dona lifted each edge of the quilt and thrust her fingers into the folds of calico. "It's soft and light as air, and the colors splash like flowers. I feel like dancing."

Accepting the money Dona offered, and from the seat of his cart, Melvar smiled and reached to shake her hand. "Dona, I have missed coming here, and I am in your debt."

She kept her hand in his for a moment before pulling it away.

"I miss seeing you, too, and I'm so happy you're making your rounds again. Also, I forgot to tell you that my niece is coming to live with us on the ranch. She is thirteen, and perhaps she'll also need a dress."

"That is good news for you, Dona. Of course, I will have something for her to look at."

"I wonder. Do you still make things of wood?"

"When I find a pine log, or stump of pecan, over time perhaps a bowl or a simple chair will come from my hands. I keep my saw and chisel sharpened. It is work I love very much. Especially if it is for a friend I care about, such as you."

"The next time you come, would you bring something you made?"

"I will be honored. And I will bring sufficient gingham to make an apron for your dress. For special occasions, and graceful enough, I think, for dancing; even in the kitchen."

AFTER SUPPER, a few days after she'd bought the gingham off of Melvar's cart, Dona stood in front of the old place they called the shacks, near the river. Through cracked panes, she peered into the dank front room where she had danced once with her Uncle Baugh; Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys cranking out the music from her grandmother's wind-up Victrola. It had been years since she had danced, so why did she want to twirl a skirt and pound her feet?

Maybe because of Melvar? He had jingled up to the ranch house again this morning, and true to his promise, he had brought something he had made of wood. Before his rounds to all the other ranches, all those miles of dust and cactus, he had returned to her.

“That beautiful, golden violin. You made that?” she had said. “And, you play it, too?”

“I do.” Putting it under his chin, he drew a bow across the strings. The tune was unfamiliar to her, but it lilted like a lily, unfurling toward the clouds.

“Is that lovely tune from your country?”

“It is, and I am glad you like it. Here is one I believe you know.” He tapped his boot on the wagon’s floor in time to ‘Turkey in the Straw.’

As the last notes faded, she said, “Great heavens. Is there no end to your talents?”

“That is the end,” he laughed. “And now I must make my rounds.”

A gust of wind rattled the dried mesquite pods above their heads as if to close the conversation. They smiled at the flourish and Melvar moved Dona’s hand from its hold on Molly’s bridle into his own. Opening her hand and tracing the lines of her palm with his finger, he said, “You have a very long lifeline, my friend. I hope for you great happiness.”

He bowed again, climbed aboard and clucked for Molly to begin their journey.

Dona waved until they were out of sight, and with a sigh, ran the tip of her tongue across her palm.

MELVAR SETTLED DOWN under the mesquite tree by the ranch house early the next morning. His wooden wagon and Molly the mule rested in the shade of the barn, and Dona had her hands in the wash tub.

“Leave the familiar for a while,” he said, “and come walk with me.”

“The familiar would be a good thing to leave.” She stood and rubbed the small of her back. “But, Melvar, I have to get my chores done. Josie’s been called to Mexico for a little while, to take care of her mother. Who else’ll finish this laundry? Who else’ll make dinner for the men? Who else will get everything ready for Annalou. She arrives in two days.”

“I can help with the laundry,” Melvar said.

“You?”

“Yes, why not? My bolts of material become dusty. I’ve done much laundry in my life.”

Dona felt his eyes the way she felt a barn cat’s, that he knew everything. She turned back to scrubbing a shirt collar.

“Your tiredness, is that from pain in the body?”

“No, and I believe you know it isn’t. No, it’s in my heart, or something close to my heart. Maybe in my belly.”

“You have not had children?”

“No.”

“And is that a sadness for you?”

“It’s part of it, I suppose.”

“And the rest?”

“I don’t know for sure. And I don’t want to talk about it right now. There are so many shirts and I haven’t begun on the britches.”

“Would it be permissible to help you?”

“You want to help with the wash?”

“Yes, of course. I am strong.”

Melvar had been sitting on his haunches, his accustomed position. When Dona asked about it during one of their talks, he said he must have sat like that as a child in Persia, that he couldn’t remember many things about his earliest childhood there, but that squatting felt natural and easy. He had laughed then and said that it made a good change from riding on the wooden seat of his wagon over roads of dirt and stones.

But now he stood, and walking to Dona’s side, he rolled up the sleeves of his blue cotton shirt. The insides of his arms, dusky and smooth, so different from her milky ones. His were luscious.

“I am quite serious, Dona. Please let me help. Perhaps you might hang the ones you have finished on the line while I take care of these things?”

“But what if the men return from town to find you doing their wash? What’ll they think?”

“What will they think of me? Or of you.”

Dona turned her back to him and picking up the basket of wet clothes, she walked to the clothesline without answering. Why, she wondered, did she worry so? It wasn't worry. The clenching in her stomach. The sour taste in her mouth. That was not worry. That was fear.

She did not want to lose Melvar. She did not want Roy to see her with him, doing the wash. He would know; surely, he would know that this was no ordinary friendship. But was it ordinary? A traveling merchant and a ranch wife doing the wash together — no, that was not ordinary and Roy, anyone, would see that.

She shook out one of Roy's work shirts and fixed its hem to the line with wooden pegs. Upside down. Upside down every one of those fifteen shirts. Everything, upside down.

Luke had whittled the pegs. Every mid-winter night for years it seemed that Luke had whittled something useful for her. The clothes pegs, the curved soup ladle, the handle on her mop, a pecan-wood coffee cup which she kept on a special shelf. Said it helped him get through those long nights. What would Luke think of his little sister, that when she heard the jingle of bells on Melvar's cart and the steady clop of Molly's hooves, her whole body felt like skipping. That she wanted to run through barnyard dust, laughing like a child?

She was a grown woman, a married woman respected in her county and by her own family. She could not think of what would happen if they found out.

These past few days, she would smooth her apron over her everyday dress or dust off her riding britches and keep on with whatever she was doing until Melvar called out, "Is anybody home?" And she would say, "Over here," if she was doing the wash below the windmill; or "I'm in here," if she was frying chicken and couldn't leave the stove; or "Around back," if she was working in the garden. And he would always find her there.

That garden. Was it the one in the hymn that had trembled from her throat on the dusty walk to Shepherd's Hut only two weeks back? And

Melvar. He was the one who walked with her and talked with her, like no one had ever done. Could it be that she was also his own?

He finished the wash and moved to the basket. "I will hang these on the line, if you give permission."

Dona laughed. "All right. I give permission."

Fifteen shirts, nine pairs of blue jeans, fifteen pairs of socks and a dozen undershirts hung on the line in neat rows when she and Melvar walked across the caliche road and into the shining green of the hay field. The sun sat low in the morning sky. They would have an hour.

They made their way to the far edge of the field and sat on a flat rock, wide enough for two slender people. The hay topped off at the height of their eyes, and the world was pierced through with emerald shafts. They were careful with each other. But something had arisen shining and unsayable between them.

"Dona, if it is not too personal, I would like to know, what are your favorite things?"

Dona grinned. "Too personal? Well, let's see. I love to watch green turtles piled on a log in the green water of the river. That's one. And then, the way a scissor-tailed fly catcher soars like an angel, its tail feathers shining in the sun. And you know the fossils from the ancient lake that used to be here, the limestone rocks filled with sea creatures — I love those. Now, you tell me."

He cocked his head at her and smiled under the shadow of his big hat. "I will say my favorite things, but what I love best I cannot speak about at this time. In nature, it is to watch the sun moving down the sky behind the big oak trees. They are black and the sky is red and purple and gold. So much like what I remember from my childhood."

"Do you miss them terribly?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Your mother and your father, and the rest."

"It is strange, but I no longer miss them."

"It must've been so hard when Reverend Sinclair took you away."

“It was an abomination of feeling, but I have learned to feed myself with those feelings. My memories are bitter and they are sweet and they are food for my life.”

“I think you have a very large heart.”

“I do not know how large it is, but it connects me with Persia and West Texas and you and my family equally. It’s long since I tasted the bitter. Meeting you when we were children, Dona, that began to restore the sweet.”

“Truly?”

“Your kindness was from the beginning. Reverend Sinclair took me to attend the church and you were there in the choir for children. Perhaps you were nine years old. And after church I stood behind Reverend Sinclair and you came up to me and said, hello.”

“I remember.”

“You asked my name and when I whispered, Melvar, and Reverend Sinclair told me not to speak, you did not laugh. You said, ‘I am glad to meet you, Melvar.’”

“And you said, my English no good,” Dona smiled.

“I wanted to sit down then, under the big elm tree, and ask you to teach me.”

“And why didn’t you?”

“Because Reverend Sinclair did not wish me to talk with a pretty little girl. He was very strict and it was not strange for me to feel the sharp buckle of his belt.”

“It’s terrible for any child to be beaten. But you grew silent and strong, like a tree, and kept to yourself.”

“It is important to eat from the past and to grow from it. That is the way of my people. Our culture is perhaps the oldest in the world, and without the past we would know very little.”

“So, then, may I ask you a question about your family? It’s a hard one.”

“Yes, of course, anything you wish.”

“Did your uncle sell you to Reverend Sinclair?”

Melvar looked down. His hands rested over his knees and he turned the palms to face the sky. "Sinclair did not buy me."

"He stole you?"

"Yes, apparently he did so."

"How do you know?"

"I may have mentioned before that when I became grown, and after Reverend Sinclair died, I travelled back to Persia and members of my family. It was difficult to find them because of the war, but they did not give me up at all. In fact, they mourned me for a long time. My mother declined and it is said that she died of a heart sickened by my loss."

Dona saw how some people, no matter how hard the life becomes, rise like butterflies from death. Clouds covered his birth in a village in Persia, but he remembered well his mother and his father.

"They found tutors for me and a nurse for Bitu, my baby sister," Melvar said. "I applied myself to my studies like a fledgling preparing to leave the nest. There came a war. Our family lost our home and land to new leaders, and we ran into hiding. We were by then very poor and as I have said, at ten, I was sent into the great city of Tehran to learn woodworking from an uncle, who was kind. The roots of that work became for me a life."

"So that is how you learned to make beautiful things, and you still do."

"Reverend Sinclair was a Baptist missionary. He seemed to like me and my wooden things, and was friendly. But one day, he turned into a creature unrecognizable to me. And though I was strong for my age, he was stronger and succeeded in abducting me from Tehran, tied and gagged. I was many days kept in the hold of a ship, headed for Galveston, Texas."

"Great heavens. Because you were a beautiful boy?"

"Apparently, yes. He adopted me, and his church praised him for saving a wretched child. But, in the hold of that dark ship, he took me to be his slave, in body. Which, out of fear, I became. But never his slave in mind or spirit. Attending church, yes, a wretched child, a slave with my master. But it is how I first saw you. And, Dona, at that moment, a freshet of clear water broke the dam in my heart."

Tears made their way down the cheeks of this man, whose spirit filled her own.

“After that, little by little, I picked up the peddler’s trade, not a threat to anyone, and learned to listen. When I turned eighteen, the Reverend died of unknown causes. I took what I needed of his belongings and what he had bequeathed me, and left the town. I made my way back to Persia. When I returned many years later, bringing with me my little sister, I had become this, a man of the shadows, who knows how to turn what he learns to his advantage.”

Dona reached across the rock where they sat and put her hand in his.

WHEN MELVAR LEFT IN HIS WAGON and Duke and Paint had whinnied their last goodbyes to Molly from the corral, Dona had barely time to get dinner ready before the men returned from the fields. Thank heavens she had already fried the chicken in the cool of early morning; the potatoes were done and ready to be mashed; and she had two jars of her own green beans to open and stir up fast with some bacon in an iron skillet. Biscuits of course took no time at all and as soon as the oven burned good and hot, she put them in to bake and turned to making cream gravy.

It was hard not to think of Melvar, his lean, noble face, his fingers spread long on his knees, eyes green and gold and dark as the river, as gentle as Molly’s. So, he had thought of her all these years, noticed her growing up, known of her marriage, and perhaps of her struggle to keep this ranch from belonging only to her husband.

“Just think about dinner,” she said aloud. “Get that gravy made and set the table. Tell Josie how much you missed her, whenever she gets back.”

She had fixed five glasses of tea when the rattle and grind of Roy’s truck reached the barnyard. In three minutes, he and Juan Carlos and Luke and Joe Bob would be washing up at the windmill pump and in two more minutes they would be in the kitchen, blowing and hawking and stomping their big boots and saying all the things they always said about being mighty hungry, about how good it smelled, and could they have a mite more sugar in their tea. And never once would any of them say, “How are

you, Dona? What kind of morning did you have?" And they would never thank her for all her work to keep them clean and fed.

She thought of Melvar, and how he used his hurt feelings to grow strong, and she said, "Have a seat, boys, lots of good food today. And I want to thank you for working so hard on the ranch this morning. And every morning. Thank you for taking such good care."

Roy said, "Is something the matter?"

"Why no." She handed him the bowl of gravy. "I'm just glad to see y'all."

The men seemed to be eating faster than usual, their eyes cast down, hats on the backs of their chairs. Dona liked the feeling that came with saying the good things.

"And remember, boys, little Annalou arrives tomorrow, so let's all be nice."

CHAPTER FIVE

AT THE FIRST SIGN OF DUST RISING out by the cattle guard at the main ranch gate, Luke, Joe Bob and Dona gathered in the mesquite tree's shade by the barn. Their grins made shy by curiosity, they waited for Roy's truck and a sight of Annalou.

Dona hoped a girl of thirteen would not notice that her best yellow housedress had thinned with wear. Perhaps she wouldn't think it too doughty, covered with a kitchen apron, its tiny brown and white checks. And what shoes to wear for this first moment in over a year between the orphaned child and her childless aunt? Even for the barnyard, she had chosen her better leather pumps, almost good enough for church. Dressed and waiting, she was as nervous as a hummingbird. How could she ever talk with Annalou about her dead parents? Even harder, how could she raise a girl? What if Annalou had turned angry, a child who would never like her aunt?

But when at last she saw the girl who emerged from the old truck, pale and tall and frowning faintly, she gathered her in her arms as though she had been waiting for this moment for years. Which, in a way, she had.

Annalou rested her head on Dona's shoulder and said, "Oh, Aunt Doney, Aunt Doney," before she stumbled to her Uncle Luke, who looked pleased to get a hug.

"Howdy, Joe Bob," she said, looking up at him and putting out her hand, "you sure did grow."

Joe Bob's face reddened. "Yep, guess I did, and I'm mighty glad you're here, Annalou. Awful sorry about your momma and daddy."

Annalou nodded and folded her arms around her chest. She shuffled to the edge of the barnyard and bowed low. It looked as if she might throw up, but instead she called out.

“Aunt Doney, all of y’all, come look. This beautiful flower.”

They came closer, and saw the way her long braid reached for the ground, how in the late sun her hair shone like new corn. Annalou knelt and stroked the tiny flower.

“Why Annalou,” Dona said, “I believe you’ve found the finest buttercup of the spring. Look, the yellow comes off on your fingers. They say if you put it to your nose and it leaves a yellow spot, you will soon find the one you love.”

“I’m a little young for that,” said Annalou, her mouth curling to a grin. “But will there be more?”

“Oh my, child, every year this whole ranch is yellow, and this year, with the rain we just had, it will be like a painting; we’ll show you where to look. Didn’t you have these in Mertzon?”

“Well, maybe we did. But you know, I wasn’t on a ranch, or outside so much.”

“These little flowers do best on poor soil, Annalou, and most of the soil around this ranch is pretty poor. Lots of wildflowers, all colors, thrive here.”

“I believe I am going to like poor soil,” said Annalou, glancing up, her eyes squinted. “Might I pick just this one for my pocket?”

ANNALOU SLAMMED THE SCREEN DOOR and scurried down stone steps to the door yard. She’d been at the ranch for two weeks, and on this morning, she’d waked up to the sound of Aunt Doney banging away on the washboard over by the windmill. She stood close to the water trough for a moment, without speaking.

Across the edge of the river pasture, a bird she had never seen before swooped for its breakfast, catching the sun like the blade of a sword. And in the brake of mesquite at the river’s edge, Tom turkeys chortled and called, perhaps to her. Annalou took a breath deep into her belly.

All this time since her parents were killed something dark and heavy had sat in her chest. It woke her up in the middle of the night; it slowed her down when she ran late for school; it tied up her throat when she tried to

eat. Aunt Doney and Uncle Roy had done their best to make her welcome, and though the school year was almost over when she arrived, the other students and the teachers had been nice to her. She tried, she really did, to smile and be friendly and polite and grateful. It made her nearly sick to her stomach.

But this morning, after yesterday's brief rain, the air had cleared and Aunt Doney worked in sunshine. She hummed as she slung the heavy work clothes from tub to tub.

Today, with hens running around her feet, like she belonged there, and with the windmill creaking in the small breeze, yes, perhaps she was happy. But could she be good enough so they'd let her stay? What if she was too much trouble to have around, who would take her in? I'm like the piglet we kept under the wood stove last week, she thought, the one the other piglets shoved out of the litter. That little fellow had nothing going for him but us, and what if we decided one morning that he was too much trouble. What if when he squealed and kept us awake at night, we had put a pillow over his head or thrown him outside for the coyotes to find? It was a good thing he was cute and grew fast, or Uncle Roy might have done just that.

"Aunt Doney," she said, "can I give you a hand?"

"Sure, honey. Really glad you're here. Wanna learn how to hang khaki pants on the line?"

A WEEK INTO MAY, winds out of the north blowing across the maize stubble turned the kitchen cold. Luke hadn't been around to buck up mesquite for firewood, so Dona was being stingy with the fire. Come to think of it, where'd he been?

"Aunt Doney, "Annalou asked, breaking Dona's thoughts, "does it ever snow around here?"

"You bet, honey, in winter. This is a late storm. In the old days, it would rain real hard and fill up the wells and rivers. Of course, we had a goodly amount of rain last month. But usually, the big clouds come and we hope for rain; and we're disappointed most of the time.

“Your great-grandmother, Myrtle Rose Cunningham — your Nanna — when she was your age, so the story goes, saw a blue norther dump five feet of snow on her family ranch, over toward Comanche. The people who’d lived there all their lives, why, they couldn’t believe it.”

Annalou and Dona finished picking stones out of the dried pinto beans spread on the kitchen table. Dona rinsed them in the sink with water from the windmill tank and put them in the deep soup pot. She threw in a piece of salt pork and a little chili pepper, slid the pot onto the back burner and stirred. The beans would cook for a while and soak until morning.

Annalou washed the table clean and sat down. “So, what happened when the blue norther hit?”

“Lots of people died,” Dona wiped her hands on her apron. “Horses and cattle. Sheep did better than most, what with their wool coats, and they’ll eat almost anything; but it took a long time for the sun to get hot enough to melt that much snow. Then, wagons got stuck up to their axles in mud. Crops spoiled in the fields. And the sickness came. The epizootie, they called it then. The Great Influenza. Children and old folks dropping in their tracks. Nobody knew how to cure it. Still don’t, really.”

“Your momma, she was all right?”

“She was. She’s always been strong, but she lost her littlest sister and brother and she says she liked to never got over it. I believe her.”

“I’ve never seen much snow, Aunt Doney, just little dustings, but I dream about it some. I’m under the snow and I know it’s blistering cold, but I never feel it.”

“Well, that is peculiar. What’s it mean, do you reckon?”

“I think it’s about losing my mother and daddy in that accident. When the sheriff came and told me, the cold came into my body and I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t feel sad. That is an awful thing to admit, isn’t it.”

“Not awful, honey. You had all the stuffing knocked out of you for a long time.”

Annalou crossed her arms around her chest and sighed. "I miss my mamma's apron. I miss my daddy's blue eyes. But I don't miss the yelling. Or the drinking. Or mamma crying in the middle of the night."

They sat in the quiet for a moment.

Dona said, "Did you ever try writing things down? I mean, your dreams and all that?"

"I did try, once. I had the little diary you sent me for my eleventh birthday, remember? And I wrote about being lonely. And how I was sometimes afraid of my daddy when he'd been out on a tear and even of my mamma. One day while I was at school, Mother found my diary." Annalou shut her eyes. "And she read it, every word, and she got really mad and she grabbed me by the arm." Annalou bowed her chin almost to her chest. "She made me watch her throw it in the cook stove and she poked it 'til it burned right up."

The mockingbird sang down at them through the stove chimney as though there were no cares in the world.

Dona cleared her throat. "How about if I get you another diary, honey? Tomorrow, when I go to the general store."

Annalou looked toward the chimney. Her voice trembled. "Do you think they might have a red one?"

IN TWO DAYS, Annalou was off at school. Bells on the cart and the clop of Molly's hooves in the barnyard dust announced that Melvar had arrived, and before she could quite dry her hands on the dish towel and smooth her apron down over her skirt, Dona was out the door and at the wagon. An animal heat, like nothing she had known, rose to her face, her neck, her hair. She stared at Melvar, astonished, and could not speak.

"Hello, Dona," he said. He pulled his hat off his head and placed it over his heart. "I have found the gingham for a fine apron to go over your beautiful new dress."

"The new dress. Oh yes, the beautiful new dress. I haven't made it quite yet, but I'm glad to see you."

"And you would still want the gingham for the apron?"

“Oh, yes, and I would like...I’m not myself right now. Forgive me. Welcome, Melvar, it’s good of you to come by.”

He climbed down from the wagon on the side opposite Dona to lead Molly and the cart to the water trough. He stood where he had stood to take Dona’s hand in his and remark on her long life line. It was a spot she had visited every day since, to remember his gentleness.

“I’ll fetch a cup for water. Or would you like coffee? And how about some sweet potato pie?”

As she poured the coffee into the same two cups they had used before, the cups she had set aside so no one else would find them, she thought, *Dona, you are acting like a silly girl, which you are not. Calm down. This is your friend. Surely, he cares only for selling the cloth.* But still her hand shook as she poured the cream and stirred in the sugar.

He stood by the big mesquite, his back to the porch. “Dona,” he said, as she came up behind him.

“Melvar.” It was a moment only. She leaned down and balanced the tray on the edge of the watering trough. “I forgot my purse,” and she turned to go.

She could hear him move toward her, his boots cracking last year’s dried pods of mesquite, each slow step like sparks snapping.

She paused, her arms rising into air of their own will; rising to hold something she could not see but only pull into her chest, something so precious it would take a lifetime to love it enough.

“The sun feels good this morning, bright as it is,” Dona’s voice wavered.

“Sometimes,” Melvar said, “I close my eyes so I can see better.”

“You mean, see into your memories? Or do you magically know when nobody is at the ranch house but me? Like now?”

They turned to sit on the back steps of the ranch house, in mid-morning sun.

“Now, looking at you, your hair, brown and gold and red and shining, I am distracted from this moment.”

Dona shoved her Stetson hat over her curls. "This better?"

Melvar laughed. "That's not quite what I meant, but maybe. In Persia, my family was accustomed to sitting quietly with our eyelids almost closed, and attending to the world inside ourselves. It is a habit I have kept."

Dona wrapped her arms around her knees and sighed, drawing the skirt of her housedress tight around her ankles. "That kind of stillness. I often yearn for it. We are moving around that sun as fast as can be and most of the time I am struck dumb by all there is to do." Dona bowed her head toward Melvar. "But you," she pushed her hat away from her forehead and gazed into the amber-green of his eyes, "you're always, well, here."

Melvar grinned, the lines in his cheeks like rivers through a golden desert. "Being here? It is the only way I can live. Being alive by being wherever I am, right now. Do you know what I mean?"

Dona nodded and stretched herself to standing. "I want to be like you. A peddler with a mule and a cart who sees everything."

"And I want to be more like you," he said, rising next to her. "You have much to love. I would like to be a rancher who cares about sharp-needed trees and the horns of bulls and loves her niece — and befriends a poor peddler."

"You must go, Melvar. It is important that no one mistake our friendship."

"The costume I wear, that of a peddler, with nothing but trinkets on his mind, is to you no disguise. You have seen me from our first meeting, without fear of my dark skin, or my words, odd and halting as they are."

He turned to Molly and rubbed her ears. With his voice almost a whisper, he said, "Only when I am with you, and when I am alone with Molly, do I not play a part."

He frowned and reached for Dona's arm. "You will not run away if I tell you of another part?"

"Something I won't like?"

“It is possible. I am close to a lawyer in town, your cousin, Edward Cunningham, and to the judge, Angus Cameron. Powerful men.”

“How do you mean, close?”

“I know things about them that would bring them down.”

“Why’re you telling me at all?” Dona’s voice, as she whispered, was sharp.

“Trouble is coming in our county. A rising up, again, of hatred by white men, especially toward the Negroes. Perhaps what I know will be of help to others you care for.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“There is reason to be afraid.”

“You have to tell me what trouble.”

“I cannot say any in particular, at this time. But be on your guard. And remember that I am on your side. No matter what.”

“What do you mean?”

Melvar glanced toward the ranch house. “It is time. I must climb onto the bench of my wagon and become once again the peddler. Molly and I will raise little dust as we leave. And we will come again.”