

DIRCK VAN SICKLE

Montana

Gothic



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Citadel

Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro,
Flapping from out their Condor wings
Invisible Woe!

Edgar Allan Poe

For most of the long winter the universal mud was frozen like rippled rock, but now, in the middle of this chinook, the grainy gumbo lay over the land like the primal muck, almost trapping the horse's hoof at every step. If you're a newcomer, the *suck* of the hoof pulling free of the thick ooze can turn your stomach; best to concentrate on the saddle creaking or the horse snorting—but don't look at the sky: winter sky in northeastern Montana is just another kind of mud; thinner and grayer, but so deep that if you ever fell into it, you'd never get out.

Or so he thought, grimly listening to the *suck suck suck* beneath him. Odd: by now he should be inured to seeing things mud-colored and gray as part of his training, he thought, trying to jiggle his horse into a faster gait, anything to break the morbid spell of this barren monotony. But the animal knew about deep mud even if the man didn't; it threw up its head so that the man nearly lost the reins, and didn't alter its gait by a millisecond.

His new town apparently would be an island in a sea of mud, but even more depressing auspices were that the Great Northern hadn't considered Citadel worth a sixteen-mile spur and that even the stagecoach balked at crossing the fens and mires for it. As the old geezer at the tan and brown shack of a depot said: "The coach ain't goin', and she ain't a'gonna go, neither, till the mud hardens some, and God ain't lemme in on when that's gonna be." Damn him, anyway: forty bucks for this spavined gelding. Seller's market, the old man had leered.

Work on the Citadel First National Bank was stalled until spring's true thaw, a month or so off, he guessed as he looked up at the bank's pathetically blatant thin facade—but it was the only building grand enough to use any brick at all, its capstone already in place for this recently turned year, A.D. 1913.

He turned the corner, as instructed, and easily found his own building. As he glumly surveyed the grimy, out-of-repair little wood structure, the best he could think of it was that at least it shared the

same block with the big new bank. He failed to get on the boardwalk without sinking his polished oxfords in the mud, shook them, then went back to the keg of nails rusting under a tarp near the bank. "Their first loan," he smiled, holding up the two nails to the men who'd stopped before his shop. They said nothing, just stood in their awkward overalls gawking as if he were some kind of grotesquerie.

"One of you men want to give me a hand?" No answer. Maybe they can't talk, he thought, going into his building, surprised to find it unlocked. Maybe they've been around cattle so long they've forgotten. Or never had a reason to learn. He found a chair, then a rusted hammer lying in the broken glass beneath a shattered windowpane, and came outside to replace the missing old shingle with his new one:

DEKE MORGAN
—MORTICIAN—

"New undertaker, huh?" one of the men finally grunted.

"New mortician, yes," Deke said, stepping off the chair.

The man snorted through his nose. "Same difference."

Deke smiled. "Well, no matter how you want to say it, let me buy a drink to toast that none of you will ever be customers."

"Saloon's closed," another man said, eyes shifting uneasily, "till six." The men turned and slowly walked away. . . .

CITADEL, MONTANA, POP. 981 read the sign over the small and badly weathered paintless courthouse. A bald lie, Deke thought, walking to the only clerk in the dim office, there can't be that many people in the whole county. "Embalmer, huh," the clerk said, reading the simple form Deke had filled. "Okee-doak, just gimme yer John Henry here and two bucks."

Deke put two dollar bills on the table, smiling: "I got a lot more of the John Henrys than dollars, only they're all Deke Morgan."

"Ain't you got no real money?" the clerk asked, annoyed.

"What do you mean? This is real money."

"I mean silver. Cartwheels. Hard dollars."

"Sorry. That's all I have just now."

Muttering that nobody else would take them, the clerk shoved the bills in a drawer, giving Deke a bitter dirty look as if knowingly being cheated, then turned away.

Deke was now a licensed businessman and, as he'd missed his lunch, he decided to celebrate with a steak.

"Mister Morgan," the waitress nodded as he came in.

“Good day,” he replied, thinking that a newspaper would go broke in a hurry here. “What’s good today?”

“Aw shit, it’s all good. Sit anyplace.”

The café—once white inside and out, but now mud-colored out and smoke-yellowed in—had five square tables covered with mismatched, worn oilcloths. He sat at the cleanest one, facing the uncurtained windows; just overhead a bare bulb hung on a long cloth-covered green cord from a nondescript grease-and-dust-covered medallion. “Um . . . your best steak, thick and rare,” he said as she set down a scratched glass of cloudy, tepid, alkaline water.

She didn’t bother writing it down—she had no pad—just leaned through a grimy window behind the counter and bawled: “Steak up! *Louie*, you back there?” She turned to Deke. “Shit, he took off. But I’ll fry ‘er up.”

When she returned, Deke asked, “Lots of cattle in these parts?” He didn’t care, just wanted to talk.

“More cattle’n people in Montana,” she said, not looking up from reaming her fingernails with a toothpick.

“I hear Montana has a great deal of sheep, too.”

“More sheep’n people.” She was chewing something and her voice was distorted.

“Doesn’t that worry anyone?” He was fascinated by what was without doubt the most unattractive woman he’d ever seen, unfeminine to the point of being an animal.

“*What* worry anyone?” she asked.

“Being so outnumbered,” he said. Fortunately, she didn’t get it.

“Look, yer grub’ll be up in a minute,” she said, putting the toothpick back in the little jar on the counter.

Of course, he hadn’t expected brass bands, but perhaps a handshake and a welcome, he thought in gloomy amazement. Are they at least friendly to each other? Do they ever use speech to touch one human mind to another—or only to issue terse orders and *yes* and *no* answers?

Suddenly the waitress clunked down a big gray platter that seemed solid stone and had to weigh five pounds, the shiny glaze around its rim worn down to a dirty brown oval band. A blunt instrument, Deke thought, staring at what looked to be a piece of burnt wood the shape of a cowboy bootsole, incomprehensibly topped off with two fried eggs. One yolk had broken in the pan and was fried into a hard yellow leather; the other broke on top of the steak and was suppurating its bright goo down the side and into a pile of

strangely cut fried potatoes. The steak dinner also included a thick stone mug of bitter, filmy coffee.

He tried scraping some yolk off with his fork, but it was useless: he took a resigned bite, wondering at the hideous sequence of catastrophes and curses that had propelled him to this place. *Malcolm Funeral Parlor—Citadel, Montana*, the ad said, \$2,400. He wasn't even sure if Montana was a state yet, and ended up in the Johns Hopkins library staring at a huge, almost blank atlas page that listed Citadel in its smallest print. But the idea of Montana fascinated him, and when he answered the ad, Herbert Malcolm said his brother had been successful there for over twenty-five years in the only mortuary for fifty miles; it pulled in the ranches, so the size of the town was unimportant. For an extra six hundred dollars, the old man's house and chattel were included, and Deke bought what he thought of as an adventurous new life, freed from the problems and fears that had grown up like weeds around him and were easier abandoned than worked out.

His best friend in Baltimore—the only person he could even bear to see after Cynthia rejected him for being “unrealistic and cloistering”—tried warning him about taking an unexplored path of least resistance, an easy way out. Perhaps he had, but those days were so panic-ridden that he deluded himself into believing that going west was the braver course. But this ugly place? This grim, muddy, ignorant nowhere?

“Fine piece of beefsteak,” Deke lied to the waitress. He'd left much of it. It was fried nearly dry.

“Told ya everything here's good.”

He paid his fifty cents and left, taking some solace that the streaked and runny EAT sign outside the door was at least spelled right. As he walked back down the hollow boardwalk beneath the dense sky, his footsteps were amplified as if made upon a big drum.

His horse stood stolidly at the rail in front of his shop, head drooping, tail hanging motionless in the still air. The dark sky was intensifying, the roiling clouds seeming to filter down a darkness that drew all life and movement from the town. Deke paused, his hand on the doorknob, and looked back up the street. It was already growing dark between the buildings; there were no people out, and the two other horses far up the long block stood as still as his own. The rough boardwalk stretched at uneven levels beneath the verandas and flat false fronts of the tiny wooden town. There was a crude wagon that appeared to have been stuck for a long time, completely

covered with mud like coarse gray paint, apparently smeared on by children. Electric light shone from a few windows, but by far the majority were shiny, dark, their buildings not electrified. The whole scene was in shades of gray, and the utter stillness as well as lack of color made it look like a faded stereoscopic view of somewhere far removed from where Deke felt he should be, and he shivered: it was alien, rejecting, and he was somehow trapped into it and now afraid he'd ended here by error, by walking backward with his eyes closed into what could be either his future—or his fate.

He quietly turned the knob and softly walked into his unlit funeral parlor. It seemed so small and weak, too frail to secure him against such a cold and foreign world: too much a part of it and in no way a part of him.

Homer Malcolm had died only three months ago, but the shop was such an abandoned mess that fixing it would take all Deke's money. When Cynthia pushed him from the safety of their romance into an unbearable panic of insecurity, he quit medical school after the second year. His mother's will provided funds for him to be a doctor, but as he looked around he wondered if the unspent tuition would be enough; he wasn't told the place had been badly vandalized. A cheap wooden chair with wired legs lay broken in the middle of the anteroom, the "parlor," its cane seat kicked through. Overhead, the Mazda light globes were broken and it would be hard getting their threaded caps out of the cheaply ornate ceiling fixture.

The workroom in back was windowless, of course, but in the nearly total dark he found a large, clear round bulb and its light came on, the only reassuring thing since he'd arrived. Vandals were probably afraid to come back here; the room was a shambles, but from neglect, not mischief. A potbelly stove stood against a wall, coal in the bucket, a careless pile of kindling beside it. A pump had a pail hanging off the spout; he worked the handle, but it had long lost its prime and only sucked air. The walls were filthy yellow, the back wall lined with crude shelves bowed by several gallon jugs of murky yellowish liquid.

"Formaldehyde," he muttered, pouring one of the jugs into the tin sink, watching in dismay as it didn't drain. But he'd anticipated the place would be old-fashioned by ordering modern Osmotone and tools before he left; they'd follow when the stage started running. Two of the clumsily made drawers held tools in the worst condition he'd ever seen, apparently untouched by Carborundum, as if Malcolm, toward the end of his years, didn't give a damn.

The last drawer was padlocked, but a few blows with the rusted hammer easily knocked away the hasp. It contained a hot-water bottle with attached enema tube, a tin of number-ten grease and a slightly curved metal rod, its rounded end discolored from fire. Junk, he thought bitterly, it's all just junk. The town and now the shop.

He snapped off the light and went back into the anteroom. As his eyes adjusted he noticed the large strips of wallpaper hanging from every wall—and he'd paid twenty-four hundred for this dump, this *ruin!* He felt like getting on that goddamned horse, riding back to the train and returning east: but he had less than three hundred dollars and couldn't start over. Still, to have to *stay* here . . .

A rapid clomping on the boardwalk stopped in front of his shop. He walked quietly to a window and looked out, carefully screened by the remaining unbroken dirty glass. Three small boys were staring at his sign. "New undertaker's here," said one.

"Wonder maybe he's like old Malcolm?"

"What d'ya bet? Dad says all of 'em are."

"Sure, lotta difference it makes to your old man. You never had no family die like me and Pop did. Pop says they oughta put that fuckin' Malcolm out on a hill for the coyotes, if they'd have him. Says he shouldn't have a decent grave like anybody else."

The children walked away. Graveyards, mortuaries, Deke thought, and morticians—central to growing up in a town where nothing happens except birth and death. But the image of the mortician: ghoulish, hollow eyes and icy, bony hands . . . he'd never fit that. He was a medical student, or had been. A giver of hope, not the one to finally bury it. How had this happened to him, he wondered, standing in the darkening room, in the dank air of early evening, flexing his chilled hands in his pockets, hating and then suddenly fearing their cold and his confusion.

Malcolm's two-story house was past the edge of town, well beyond the boardwalks and into the mud, set well apart from any other. Some tokens of elegance were nailed onto the corners of the eaves and a fancy cemetery-style wire fence ran across the front, but in general the house looked in little better shape than the shop. Surprisingly, there was a light in the back; Deke paused and almost knocked on his own front door, then opened it and stepped in. The parlor lights came on suddenly and a stubbled old man in bib overalls

stood blinking at him over a shotgun, obviously terrified and as panicked as a trapped animal.

Oh my God, Deke thought, reflexively showing the palms of his hands. "Hey, I'm sorry. Perhaps I'm in the wrong house." He began backing away.

"You some kinda fancy marshal or sumthin'?"

"No-no, I'm looking for—"

"You ain't from town, ain't one a them." The old man frowned as he peered quizzically at Deke.

"No, I'm from the East, from Baltimore; you see, I—"

"You the one come to buy Malcolm's place?" the old man asked, his manner calming somewhat from that of a truculent dog. "The one I was told was comin'?"

"That's right," Deke smiled. "Deke Morgan. And you?"

"Work fer Malcolm. Watch things. Ya buy this place, too?"

"Yes, but I didn't know it was so run-down," Deke smiled, thinking he'd appear friendly by deprecating his purchase.

The old man put the shotgun against the wall and frowned: the guard dog was accepting the stranger as his new master. "Naw, a little paint, mebbe a couple new curtains. Old Malcolm lived here a long time alone an' probably didn't notice things gettin' wore up, y'know, day by day. But I'll fix 'er up fer ya, little carpentry, little paintin'. Good wood. Solid." The old man kicked a door frame. "Helped ta built 'er, I oughta know. Lotsa oak ya can't see in this place. Can't beat oak. Good pine deckin' an' sidin'. Wood's seasoned, won't warp."

"You're a carpenter?" Deke asked, shaking hands.

"Yep. Carlo's the name, Carlo Framp. Do all the handiwork around town. Have for years. Can't beat oak."

"I see. And you've been taking care of things here?"

"Oh yes; that's m'job, first fer Malcolm and then his kin; that brother a his, Herbert, he put me in charge."

"Well, Carlo, I'm sure I'll have need of you, too."

This apparently was what Carlo had waited to hear; the last of his reserve seemed to leave as he said, "Yes sirree, was told you was comin', told ta help ya out all's I can. 'Course, I'd expect ta do that, seein's how I worked fer old Malcolm, an' such. But then, too, I was supposed to take care a *everything* here, leastways, till you showed up and could finish off. See, there's only just the so much I can do . . . can't do more." Carlo seemed to be working up to unburdening himself of some kind of trouble. "I mean, when the doctor takes sick, who doctors the doctor, if ya follow my drift?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Deke smiled.

Carlo stood perplexed and fidgeting, having used his well-rehearsed riddle to no effect. "Come on an' follow me then, I'll show ya." Deke followed Carlo through the parlor and up the stairs, stopping many times as Carlo bragged about the wallpaper or the nearly new rose-tinted lamps which he himself had installed. At last they came to a door on the second floor and Carlo unlocked it, stepped inside and pushed on the mother-of-pearl wall button.

A sudden darkness seemed to come on with the electric lamp to infect and infiltrate the air; Deke felt his knees buckle and he leaned against the door frame: in the bed lay the three-month-old shell of Malcolm. In the dark pull of vertigo, Deke heard Carlo's voice as a strangely modulated buzzing: "Y'see? Who doctors the doctor an' who buries the undertaker? 'Cept the next one. But I keep these windas open and she's cold enough yet to make no never mind. Ain't no one else could do the work and seein's he was a friend a mine as well as an undertaker hisself, well. . . . So he ain't been moved none, no way at all."

"You mean . . . you just . . . locked the door?"

"Hell, yes. But just over winter, an' ain't like she's thawed clean up yet."

There was something about the wind slowly bulging into the curtains like a cold gelatinous evil from the night; something about the prim tightness of the room, about the parched skin taut across Malcolm's cheekbones, his sunken eyes, raised teeth exposed through dried, stretched lips; something about the cracked window stained with mud someone had thrown up against it; something about this Carlo, subservient, sly, cringing around him—it added to the feeling he had about the small wooden town in the center of the sea of mud, and an instinct told him that something was very wrong and to get away as if his life depended on turning and running from a nightmare deathworld whose landscape he could not see and could only indistinctly sense.

He'd never wanted to be a mortician—who would?—it was all a mistake, a colossal one, but now he had to make the best of it, had to choke down the instinct to flee, had to stick it out for at least a year: "We'll bury him first thing," he said, turning and walking quickly from the room.

Carlo switched off the light and dogged right after Deke's heels, "Box's already built. Ain't no store-bought, but I sorta put a bit ex-

tra in 'er. Wanna see 'er?" There was a faint undertone of whining, pleading in Carlo's voice that repelled and disgusted Deke.

"Perhaps later."

"Naw, ain't no trouble. Right in here." Carlo led him into a nearly barren pantry where, resting across two sawhorses, lay a crude pine coffin with a thick, runny coat of white paint and some roughly hand-cut scrollwork nailed to it. The nails were too big and had split some of the scrolls. "Ain't much, I reckon, to somebody what's useta factory boxes," Carlo whined, his thin apologetic veneer not at all covering his clumsy coaxing for praise.

He raised the flat lid. "See? Lined 'er from the big red curtain was in the shop. Now Malcolm, he wasn't bothered much 'bout death, y'know; jest said she was meat what lost 'er lights is all, but he didn't like that they was cold, so I also got this quilt in here as a kinda token to his memory, y'see."

"I see. Yes, it's very nice, very thoughtful."

Carlo warmed like an anxious dog finally patted. "Looky here," he said, running a finger along a corner, "not just nailed, but glued, too. 'Course now, harder to do 'er, but she holds longer. An' paint's got extra lead, lotsa lead. Mixed 'er m'self. Holds water out a while more. Got lots left over from stoppin' paintin' the house when he went. Figured new owner might want some other color. Mebbe yella." But Deke hadn't patted him again and he stumbled out of words: "But white's nice color fer a house . . . real nice."

"Is there coffee?"

Carlo picked up: "Hell, yes; sure thing." They went into the kitchen. "See here? Pump's right inside, modern-like. I had 'er done when she was built, long time back." Carlo poured several dippers of water down the pump as he worked the handle. The creaking changed pitch as water rose and finally sputtered from the spout. "Was settin' up fer java when I heard ya comin' in. Didn't know who ya was first off, but when ya wasn't one a them sons a bitches from town, figgered ya come fer the place." He filled a large blue enameled coffee pot and dumped a fistful of coffee into the water, then set it on the stove.

Oh, Christ, he's going to boil it, Deke thought as he settled into a rickety chair. "How come you didn't put him in the casket?"

"Well, took mostly a week to built, took m'time on 'er, and by then, well, didn't matter. And wasn't nobody else needed his bed ner nuthin'—I got my cot in back."

"You *sleep* here?" Deke asked, utterly dismayed.

“Hell, yes. Days, mostly, an’ watch the place by night. Malcolm’s kin hired me hisself. Use m’shotgun, too, goddamn it. See, I moved in after my place burnt up three, no, four month ago. Yep, closer four: right after Ellen McCarthy’s funeral. Malcolm, he got plumb loco when my shack went; asked me, Carlo, move in. Died in the month.”

“That’s too bad about your house burning.”

“Yep, ’twas,” Carlo said, handing Deke his coffee. “Warn’t no accident, neither, smelled that damn coal oil burnin’ all over. Some son a bitch set ‘er. Fer sure.”

“Why in the world—? What was it, some kids?”

“Reckon,” Carlo said, shifting his eyes to the stove and back. “Sons a bitches ‘round here, anyways. By God, I got off a shot at one just the last week; snuck out the back way and let one go. Missed, though.”

“What’s the problem here? Why all the trouble?”

“That’s what I wanna know. Only God can judge the dead, ain’t that so? Yep, an’ that’s exactly what I told that son a bitch McCarthy, too. Only God can judge. Was his girl Ellen what Malcolm did his last funeral on, an’ mebbe he knew it’d be his last work, ‘cause you shoulda seen the job; why, she looked natural as a scrubbed shoat. Went down ta work every night fer a week, fixin’ her up.”

“Night?”

“Hell, yes. He always did say don’t matter ‘bout the men, they’s all so ugly they’s hopeless, but he worked extra makin’ the women pretty as he could. Most times they looked better dead’n alive. He was an artist, Mister Morgan, real artist. Anyway, ‘fore we could get Ellen under, a chunk a the North Pole blew in an’ the ground froze like rock. Coulda bricked the damn bank with ‘er. Hell, I couldn’t dig no hole outta that, so they jest did the parlor part an’ Malcolm said she could stay there till the ground softened up enough for the buryin’ part.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Deke said.

“‘Course it does. Damn near a month ‘fore I could get m’pick two inches inta that goddamn frozen mud, but I finally did ‘er, and they held the hole service. Now Malcolm, he was to home, sick by then, but I come here after to tell about it, see if he wanted somethin’ ta eat. Did all his cookin’, and he told me more’n once, did ‘er damn good. Carlo, he’d say, yer a helluva cook. Jest a helluva, cook. So how’d she go, he asks, and I told about that damn fool Mrs. McCarthy an’ her wantin’ to open the box fer a last look at her little

pride an' joy, Ellen. Great Jesus, what a woman to carry on, bawlin' over how long it's been since the first part a the funeral, wantin' ta see 'er again."

"I suppose that's understandable," Deke said.

"Anyways, Malcolm blows up coughin', ya didn't open it, didja? he asks. Hell no, I says, I didn't. But that crazy woman, she finally got the preacher an' the doc, that's Emerson an' Bailey, to pry the lid. I was off mebbe twenny feet, but the looks on their faces when they saw 'er! Hell, she was in 'er box more'n a month. They quick nailed the lid back an' Mrs. McCarthy didn't see nothin' nohow."

Deke was confused: "But even with formaldehyde, if it was that cold, she couldn't have been very advanced."

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no; all's I know, when Emerson an' Bailey saw 'er, they looked fit ta puke. Anyways, I was here day after, gettin' lunch fer Malcolm, when Bailey and Emerson come by. They was here not ten minutes afore they stomped out madder'n hell. Was that next night my place went up an' he asked me wouldn't I move in here."

"I'm sorry to hear that . . . but how could he hold services with the shop so torn up?"

"Well, it wasn't yet, but I can't be here an' there, too. Probably the same sons a bitches as fired my shack woulda fired the shop ta boot, 'cept the whole goddamn town'd go. An' they can't fire this place 'cause I'll blow their goddamned eyes out if they steps inside the fence, an' they know 'er, too. Goddamn sons a bitches, anyways. But look, now yer here, why don't we move Malcolm outta the bed and I'll make 'er up fresh for ya. No reason not to, now yer here."

Deke thought his medical and mortician's training had inured him to cadavers, but he couldn't match Carlo's nonchalance: "Isn't there another bedroom?"

"Sure, but that old bed ain't so good or I'd be usin' 'er. I can make up Malcolm's bed, ain't no bother."

"No. But we will bury him tomorrow. Too late to embalm, but we might want to plan a service."

"Naw. None a these sons a bitches'd come, anyways."

Deke's bedroom was as sparsely furnished as a cheap hotel room; Malcolm apparently never had guests. And Carlo was more than right about the old bed; it sagged so much Deke was sure half the slats were out. After an hour of trying to find a comfortable position, he threw the mattress on the floor and—although feeling foolish—pushed it firmly against the door, not so much as a barri-

cade as an alarm. Even so, he couldn't sleep, his thoughts crazed and swirling, and the dead iron dread of gray predawn was the last thing he knew before the mattress lurched and he awoke to find Carlo trying to push into the now dimly daylit room.

Malcolm was buried that afternoon. When Carlo tamped the last shovelful, he buried not only the parched, desiccated, skinny and unbendable frame of Malcolm, but all his loyalty to him: Deke was now the town mortician and Carlo was now *his* righthand man.

By the time the fresh Osmotone and tools came, the shop was nearly ready. The anteroom still needed the carpet and draperies and red brocade wallpaper ordered from Sears Roebuck, but the workroom was fixed. They'd ripped out the old shelving and painted the walls with Carlo's heavily leaded white housepaint. Carlo built a new table with a sheet-metal top, put new linoleum over the old stained counters, planed the warped drawers so they'd slide, even cleaned the old potbelly stove and made the sink drain properly. It looked good, the large, deep pink jugs of Osmotone sitting like soft-drink syrup on solid new shelves in the clean, shipshape room. And when the things came from Sears Roebuck, the entire place looked brand-new—Carlo even painted the outside with his seemingly inexhaustible supply of leaded white.

Yet during this time, no one came by to look. Deke didn't expect anyone to pitch in, but that no one even had any curiosity seemed odd—unless they peered in at night.

With the lack of business, the next weeks were spent on the house. Carlo finished painting it white, and even defeated Deke's resistance to Malcolm's room and bed: "Hell, ain't like she's diseased ner nuthin'," Carlo said as they stood looking through the doorway. They'd been washing walls and had worked their way to this room.

"I don't know," Deke said, panting from the work. "Just don't seem right. Feels kinda funny." He'd been around Carlo so much, and only Carlo, that he was irritated to catch himself often picking up Carlo's accent.

"Hell, s'best bed in town. Walnut. Can't beat walnut. 'Course, if yer finicky, get new sheets for 'er."

"Well, Carlo, I've always wanted a four-poster."

"Oh, them sticks what hold up the tent? Real elegant. And if the roof leaks, why, yer still okay," Carlo laughed.

Deke laughed, too. "Why not, then. You strip it, wash 'er clean, and I'll take the wagon inta town. I want that goddamned mattress outta here, though."

Easter had just gone unobserved and winter was in its last stages when Deke put an ad in the nearest newspaper, a biweekly two counties away:

Citadel, Montana

Citadel Mortuary under new management. Deke Morgan, proprietor and funeral director, assures the bereaved of this community that their last token of love to their dearly departed will be handled with the quiet dignity befitting their last rite before a loving God.

Carlo kept several copies of the paper, pleased and proud. "Reckon that's it, then," he said. "She's all new now, the other is over with. Yes sirree," Carlo said after Deke helped him rebuild his shack and as Carlo moved out, "she's the new days now, an' them old ones is ended forever."

As spring evolved, the sun seemed to charge the town with life as farmers and ranchers came in to buy rope and harness, feed and tools, seed and sheep-dip. But if anyone died during the winter, Deke hadn't heard of it. Although he told Carlo that he was glad no one passed away, the fact was that unless someone died soon, he'd be in real trouble. He was nearly broke and starting to feel a bit desperate.

Not only was each week warmer, but each day seemed to promise summer. Everyone said it was a rapid spring, but they didn't say it to Deke: he rarely even heard a "good morning" from anyone. The men openly glared and the women simply looked the other way whenever they passed him on the boardwalk. Apart from some boys who came to the shop, apparently on a dare, to touch the fuzzy wallpaper, then run out as if chased by ghosts, almost the only person he talked to was Carlo—and Carlo was so maddeningly fawning and inarticulate as to be nearly no one at all. Deke's life had become a bizarre and deep loneliness of identical barren days spiced only by his mounting panic at his dwindling dollars—what would happen when these last few dollars were gone? Would he simply starve and, months later, be found in bed as he'd found his predecessor?

"I can't fathom it," he said to Carlo on a typical afternoon in the empty shop. "I've been here over four months and they still shun me like a leper! How long will it take before they realize I'm not a goddamned stranger? They can't dislike me—no one even knows

me. This goddamned loneliness is driving me crazy and I just don't get it! What the hell is wrong with everybody?"

"Don't worry 'bout it; they're all sons a bitches."

"Worry about it? Of course I worry about it! I live here! I'm a citizen here now, but they haven't even asked me to pay taxes! What's wrong?"

"Mebbe 'cause yer the undertaker."

"So? So what difference should that make?"

"I dunno," Carlo shrugged, chewing on a nail.

"So what difference should that make?" Deke asked Sam Franklin, owner of the Citadel Mercantile, where Deke had spent nearly all his money. When he noticed that Sam didn't shut him out, he cultivated Sam as if he were an oasis, buying only at the Mercantile and from Sam personally, never sending Carlo, never stocking up.

"Still, it makes a difference," Sam replied, sitting across from Deke at the back table in the Citadel Saloon.

"But why? Christ, I know it's unpleasant, but it's more or less necessary: somebody'd have to do it. Most people don't fear morticians. It's not *me* who's death."

"Well, I don't think it's fear so much, really." Sam studied his glass. "I'm a newcomer here, too, though. Bought the Mercantile not yet three years ago. . . . I don't think I've been accepted yet. These things take time."

"Sure, but they say hello to you, they drop into your place just to pass the time. But they shun me as if I'll kill them as well as bury them."

"Hope you don't intend to bury *me*," Sam smiled.

"Bury my only friend?" Deke grinned: "Live forever!"

Sam laughed: "If the mortician wants me to live forever, I guess that's a good sign. But how'd you get into your business, anyway? You don't seem much the mortician type."

"A dismal tale," Deke sighed wearily. "Don't intend to stay one, that's for damn sure." The pressure within him welled up nearly into tears, but he held them and disguised wiping his eyes as if making a mock gesture to wipe away a headache. "I'm a doctor—nearly. But there was this woman, you know: life would be wonderful, the old story, I suppose. But it took the guts out of me and I quit medicine

after two years. I couldn't keep up with the studies and I just kept seeing her, it seemed, in other women's faces, and every place I went reminded me of some time or another with her. So I thought of transferring my medical training into veterinary school, but even that'd take extra work and I just wanted an easy way out for a while. So when I saw the ad for this place," he paused to inhale deeply and quickly exhale, again wiping away the false headache, "well, it was easy getting a mortician's license. . . ." He laughed bitterly: Med school even overqualified me. But it's so goddamned hard, the goddamned loneliness; I got out of Baltimore to get out of this kind of feeling, this . . . rejection, and I just run right into it here. Maybe it's me and I'll find it no matter where I go; maybe there's something wrong with me and I just take it with me like some punishing curse."

Sam looked down at his glass, struggling to find words for something, then put it off and said, instead: "Two years of med school? You know, if word of that got around—think you could do *any* vet work at all?"

"Maybe some. I'm no vet, though. Not licensed."

"Neither is anyone else around here—oh, some of the older waddies are pretty savvy, but it's mostly lore. You could send off for a few books, though, and with your background, why, hell, you'd be a big help with stock work and once word got around, it would completely change the picture people have of you. Change it just like that."

Deke smiled ruefully. "You mean if I was a part-time vet, I'd also be only a part-time ghoul. Well, there's a piano at the place—I could further dilute my ghoulishness by giving lessons."

"Come on—there's nothing ghoulish about you to dilute; but just do something else so other people have a chance to find out. You serious about also teaching piano?"

"I suppose I could. I took it for twelve years."

"By God, then, that's it! I'll start word that you'll give free piano lessons now and do stock work later on."

"*Free* lessons?" He was down to twenty-six dollars.

Sam laughed: "Place like this, they *have* to be free."

"Well . . . I guess it's all right. Be nice to have someone other than Carlo come around."

Sam chuckled. "Carlo's a real dandy, isn't he? Him and that damned Malcolm, great pair. Yep, Carlo's a pip."

"A *pip*? I'm getting sick of him, he's a bore."

“Well, you know that Carlo keeps a sheep, don’t you?”

“So? ‘More sheep’n people in Montana.’”

“Not *some* sheep. One. A ewe.” Sam started laughing and ordered fresh whiskeys and ditch.

Deke looked puzzled, shrugged his shoulders.

Sam grinned. “Well, you’re a newcomer and I didn’t get it either, at first.” Sam started laughing again. “And I don’t suppose there’s anything too wrong with it—if the ewe doesn’t mind! But old Carlo and his sheep are quite a legend. One night a bunch of kids went to where she’s penned behind his shack and they put some toilet water on her. Just doused her with it, the way I heard. Then they tied a lacy scarf around her neck and pasted a big red valentine on her rear end, then hid.

“Well, sure enough, after dark old Carlo comes out wearing a pair of huge floppy rubber sheepherder’s boots—you know, to drop her hind legs into. Well, he sees her all fixed up, stinking like hell, the heart pasted over her ass. And he starts cussing: ‘Sons a bitches, anyways,’ he’s yelling over and over. But the kids, see, they’re hidden, and they start going ‘Baa baa, feels so good, Carlo; baa baa, do me again, Carlo,’ and on like that. He stomps into his shack and comes out with his shotgun, but it was too dark. So he just waits a while until he figures the damned kids are gone, but just when he’s right in the middle of it with the ewe, those damned kids start in going ‘baa, baa’ again. Poor old bastard!”

But Deke had not laughed. “You mean he’s a sodomite?”

“Hell, it’s more a joke than anything else. Not all so unusual around here. Schoolboy stuff.” Sam’s smile faded. “But when they learned about Malcolm, that wasn’t so funny.”

“Malcolm?”

Sam looked into his glass a long time before he spoke. “You have a right—no—you *need* to know. There’s nothing wrong with you. Nothing following you. But you bought more than his shop when you took Malcolm’s place. See, Carlo had his sheep, but Malcolm had the—how’d you put it in your ad—the ‘dearly departed?’”

Deke whispered, nearly inaudibly: “My God. . .” his face going chalk white, “you mean he, he molested the—”

“Molested, hell, he fucked ‘em,” Sam said quietly.

“Oh, God.”

“They found out when they opened Ellen McCarthy’s casket. They closed it right back up again, but word got around pretty fast and there was even talk of lynching him. But it never got that far.

He died shortly after; the old bastard just died, and there was nothing anyone could do. But that's what you bought, that kind of feeling."

Deke stared in silent, sick horror, unable to speak.

"Once they knew, why, everything pulled together. Why he always worked late at night on the women, why he always made them up so—garish, even grotesque, really."

"Aww, Jesus . . ." Deke felt weak, as if draining.

"Yeah. Well, who knows what happens to people—even Malcolm. I'd have thought he'd have more sense, but I guess he'd been getting away with it so long that maybe toward the end, part of his . . . madness involved taking chances of getting found out. Like when they opened Ellen's coffin and found her naked, a thick brown grease smear between her legs and these deep bite marks in her shoulder—"

"Stop!" Deke was fighting the roils of nausea.

"Well, that's all of it. Now, I knew Ellen and liked her, yet she wasn't kin or anything—but when word got around, every girl or woman Malcolm'd worked on had at least twenty, thirty relatives, just nets of them, so it involved nearly everyone. And ever since he died, they can't swallow it and they can't spit it out."

"So that's what it is," Deke said quietly. "Jesus. No wonder they shun me. Thanks for telling me—I guess it was driving me crazy not knowing, thinking there was something wrong with *me*."

"Well, I've known loneliness, too. Sometimes the mind gets pretty knotted up trying to break free of it."

Deke nodded, his thoughts actually on Malcolm. "It seems incredible . . . med school trains you to get over, you know, fear or revulsion about cadavers; you see that although they're somewhat special, they're really just objects, a *thing*. Lifeless . . . and *certainly* sexless because of that. But I guess the family or friends can't face the final truth of death, that transition of someone they loved into, well, into nothing, really. And so a mortician's work is to deny this for a short time, to make the dead look like the live, only sleeping—Christ! How'd I ever get into this goddamned business! It's so damned *wrong!*" Deke clenched his fists as he tried to control his voice. "It's one thing for a doctor to work to keep the living alive, there's a truth in that—but to make the dead appear alive? It's such a lie, such corruption . . . and how Malcolm could even see it was possible to, to . . . the man *had* to have gone insane. Even Carlo's sheep is part of the living world, but Malcolm—"

"Yeah. He must have been pretty twisted up inside."

“*Twisted up!* Embracing the opposite of life with the act of creating life? It’s unthinkable . . . a blue-gray corpse lying naked on the slab, fluid pumping into the chest, blood draining out the leg—to see that and have any kind of passion, lust at all, is so impossible, so unthinkable that it’s utterly, it’s terrifyingly *insane!*” His jaw hurt from the extreme tension built up in the muscles and he paused a moment to relax. “And I’ve inherited everyone’s revulsion and hatred of it. No idiot will show up to buy the place like I did, without first checking it out. I’m stuck here! Jesus!”

“Well, the first thing is to convince people you aren’t Malcolm, and I think the piano lessons and stock work will help. And here’s another tip: he always dressed formal, as if there was a funeral that day. Maybe you should dress more casually. Wear old clothes, roll up your sleeves. I know in the East you’d just be dressed normally, but here, well . . . it singles you out as being different, and you sure don’t want that!” Sam paused to look around. He finally caught the eye of a young cowboy about nineteen years old and waved him over. “Evening, Boss! Just the man I want to see. Do you know Deke Morgan?”

“Reckon. You’re the new undertaker.”

Deke smiled weakly. Sam said, “Deke, this bird’s the foreman out to the Crandall spread. Called Boss James on account of he’s so damned young to be a ramrod.”

“Glad to meet you, Boss.” Deke extended his hand.

Boss James looked at the offered hand a few beats too long before he finally took it. “Howdy.”

“You know, Deke didn’t even know a damn thing about Malcolm? I was just filling him in. He damn near threw up.”

“Yep,” Boss James said. “Course, don’t hit me personal as he never planted any of my she-relatives, but I reckon you bought yourself a heap of hard feelin’s.”

“Reckon,” Deke said. “If I’d a knowed the deal—” he caught himself imitating Boss—“I’d never have come here.”

“Reckon so. Gonna take folks a long time to ferget old Malcolm; he left a bitter stick in everbody’s craw, him an’ that old fool a his, Carlo Woolhumper.”

“Y’know,” Sam said, “Deke’s damn near a doctor and was just saying he’d be able to do professional stock work before long. And he’s even willing to give free piano lessons, if folks want to just get over thinking that he’s another one like old Malcolm. He can’t help what Malcolm was, or undo what he did.”

"That's for sure." Deke held up three fingers for drinks. "I may not be bright enough to look before I leap into Malcolm's mess, but that doesn't mean I'm anything like him."

"That's true, I reckon. First time out west?"

"Yes. Just walked in like the lamb to the slaughter."

The young cowboy laughed. "An' so ya did at that! Well, in that case, I'll go these ditches and have a seat; you seem okay to me—don't much care fer yer line a work, but just so long's ya ain't doin' it on me, why, I reckon I can't hold it agin' ya." He pulled a chair from another table, turned it backwards and straddled it. "So yer out ta give piana lessons? Tell ya what. Sam, you know how Mary Lynn is with her music. Hell, she even tried gettin' me singin'. The old man bought her a piana, but nobody can run the damn thing, even if it did come with a book. I'll tell Mary Lynn tomorra that Deke here can show her how she goes, and she'll probably head in. And if she does, I reckon lotsa others'll follow. Got a piana yerself?"

"Chambers upright. It came with the curse."

Boss James chuckled. "I folla yer drift, okay. Now, what time shall I say I'll bring 'er by?"

"Anytime. Doesn't matter. Maybe after dinner?"

"Who knows? Might just flush a whole herd a music lovers flockin' ont a ya. Say, you know Johnny Carp?"

"No, I've never heard the name."

"Half-breed out ta Elmer's place, plays a mighty fine banjo. Might be you and him could get together sometime for dances."

"Maybe," Deke said, smiling at the idea of a piano-banjo duet. The three men talked for perhaps another half hour, Sam and Boss doing most of it, Deke trying to keep the names straight in all the gossip. Then, promising again to tell his fiancée about the piano lessons, Boss James left.

Deke left not long after. The night was warmer than he'd expected, and he remembered Sam's suggestion and took off his coat, pulled his shirt out a little. Maybe things will work themselves out, he thought, swinging the coat as he walked; at least he knew the story and had a friend now, and maybe soon he'd have more. It was after eleven and the town was dark except for the bulb Sam left lit in the back of the Mercantile, Deke noticed as he walked past the shadows of three brooms hugely projected on the dusty glass of the big front window. He turned the corner onto a street with only houses, a few houses, dark, with large trees in front—buds were opening on the high branches that passed in front of the moon as he

walked on the drying earth that was changing from winter mud back to fertile soil.

His house was farther on, but from where he was, tiny in the night, he saw a long narrow yellow streak stretching across the road from his front windows. It had to be Carlo and he was suddenly irritated: Carlo had his own shack now. And his own sheep.

“Carlo, what are you doing here?” Deke called out as he hung up his coat.

“Evenin’, Mister Morgan. Why, I was down to my place, got sorta lonesome, bein’ there all alone, and I figured I’d mosey over as you’d like as not hanker fer some live human company.” It was obviously a joke between him and Malcolm. “Got a fresh batch a coffee in back.”

Carlo Woolhumper, Deke thought, glaring at him; that’s what they called the damned sodomite: he wondered if Carlo knew about Malcolm and had purposely not told him. Of course Carlo knew, Carlo probably helped him! Now that he was on the verge of making some real friends, decent ones, he couldn’t afford to have Carlo around: “Carlo, you can’t just walk in like this.” But he said it kindly.

“Why, hell, ain’t no trouble. Malcolm always said feel free to drop by whenever you like; he said that near most every day. See, even when he was workin’, he was alone, like you, and a man has to have someone to talk to, them sons a bitches around here, anyways.”

“But Malcolm’s dead,” Deke said, realizing he couldn’t throw Carlo out; the poor bastard was the village pariah, and Deke knew how that felt. As of tomorrow, it would no longer be true for Deke, but it would be for the rest of Carlo’s life and there was nothing served in hurting the sad old man who’d befriended and helped him when no one else would. Deke suddenly realized that he was feeling pity for someone other than himself, and extending charity: maybe the siege was ending! Maybe these bleak years and horribly desolate months were finally ending! “Anyway,” Deke said, accepting the cup of coffee and repeating, “Malcolm is dead.”

“Yes sirree, he is that and fer a fact. Kinda miss those times we’d sit out here, talk, play cards sometimes till one, two in the mornin’, even later. Lotsa times, I’d sit out in the front room on the sofa there and he’d play piana for me, he knew I liked ta hear it. But that’s done now, I s’pose. Ain’t heard that piana fer mebbe a year. Good machine though. Mahogany. Can’t beat mahogany.”

“By the way, do you know Mary Lynn Crandall?”

“Oh, she’s a smart little piece, good-lookin’, too. Her and Ellen McCarthy was best friends, that was before Ellen died. Yep, Mary Lynn was at both the parlor an’ hole service, bawlin’ like cattle. Was the last funeral Malcolm ever gave, was Ellen’s.”

“Well,” Deke said as he got up and went into the front room, “there’s just a chance—a precious chance—she might come by here.” He opened the piano and spun up the stool. “Maybe even tomorrow. For lessons.” Deke began playing scales. “I can see I’ll have to practice a bit myself.”

“Say now, I never knew you could operate that thing,” Carlo said, creeping into the room in his peculiarly insinuating way. “So Mary Lynn’s comin’ by. Yes sirree, be good to see ‘er again; she always did treat me polite, not like the rest a the sons a bitches around here.”

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to see her.”

“Eh?” Carlo asked, confused, as if his master wasn’t going to share his good fortune.

“Nothing personal, but we’ll have to be alone. People get nervous if there are others around to hear their mistakes. I could never practice with my mother in the room.”

“Hell yes, I’ll stay in the kitchen till yer done.”

“I’m afraid you can’t be here at all. No one can.”

“Reckon her boyfriend’ll be here, all right,” Carlo said stubbornly, almost petulantly. “Reckon *he* will.”

“Not if he wants her to learn, he won’t.”

Carlo settled into the sofa and listened to Deke practice rapid trills and chords. After a few minutes he asked, “Mister Morgan, reckon you could play *Aura Lee*?”

Deke answered by beginning the slow ballad; he played it through a couple of times, silently singing as much of it to himself as he could remember. When he finished, there was a moment’s quiet before Carlo said softly, almost reverentially, “You play ‘er perfect, like he did. Just as good, ‘cause, reckon like him, she’s yer favorite too.”

Carlo left soon after.

The rose-colored lamps Carlo installed on Malcolm’s stairway threw a thin light, just enough to show the steps as Deke slowly climbed them to his room. He turned them off at the top, but didn’t light the hall; he knew the linoleum passage through the dark perfectly well.

The bedroom darkness was streaked by pale moonlight, enough to see by, and he didn't use the electric; just undressed and got into bed by the evanescent coating from the other world. It was a good bed, deep, softly firm, and the imprint that was deepened each night was now easy to find and settle into: when he found his exact fit in the impression, sleep came quickly, if not completely.

In the state when sleep half clouds the mind, its shadow almost but not quite complete, in that dim, untied semiconsciousness, a sceneless, lightless dream began forming. A dream of perhaps sleeping on a noiseless train, a dream of movement in which the bed begins at first to rock as gently as a cradle, then more and harder until it seems to be nearly bouncing, bouncing as if there are two in bed, one resting easily, the other tossing in the restless paroxysms of an agonized and sleepless dream . . . and then his dreaming mind dissolved into darkness.

Boss James brought Mary Lynn by just after seven the next evening, the young cowboy touching his hatbrim as he introduced her, the gesture toward formal manners clearly engendered by his pride and love for her. That done, he laughed: "When she heard you'd teach piana, she was eager as a wet hog in a rainstorm to get in here."

Deke stared at her for an awkwardly long time, in a state near shock: even more than Cynthia, Mary Lynn came transfixingly close to reflecting the unknown but driving image of his anima, the feminine quintessence that haunted him, although he'd never seen it, not even in dreams. Yet here was such a near approximation of his elusively invisible but insistent succubus and salvation that her face burned into his retinas as if he were staring into a light bulb, and he stood, holding himself to reality by the doorknob. When he finally looked away, her afterimage persisted, glowing in the center of his vision.

"Excuse me," he smiled at last. "A pleasure to meet you; I wasn't sure you'd be by today, and I was trying to recall if I'd gotten the piano in proper tune. I think so. Please excuse my wandering and come in, please." He showed them to the sofa. "Boss tells me you've practiced with a self-teaching book. How far did you get?"

She smiled—it was uncanny!—"Not very, I'm afraid. You'd better just assume I don't know anything at all."

"I'm sure that's not so, but no matter," Deke said, hardly hearing his own words, oblivious to their sense.

"Well now," Boss James grinned, "I don't guess I'll learn much; I reckon I'm beyond learnin' anything, so I'll just come back by when yer done an' ya can suprize me with what ya learnt. When should I head back, ya figure?"

"If I'm able to *ever* play anything, it'll surprise me more than you," she said, laughing softly at herself.

Afraid his motives were showing, Deke said, "Well, let's make it about two hours," and felt himself reddening with the obviousness of his attempt—he couldn't have exposed himself more completely to their amazement and contempt, he felt, if he'd said "forever."

"See ya 'bout ten, then," Boss said. And he left.

"I hope you won't find your time wasted," she said, following Deke to the piano, her voice liquescent.

"Impossible," he smiled, speaking softly, "under any circumstances," feeling the almost blinding surge of adrenaline he'd only felt when he'd meet Cynthia, or, curiously enough, been under the sudden deadly danger of a rearing horse—his perception of love or fear charged him with the same hormonal jolt.

Deke stopped the lesson an hour and a half later. "You've learned far more than I'd planned for this first time. You're really a phenomenal student—learning all those chords with being shown only once—I don't understand why you say you couldn't learn from the book."

She laughed, shaking her dark hair off her shoulders. "It's not the student. It's the teacher. Yes, the book had the chords marked, but when *you* strike them, you do it so strongly and surely that, well," she smiled, "you set a good example, and I guess I want to please you. And when you spread my fingers and press them on the keys, it's almost magically easy for them to remember how it felt and find that position again themselves." She looked at her brooch watch. "Jimmy won't be back for some while yet. Would you play something for me? My favorite?" She rose from the piano stool.

"It would be a pleasure," Deke said, trading seats. "But I don't have any music, so I hope I know it."

"Do you know *Aura Lee*?"

Deke answered by beginning the slow ballad, quietly singing a few verses the second time through, then improvising a few modest variations for the twenty minutes until Boss James arrived to fracture the mood completely.

After a few minutes of clumsy sociability among the three, Boss James and Mary Lynn left. Deke stood in the doorway watching them rattle off in the buckboard into the darkness of the street. Soon he couldn't hear the squeaking buggy, and soon after, not even Boss's frequent laughs; but she would return next week—and all he could do was wait.

"Well then, how'd she go?"

Deke spun suddenly: it was Carlo, smiling slyly from his unshaven face, his hands making and unmaking fists behind the bib of his overalls. "Carlo, I told you not to come by when I'm giving a lesson."

"Sure 'nuff you did, and so I didn't. I waited out back, straightened things up best's I could in the dark till they left. Then I figured, seein's how ya'd be alone, mebbe ya'd pleasure in some company even if 'twas only me," Carlo rambled as he followed Deke into the kitchen.

Deke's main concern, he realized, was that Mary Lynn might associate the two of them and refuse to return. He put on the coffee as Carlo took his accustomed chair. "It may not be a good idea for you to come by anymore at all." He paused to let the knife sink in. "Until after you see them drive off," he said, finally withdrawing it. "I don't want her ever thinking anyone can hear her except me, I don't want her nervous about mistakes."

"Yessir, Mister Morgan; I understand. You betcha."

"Good. What can you tell me about her?"

"Oh, ain't much to tell 'bout anybody in these parts, but I reckon I know 'er all. Mary Lynn . . . the Crandall place is out mebbe five, six mile on the Old Hootbill Road. Big spread, mebbe biggest 'round here. Fred Crandall, he's a stiff-necked old son a bitch an' so's his old lady, but Mary Lynn, she ain't like neither one of 'em. She's a bright little piece, an' all lined up to get hitched to that Boss James sooner'r later."

"So I understand," Deke said, dissolving Carlo's leer.

"Well, that's her old man's idea as he ain't got but the girl, then Boss'll run the place proper, keep 'er in the family. Leastways, that's the talk."

"Does she love him?"

"Well now, don't rightly know, but, yeah, I reckon. Fer a fact, he's ass over ears for her, so must be she's feedin' it the most likely way. Leastways, they're always together at the dances an' stuff. Yep, quite a sumthin', her so smart and tiny and him just dumber'n a

stump and the toughest bucko around. Hell, ya'd think he'd kill 'er first time he lays on 'er, if he ain't got it into 'er by now."

Carlo was chortling at his vengeful levity, but Deke was silent until the coffee was poured. "But what does she see in him? He seems to be a nice enough fellow, but I think hardly in a class with her—he's so rough and crude, so uncouth."

"I dunno, no tellin'. Mebbe jest 'cause her old man wants it. Or mebbe he's hung like a hoss and she knows all about it inside an' out, ya might say."

Carlo was again chortling at his own malicious wit and Deke was trying to ignore this second gibing slur, although the clumsiness of Carlo's taunts was beginning to irritate him. "I guess women are hard to figure out," Deke said.

"Yep, fer sure. Don't run off a brain, Malcolm'd say. Carlo, he'd say, Carlo, women an' Injuns are the same in that the only good one's a dead one." Carlo chuckled.

"He said that?" Deke asked, staring at Carlo.

"Yep," said Carlo, remembering with a smile the words of his previous and more faithful friend. "He'd shake his head and laugh the way he useta, y'know, then he'd wink an' say, 'Women an' Injuns, Carlo, women an' Injuns.'" Carlo wiped his eye. "Yep, I can hear him sayin' 'er, setting right where you are now. Was his favorite sayin'."

"Women and Indians," Deke muttered, stunned that Malcolm dared use such blatant irony.

"Yeah, jest like that, only louder."

"Women and Indians," Deke said louder, mesmerized with his horror of Malcolm's mind.

"That's it," Carlo smiled. "You got 'er."

No one else came for piano lessons, and summer passed with Deke's situation only deteriorating. Mary Lynn insisted on paying for her lessons, but Deke adamantly refused, even though now he frequently had to ride the sixteen miles to the next town to sell some of his or Malcolm's things. Nobody in Citadel, certainly, would buy them—the town still treated him like a despicable growth, loathsome but inoperable—and he needed the money for the things Carlo couldn't make or grow. Sam carried him on credit at the Mercantile, but Deke hated to take advantage. Sam was still his only friend in town and they often drank together—at first at the saloon, then as Sam realized Deke's situation, after hours in the Mercantile, where it wouldn't be so embarrassing for Deke when Sam simply poured

all their drinks from his own bottle, rather than buying them one by one in the saloon. "It'll take time," Sam told Deke. "But have you sent for the veterinary books yet?"

"Uh, no, not yet." Deke hadn't even thought of it.

"Well, roundup's coming. Might even be good to ride out for some . . . or *I* can send for them," Sam insisted.

"No, that's all right. I'll do it pretty soon."

"I don't see any other way of getting accepted, short of getting married."

"Oh sure!" Deke laughed bitterly. "When nobody even talks to me."

"Well, Mary Lynn—"

"She's only my student," Deke said, too quickly.

"I know, but she's also your friend. How come she hasn't brought any of her girlfriends by? If not for lessons, just to hear her play, or you play? She may be your best asset, she's very popular. Oh, I talk you up all the time, but I'm still a newcomer myself. But Mary Lynn—the Crandalls are the richest family around here; the old man was one of the first cattlemen in this part of Montana. Mary Lynn's the golden girl, everyone loves her." He raised his voice to imitate an old woman: "My, there's Mary Lynn Crandall; isn't she a *love-ly* girl! I hear that almost every time she comes into the store. Boss says she doesn't know about old Malcolm, so she may not realize the spot you're in. But I could suggest a concert to her, and if she organized it for you, people'd come."

However, Deke was glad that she hadn't brought any friends by as students or audience—of course she would if she thought it would help him—but he even refused her pay precisely to keep the reality of his need from her. Sure, he needed friends and money, but nothing she would do to help could replace losing the intimate nature of their time together now, just them, no others to dilute the glow of her presence or distract the very nearly all-consuming anticipation of her next visit. "No," he said to Sam, "she's damned good, but not quite ready for a recital. But she's taking two lessons a week now, and it'll be soon. Let me suggest it to her; I think things'll work out in their own time."

Then he changed the subject; Mary Lynn was a painful topic, for he was more in love with her daily—she was as beloved as a saint who had pronounced him worthy and good, and by her presence and judgment of him delivered him from the bitter loathing and the lonely terrors of self-doubt that was Citadel.

But this salvation was the most tenuous and futile thing of all, for Sam was right: she was the golden girl. If Citadel had any kind of local idol, it was she; she was almost public property, in the way beautiful girls often are in small towns. And as she represented beauty and kindness, Boss James symbolized the apex of Montana manhood: hard-drinking, but held every drop; never started a fight, but never backed down and never got beaten; would ride to the end of the trail for a friend and help any stranger in a jam; humorously self-effacing while each year holding the record for steer roping at the big State Rodeo in Miles City; not formally educated and even anti-intellectual, but “heap savvy.”

It was only fitting that they marry, the two great symbols fuse and on the Crandall ranch, clearly the only fitting place from which to reign. They were the pride of Citadel, and Deke despised it: not only was she beautiful, but she loved beauty, and that could never be fulfilled in this tiny, desolate wooden town lost in the middle of a nowhere of mud and ignorance, population 981.

And he knew she didn't love Boss James. During the months of lessons, she'd confided in him, asked advice, begged to hear about the real world outside of Citadel. Often, while they waited for Boss James after a lesson, he'd read poetry and they'd discuss it. He loaned her books and they talked about those. She told him her dreams of one day hearing a symphony and seeing a museum of great paintings, something other than the five Charlie Russells which marked the Crandall home as the cultural highpoint of the area. She'd never even ridden in a train, let alone an automobile; never seen a moving picture or talked on a telephone—but knew of such things only from the pages of *Country Gentleman* and *Saturday Evening Post* and *Woman's Home Companion*. Each new Sears Roebuck catalog was an adventure and a fantasy to her.

And all Boss James could do is make her the matriarch of this barren mud world, Deke thought bitterly. She'd die isolated forever from the life she knew existed but was denied her. Deke would eventually return to the world, become a doctor; but she'd be wasted here to grow old but never to grow. And he could do nothing about it directly. Although far too proud to let her know, he certainly had no resources, was, in fact, in debt. And when they met on the boardwalk, he carefully returned her open delight with a courteous formality so that onlookers might think of it only as the princess gracing the pariah; he knew that if Citadel suspected he was alienating their goddess, the story of Malcolm would surely reach her and,

if not turn her against him, at least horrify and confuse her. No, better their relationship developed this way, under the aegis of Boss James: if it was all right with him, no one dared speak against it.

But when he'd play something especially beautiful for her, or read her a poem, or talk about great cities, she looked at him with what he hoped was love. It became more maddening with every lesson as fall began to cool the days. He loved her and was sure she loved him, but was afraid that if he said anything and was wrong, it would destroy his vital cloister with her: she'd be gone and he'd be alone, the bubble broken, exposed to Citadel's killing cold.

Yet, if he was right, but because of his reticence she married Boss James, then that would be a double death.

He finally thought of a way in mid-October and ended the lesson an hour before Boss James was due. "These lessons," he smiled, "are only a pretense. You've learned so well that they're really just visits in which you play for me or I play for you."

"Oh, Deke, thank you, you're kind. But it would be years and years before I could play like you, if ever." She laughed: "But you're right; I do love to hear you."

"No, no—I'm not just being kind. You have a real feeling for music, much more than I do, and it comes out in your playing. That's just as important as technical mastery—and I've taken you as far as I can with that. No, I think if you studied professionally you could play concerts in a few years. Oh, it's work, of course, but it'd be a wonderful life, and you could easily have it."

She lowered her eyes. "If you're pleased with me, well, I'm proud. But . . . a *concert* pianist?"

"Why not? You've a lot more talent than I can help develop, and if you've ever wanted to see the world it'd be the very best way—you'd be right at the center of it!"

"I don't know. . . . Oh, sure; I've dreamed of seeing Paris or New York: who hasn't? Well, I guess Jimmy hasn't; I mentioned it once to him and he just sort of laughed, then asked why in the world anyone would waste a lot of time just traveling around places where they don't live anyway."

"But that's not how you feel?" Deke asked gently.

"Oh, no—it's just that the ranch is his whole life."

“And maybe it’s enough, too—for him. But that doesn’t mean for you, if you can see more to life than just a ranch.”

“But I couldn’t go alone,” she said, as if asking a question, looking to him as if for a reply.

This seemed the moment, and he was afraid to speak, yet dared not let it pass. “Do you—do you recall that Italian sonnet a friend in Baltimore translated, the one I couldn’t find? Well, it finally turned up—I’d put it in a book for some reason. Still care to see it?” She smiled, nodded eagerly, and he went to the desk and took out a carefully penned sheet. “I made a copy for you. I’d like to hear you read it aloud.”

“If you wish.” She took the sheet and read:

Might I, a single ship out on your sea,
And I, a young bird first out on my wing,
Ride wind with any fair felicity
Yet needs for wind a wind no wind can bring.
Lost ships becalmed on windless empty sails;
Young birds aground on blackened riven rock;
No movements can be made when breezes fail;
No birds can live long after breezes stop.
Like ships becalmed and waiting for a gust,
Or like the stranded breezeless flightless birds
Vailed low with muted cries, I’m rendered thus
Entombed to rise or die on your next word.
My days without your love have this despair:
Each one that comes brings ever lessened air.

“It’s very lovely,” she said. “But it has no title. And it seems so sad,” she said, silently rereading. “It seems such an unhappy way to be.”

“I’ve always thought so. Apparently the poet was in love with someone he feared didn’t love him—yet he needs her love as if it were a vital force, like the wind for a ship or a bird. Without it, he’s just doomed.”

“She must have been blind not to return his love.”

“Maybe she didn’t know he loved her,” Deke said.

“Well, then he’s at fault for not telling her; any woman would love a man who could write this.”

“Maybe he was afraid she’d consider him unworthy.”

Mary Lynn laughed: “In that case, *she’s* unworthy.”

"Maybe she's rich and he's just . . . a commoner."

"People can only be common in spirit," she said, "and this poet certainly isn't."

"Then you'd say his love was worthy of her?"

"Probably more than that. He probably thought too little of himself and too much of her," she smiled.

Deke paused a long time, desperately afraid to say the next thing, hardly able to bear the enormity of the gamble his next statement would involve. She was his only touch with something inside him that he loved and he'd rather have her naïve friendship than try for more and lose everything, fall back into the life with only Carlo and Sam and unbearable loneliness and endless fear: he felt drawn to her by a power he never understood; it was even stronger than with Cynthia, and he felt he'd die if he didn't speak and feared he'd die if he did. "Mary Lynn," he said, but his voice croaked and he began over, "Mary Lynn, read the first letter of each line down; they form words." His vision was rapidly blackening: he'd said it, felt as committed to what would follow as if he'd jumped from a building or fired a bullet into his brain.

"I have," she said softly, gently touching his hand. "And I do . . . of course I do."

She said it too quickly, she hadn't had time to find it, he thought wildly, "No, I mean the—"

"'Mary Lynn love me.' I saw it right away. And I do." She laughed, squeezed his hand. "You taught me the difference between Italian and English sonnets, and this is English. When you said it was Italian, I had to look at it closely—and do you think I wouldn't recognize my own name running down the front of the lines?" Her voice was so quiet it made him think perhaps he wasn't hearing what he hoped she was saying. "Deke, I've loved you from our first lesson. I've just been hoping you'd feel that way, too."

Deke exhaled, his eyes closed, the tense panic draining out of him. "You don't know how afraid I was. I was sure no one could love the town mortician and that if I said anything, I'd never see you again."

"Even if it made any difference, you're not the town mortician. But I'm glad you weren't ever given the chance to be, because it means you're really a medical student, on a kind of leave. I've always known you'd go back to that and I've been afraid that when you did, I wouldn't be able to go with you. You've been the only bright spark in my life and I'd have taken lessons every day, if I could. I was more afraid than you."

"I love you," he said at last, feeling a privilege in being able to say the words, feeling a protective film from them that would forever seal out the hostility and banish the disabling rejection that Citadel had so strongly reawakened in his life.

"I love you, too. And if you'll have me, I'll go with you." She grinned: "And even if you won't, I'll follow you." Her smile faded. "But I can't hurt Jimmy or my parents, not any more than I have to. I mean, it'll be hard enough for them, no matter how easy I try to make it. I guess I was always expected to just marry Jimmy, sort of automatically whenever Father thought the time came. No one ever asked me, though—but I think that's why he was hired as foreman so young. And he *has* been kind, like a big brother. We'll have to take time, break it easily."

"Of course. Love should make the world happy, it shouldn't hurt anyone. We'll take our time." He laughed with the relief of being able finally to admit this next: "Besides, I don't have any money now, anyway! I'll have to sell the place—except that I met you, it's been nothing but a curse—but I should get at least what I paid for it. That won't last until I'm a doctor, but it'll hold us for a while, and the rest will all work out as it comes."

"When we're ready, I think Father'll help us."

"Won't he resent your leaving the ranch?"

"Maybe. But he isn't cruel. I think he'll help."

"May I kiss you," he whispered. "At last . . . ?"

Carlo, as ever, came by later that night and, as usual, talked of the good old days when Malcolm was alive.

Deke's mind was on better things and he changed the subject—he knew he was Carlo's friend, but he couldn't keep his focus on the yesterdays of Carlo's life when his own yesterdays were over and his tomorrows truly about to begin: "Winter seems to be coming in a bit early, Sam says. Think so?"

"Hell, yes. 'Cordin' to Injun signs, it'll be a bad one, too. 'Course, we ain't had a real bad winter fer several years. Runs by threes, it seems. Bad winter, then'll come generally two warm ones. Then another bad one. And when she starts this early, why, she'll be a miser'ble son a bitch. But then, this place'll take any kinda cold."

"That's good. I hate the cold."

“Yep. Same’s Malcolm. Hated cold worse’n anything. That’s why I put the quilt ‘round ‘im. But this here place is jest about like bein’ wrapped in a quilt, too, ‘cause me an’ Malcolm, he had me personally pour a mix a sawdust an’ chicken feathers down between the outside walls when she was bein’ built. Best place in town when she’s cold, jest like a quilt.”

A few mornings later, Deke awoke to a dazzling white world that made the frost-crazed windows glow as if by electricity, and although the house was only slightly cool, the frigid outside air shocked his lungs and he could taste the cold in his mouth. As Carlo had predicted, winter was here early and hard. Deke had never known coldness so much below zero that the air itself seemed frozen.

The weather stayed arctic and the weeks went by marked only by Mary Lynn’s semiweekly lessons as Deke grew increasingly insular. Carlo was always eager to run errands, and the few times Deke left the house were to see Sam Franklin. But these visits grew tiresome, even agonizing, as Sam continued urging Deke to find more students, give a concert or do the vet work Sam could arrange: generally to take some steps on the path to gradual acceptance by the community. It was hard to bear these trivial conversations with Sam; Deke and Mary Lynn were on their own path, just the two of them, and it led out of Citadel—but Deke couldn’t tell Sam, he’d promised her to keep it secret.

And so Carlo was a relief; he wasn’t even tempted to tell Carlo, who came by each day to stoke the furnace, take out the ashes, then ramble on about the weather, the good old days with Malcolm, the sons a bitches in town: very nearly the same conversational agenda each day, worn as smooth as a streamway stone and as predictable and comforting to Deke as an old, faded favorite shirt. And all Carlo asked was that Deke play *Aura Lee* occasionally, which he gladly did, but secretly for Mary Lynn.

The loneliness was gone; Deke’s mind was filled with Mary Lynn as he painstakingly rehearsed the pieces he’d play for her, devoting the time and attention as if doing two concerts a week. And when not filling the house with music, he was even more intensely occupied writing sonnets, complicated love anagrams as carefully disguised as their relationship. She delighted in the poems, found them more beautiful than Shakespeare and was as gleeful as a child when she discovered the secret message concealed in each one.

Her last lesson had been after a great storm in the final week of November. He’d sat through the blizzard, staring into the blasting

snow and cutting banks of wind, afraid she wouldn't come—but the storm ended, and she arrived on time. She'd driven the buckboard in alone; Boss James and most of the others were checking the herds. Because she wouldn't be called for, they spent over three hours dreaming of their plans—he'd be a doctor, they'd have four children, would live in New York City or perhaps Paris, where she'd give recitals. She'd break the news to Jimmy and her father right after Christmas and they'd go east as soon as Deke sold the house and shop—he'd mail off the ads to eastern papers as soon as the weather broke. He wanted to do it now, but she wouldn't let him ride the sixteen miles in such cold: "There's plenty of time for us," she said as he held her to him, swaying together gently in the doorway, warm against the cold, before she left.

That was Friday. On Tuesday, she missed her first lesson. He fought anxiety by convincing himself she was busy with ranch work after the storm and would come the next day. She didn't. Or on Thursday. And by Friday, she'd missed two lessons. He paced the house, waiting hour by hour, unable to leave even to visit Sam, for fear she'd arrive when he was out. Besides, he wouldn't be able to tell Sam what was bothering him—he lacked any public right to anything other than the minor irritation of a piano teacher over a truant student—and he was nearly crazy with anxiety, obsessed with it every minute's every second.

He was languishing in the kitchen on Saturday when the heavy rap sounded at the front door. An instant's hope had Boss James bringing her—but just as instantly it died; it wasn't Boss's knock. He opened the door to a large man on whose face years of Montana's brutal weather had done their work.

"You're Deke Morgan, right?" Even more than ruination from the weather, the face was disarrayed by worry.

"Yes, come in." They'd never met, but Deke knew who this was.

"Fred Crandall, Mister Morgan; I'm Mary's father."

"Come into the kitchen. There's hot coffee."

"I'm afraid there's no time. Can you come out to my place with me right now? Mary's real sick."

"Sick?" Deke asked, turning away, feeling a sudden flush of panic, a pressure building behind his eyes.

"When she was driving home last time, her buggy slid and pulled the mare down, lamed 'er. Mary walked on home. I think, me and the wife, that she's maybe got pneumonia."

"Pneumonia! Well, what does Doc Bailey—"

"Ain't here. Got called out to some goddamned ranch days ago and probably got snowed in. Jim's ridin' the circuit for him now, but Mary told us you've had training."

"Some," Deke said, confused, "but I'm no doctor!"

"Maybe so, but you're a lot closer than anyone else until Bailey gets in. Will you help us?"

They didn't speak much during the ride, but about a mile out of town, Crandall said, "Right around here's where the mare went down."

"Why didn't she come back to town? She could've waited at my place, at any place, until she got a ride."

"She never likes to trouble no one. And maybe she didn't want to worry us by coming home late. She's mighty sick, though, I'm afraid." They said nothing more during the slow ride through the frozen snowfields.

Mrs. Crandall was almost hysterical when they arrived. "Even though you're the undertaker, we sent for you because Mary speaks so well of how you taught her piano and how you're really not an undertaker but almost a doctor. She thinks so well of you; please do something to help her."

They hurried him up to Mary Lynn's room. He came back down within half an hour. "She's asleep now," he said to Mr. Crandall. "Why didn't you come for me before this?"

"Seemed we'd find Bailey. Didn't seem so urgent."

"Urgent!" Deke exploded—but Crandall's tone indicated the real reason, and Deke knew he must answer that. He couldn't be a worried lover, he had to be a doctor, and part of that was to ease the Crandall's fear of him. Even so, he was frightened, his speech almost automatic: "No need to feel badly, I can understand why you wouldn't want to call . . . the mortician. And I know about Malcolm: but he was very sick, he was crazy, and I'm not. Besides, Mary Lynn's right. I've never actually even been a mortician anywhere, I just happen to own the place. So don't let that worry you. I'm a two-year medical student, and while that doesn't make me a doctor, I know a few things. Now look," he went on calmly as he could, "it's double pneumonia, and advanced. Her chances may be fifty-fifty, though, if we do everything right. Too much time's been wasted already, and we'd better move fast. Is there a paper and pencil?"

Deke printed out a short list and gave it to Fred Crandall. "Now this is certain: if she contacts any more germs, it'll go against her. I

know how concerned you are, but can you understand that until Bailey arrives, it's essential that she only be exposed to me?"

"Yes," both Crandalls said.

"I'll stay with her to give medication when it's needed, but whenever she's asleep, I'll come down and keep you informed. Now, Mister Crandall, that list: ride straight to Bailey's house, break in if you have to, and go through every drawer and cabinet until you find the bottles and packets on the list. It's Latin, so check everything letter by letter. If you don't find them all, go see if Simmons has any of them. But try to get everything. And hurry."

Fred Crandall was out of the house almost at once.

Deke turned to Mrs. Crandall. "Now, tell me what's been done so far. I hope you haven't been exciting her in any way."

"No. Read to her a little, that's all."

"Well, if you ever have another pneumonia patient, don't even do that. The disease settles in the lungs and weakens them, but it also weakens the heart tremendously. Any kind of excitement can be very dangerous. Now, I want boiling water on hand at all times. New bedding will have to be boiled and ironed dry—I'll put it on the bed, and we'll have to change it daily. Drinking water will have to be boiled—you can cool it in the snow."

"I understand," she said firmly, in perfect control now that she knew what to do. "I've been giving her only liquids. Soft-boiled eggs. Soup."

"Good. I'm going up now. Bring me a basin of ice, but just knock on the door and I'll come out. Don't come in; it could be as dangerous for you as it would be for her."

Mary Lynn was awake when Deke entered her room. "Shh, don't try to get up," he whispered. "Just relax."

She smiled. "Oh, don't you be so serious with me. I heard you downstairs. My goodness, how grim you can be."

"No, just practicing my professional tone for when I'm a doctor." He sat on her bed and smiled. "It's so they won't argue; that's why doctors talk that way, or didn't you know?" His smile faded. "And you are pretty sick, and I'm really not a Doctor Frederick Bailey."

"Good, how wonderful. Come closer, my nondoctor."

He moved closer, took her hand. They were silent for a time, he watching her face for any sign of discomfort, she just admiring him, glad he was here, feeling safe. There was a knock on the door and Deke answered it quickly. He took the basin from Mrs. Crandall.

"She seems to be resting well," he told her as he shut the door. "Here," he said to Mary Lynn, "have an icicle to suck on."

"How ridiculous. Is that what they taught you in medical school? Suck icicles?"

"It's pure as rainwater. It'll relieve the hot dryness."

"What hot dryness?" she protested, smiling weakly.

"If I say there is, then there is."

"Yes, doctor," she said around the piece of ice he pushed gently into her mouth. "Maybe you can move the piano up here and give me my two lessons, maestro."

"When your father returns he can bring it up. I'll play and you can get on top and dance. No, you're ill; you play and I'll dance."

"I feel so much better, stronger, now you're here."

"Good, but don't let it fool you, it really is kind of serious. I've sent for some medicines to help you through the crisis, when it comes. One of them will help you pass it asleep, painlessly. You won't even know it."

"Oh, no," she said, her voice so feeble she was barely awake, "I want to kick and scream and carry on."

He kissed her forehead; it would comfort her as she fell asleep and it was a way to check her temperature. "If you insist, I'll wake you so you can."

She slipped easily into sleep.

Fred Crandall came back empty-handed. If Bailey had anything on the list, he'd taken it with him, and Simmons only had a line of homeopathic medicines, nothing like what was on the list; the best he could do was sell Crandall some laudanum. "Maybe it'll help," Deke said—it was almost worthless—and he controlled his own panic only with the knowledge that if he showed any fear, the Crandalls would fall to pieces. Mary Lynn would have to go through the crisis on her own: the goddamned Citadel had even denied Deke the medications with which he knew he could help her.

Her crisis came that evening. Deke was with her through the night, cooling her forehead, holding her head as she coughed, encouraging her to keep breathing, but mostly holding her, softly kissing her temple or brow to assure her frequently, in her mounting delirium, that he was still there. He whispered to her almost continually, about music, poetry, their plans: anything to hold her

mind tightly to life, to their future; afraid that if he ever stopped talking she would drift away into the fever, into death—his words were a lifeline never relaxed.

The crisis passed at dawn, and she finally fell into a true sleep. Deke sat with her for two more hours before he went downstairs, sure that she was safe at last.

"It seems the worst is over," he said as Mrs. Crandall offered him a mug of coffee. "It's still dangerous, still touch and go. But the fever's breaking up."

"Thank God," Fred Crandall said, grasping Deke's hand, shaking it. "And thank you."

"She's a brave girl, a real fighter. But asleep now."

"And *you* haven't slept a wink, have you?" Mrs. Crandall asked. "We'll never forget this, Mister Morgan."

Mary Lynn's fever was much lower when she awoke, her eyes no longer glazed, her breathing steady. "Please give your patient a kiss for doing so well," she said after he'd sat silently through the many minutes of her waking, stroking the hair from her forehead. "The way you kiss me when I finally get something right at the piano."

"There's a shade of difference between mastering pneumonia and mastering a Strauss waltz," he smiled, bending to kiss her forehead. She took his face in her hands and gently moved his head downward so their mouths met in a kiss not of his physician's bedside manner, but of two lovers now safe after a frightening and dangerous voyage.

She napped much of the afternoon, which gave Deke his first chance to eat anything since he'd arrived. "You know, Mister Morgan," Fred Crandall said as Deke finished a bowl of soup, "I can't say enough for what you've done. I think folks have got you wrong. May I call you Deke?"

"I'd enjoy that very much," Deke smiled.

"Sam Franklin told me you offered to do some stock work a while back. Once word of what you've done here gets around, why, I know things are gonna change. I know I got plenty work needs to be done, and I reckon other folks'll find it even if they don't think they need it now."

Deke smiled. Sam and his veterinary plan! Well, Sam, like Crandall, meant well, but Deke had no more intention of studying cattle diseases than he had of staying in Citadel. He might have considered it before, as a desperate attempt to make the best of a ruined life, but his life wasn't ruined now that Mary Lynn had en-

tered it. Things were going to go well, and they were going to go well in a place a hell of a lot better than Citadel! But at least Crandall's offer meant that Deke wasn't such a pariah, and maybe Crandall would take her leaving better if he didn't think of it as his daughter running off with the town leper. "Well, thank you, Mister Crandall—"

"It's Fred, son."

"Thank you. But I'm not planning to stay in Citadel. I'll be selling out and going back to school. My goal was to be a doctor." He laughed. "Certainly not a mortician."

Crandall looked disappointed. "Well, son, I wish you the best, and I'd hope you'd consider coming back here to help old Bailey. But I reckon once you shake the dust of Citadel off your boots, you'll be after bigger game'n us."

Rustically but very accurately put, Deke thought, pouring himself another cup of coffee. "Yes, I suppose I'll stay back on my own range, where I grew up," he said, thinking, *and not stuck in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of ignorant self-satisfied bigots.*

Mary Lynn seemed much stronger the next morning. "I've been dreaming about our plans," she grinned. "Oh, I've got just loads of notions on what I'll do with you. It's my reason for getting well."

He smiled. "Well, I've got a few plans for you, too, and they're my reason for getting you well. But take it easy. Relapses are very common, your heart still isn't as strong as you think. I'm still doctor, not lover."

"Okay, for a kiss. But it better be no *doctor's* kiss."

By the next day her color was completely restored and when Deke came in, she was sitting up, her hair brushed, and wearing a much more enticing nightgown. She'd tidied the room of any evidence that it was recently a sickroom.

"What's all this?" he challenged, sitting on her bed.

"It's over! I'm well," she beamed. "No, really, I'm serious! You've done it. I'm cured."

"You sure?" he asked skeptically, feeling her forehead. No unusual temperature. She looked fine.

"Of course! Who'd know better than me? Look, I've changed bedding, everything. I'll go downstairs in a bit, but, well, I wanted to be alone with you a little longer now that I'm well and can appreciate it." She smiled slyly. "Room's different now, isn't it? And so are we. More like a husband and wife in their bedroom, not a mean old doctor and his poor patient in some sickroom. Don't you like *this*

room a lot better than that other one? It's so. . ." she dropped her voice to a whisper: "so intimate."

Something in her words, her looks, her unspoken but clear suggestion, her insinuating need, was preoccupying him with a rushing mix of feelings: security, being saved from Citadel, finding again the safety of the love whose loss agonizingly obsessed him when Cynthia rejected him; it all combined into a racing, mounting, almost a strangling flush.

She smiled, lowered her eyes. "I was so scared I'd never have you, so sure you'd leave without me, never love me. It was such a relief when I knew, that day, with your first poem. But each day as it would get closer to my having to tell Father and Jimmy about us, I got more and more frightened all over again—what if they did something to stop it? Maybe tell you it was for my own good that you leave without me. . . . They'd mean well, and . . . perhaps you might believe them. I didn't know, but I got so scared of losing you all over again, especially after the last time we talked, the day of the accident. And as I walked home, I just couldn't stand the idea of telling them and then ever losing you. . . . I was just sick with it when I got home." She laughed softly. "Maybe that's how all this got started. Anyway, I know I couldn't bear it if I lost you, and I suppose we'll soon be together like this every night, but . . . but must we wait? I can't bear to wait, not after the illness could have taken it all away."

The strangling flush of sensation, driven higher by every word and fear she expressed, was now so powerfully ruling him that he could barely think: "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, looking into his eyes, "I can't wait to love you fully. I want to know it now. My illness was the bridge from my old life, my fears, to my new life with you, and now that I've crossed it, I want to know the loving right now. Afterward, we'll go downstairs and tell Father of our plans, but right now I want you so much I don't think I can stand it unless you kiss me."

Kissing her was like being jolted by electricity; the soft pressure of her breasts against his chest blasted his mind with such passion that he trembled unthinkingly, working as if an automaton irrevocably set, preordained, mechanically committed to move through the well-known motions toward that which she wanted and which was not only now inevitable, but necessary, mandatory, seeing her soft eyes as if through a haze beneath him, and when he gently, slowly, broke the resistance and came into her, he heard a little gasp and bent his head to touch their lips as he began the automatic motions

which each produced a gasp and then a sigh, and he held her mouth with his own as the vertiginous long black wind started to blow through his body and his heart suddenly leapt and galloped, all his nerves turning into sirens whose pitch rose past neural audibility in the blindness of the pounding blood and the unendurable rapture in each muscle, each fiber seeming to burst as he came into her, blasting and blasting into the sudden stillness of her, his frenzy spending itself completely and then melting slowly into the depths of her motionless calm.

He lay beside her, exhausted, for an unknown time, but finally his vision cleared enough so he saw her as if in a dusky light through a dusty glass, diffused light that softened her features, made her hair a dark haze around her peaceful, lovely face. "Is that what you wanted to know?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. "It's what I always wanted, but never found . . . and now I have. I feel the world is oddly and completely with me now, and everything's in place. Thank you." And he leaned over to kiss her lips, but the lips that he kissed were already cold.