

The Locktender's Daughter

Prologue

July 12th, 1865
Independence, OH

Josiah watched the funeral from the woods surrounding St. Lawrence cemetery. Behind him, he could hear the rushing of West Creek and a soft summer breeze rustling through the trees. He watched as a petite, pretty red haired girl comforted a beautiful tall blonde girl.

"I wonder which one's his fiancé," he whispered. "It's a pity I had to shoot him. Damn shame. I think he was about my nephew's age. What a waste."

He climbed back on his horse and rode away still shaking his head. Wishing he didn't have to take the life of young Hagan O'Neal, the Boston Township deputy.

Several hours later, when the funeral procession arrived back at the O'Neal home in Boston Township. Bethany could have followed the rest of the family inside but decided she needed a moment alone. She turned to her best friend, who also happened to be Hagan's younger sister, and pointed to the covered bridge which spanned the Cuyahoga River.

"I need a moment alone, Rosie. If anyone wants to speak to me, I'll be sitting right there."

Rosie nodded as she dotted her freckled cheeks with her

handkerchief. "You were very brave at the cemetery. Thank you for letting me lean on you."

Bethany nodded. Rosie O'Neal had been her best friend for eleven years now and the closest thing Bethany had to a sister. Although they were both nineteen, Rosie was petite and her fiery red hair and freckled skin made her appear younger than Bethany.

"I'd do anything for you, Rosie. You are like my sister and always will be. I'll be back inside in a bit. I just need a moment alone."

Her best friend nodded and wiped away a few more tears. Bethany watched as Rosie's fiancé, Gil Finnegan escorted her through her home. Both girls were to be married next month and both were to be each other's maid of honor during the ceremony. Rosie's wedding would still go on as planned.

But mine won't, thought Bethany as she sat down on the bridge. All I ever wanted was to be Hagan's bride and now he's gone. How am I supposed to go on without him? What do I have that's worth living for now?

She placed her head in her hands and began to cry as she thought of her lost love. Her lost hopes and dreams.

She looked up and wiped away her tears when she heard footsteps heading in her direction. She looked up and saw Hagan's father. He sat down beside her and handed her a velvet box. She forced herself to smile at him as she kicked her long legs over the side of the bridge.

"Hagan's last wish was to make sure you received these. He loved you more than anything, sweet girl." He handed Bethany the box and she looked up at him.

Sean O'Neal was an exact older version of his son. They both shared the same dark hair, although Sean's was now tinged with grey. They both shared the same sparkling blue eyes, though Sean's had a few wrinkles surrounding his. They both even shared the same dimpled smile. He was a very attractive middle-aged man and she couldn't for the life of her could figure out why he never remarried after his own wife passed away 17 years ago. She took the box from Sean's hands and opened it.

Inside she saw Hagan's gun and deputy star. He had taken the deputy job his father had offered him to pay for her engagement ring. However, accepting the job had cost him his life. He was shot down while trying to apprehend the ruthless horse thief and counterfeiter, Josiah Black. Bethany felt as if her life was over. She loved Hagan since she first met him when she was eight years old. She ran her fingers across the star as it shimmered in the summer sunlight.

"Mr. O'Neal," she said as she closed the box, "I can't accept..."

"Yes you can accept it. My son loved you and wanted you to have it."

She opened the box again and stared at the gun. Suddenly, a thought popped into her head. God help Josiah Black if he ever dares to set foot in Boston Township. I'll be ready and waiting for him if he does.

"I'll take it but you have to do something in return for me."

"And what is that Miss Wilder?"

"You have to teach me how to use the gun."

"I don't know if a young lady like you should learn such thing..."

"Please, Mr. O'Neal. You have to do this for me."

"All right," he agreed, "If you stop by the jail tomorrow, we'll begin our lessons."

She smiled at Sean and gently kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Mr. O'Neal. I'll be there with bells on."

Chapter One

Bethany stared at her reflection in the murky Ohio Canal water. A golden curl tumbled on to her forehead and she tucked it back into her blue bonnet. She knew of at least two men in town who found her beautiful despite the crookedness on the bridge of her nose and she just didn't see what all the fuss was about. Why don't they all just leave me alone, she thought.

First Mrs. Wilkin's son, David began knocking on her parent's door just after Hagan's death. He claimed at first he only wanted to send his condolences but it soon became increasingly clear he wanted to court her. Next, Ed Walsh, a former schoolmate started paying her visits. She wanted nothing to do with either of them. The only man she could ever love was Hagan and she was prepared to become an old spinster if she couldn't be with him.

Her eighteen year old brother, Michael broke her train of thought by throwing a stone into the canal. She looked up and smiled at him.

"I thought you were going into town with papa. Why are you still here?" she asked.

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "I thought I'd check up on you before I went. You were awful quiet this morning when we helped The Cuyahoga Queen lock through and normally you're very chatty with the

captain."

"You worry about me too much, Michael. I'll be fine. Today's just an ordinary day and..."

"Yeah, but tomorrow isn't. You'll probably go to the cemetery with Rosie, Gil, and Mr. O'Neal. I could tag along for the trip if it would help."

"No, Michael. I'll be just fine. You worry about me too much. Now run along. I'm sure papa's eager to get going."

"All right then. I'll see you when we get back."

She watched as Michael walked down to the towpath. I'm older than him, she thought. I'm the one who's supposed to look after him. Michael was just two years younger and she had to admit that she was closest to him out of all of her six brothers. She looked back into the water again and thought about what he told her.

Although tomorrow marked the one year anniversary of Hagan's death, today was just an ordinary day. She helped her father, the locktender, as he locked the first two boats through this morning. She would attend the quilting bee with her mother in the afternoon since the newest quilt was for her best friend's baby. After the quilting bee, she had another lesson with Mr. O'Neal in the back of the Boston Township jailhouse to attend.

"I'll worry about tomorrow when it gets here," she whispered as she placed a hand over the golden locket that held a piece of Hagan's dark hair. The day would be difficult but somehow she would find the strength to go on.

Tyler arrived at Olivia's boarding house late in the afternoon.

His trip from Cleveland had been uneventful and he was looking forward to seeing his Uncle Josiah again. He had hoped his uncle would be there for his medical school graduation but he should have known better. I just hope Uncle Josiah was able to keep his end of the bargain while I was away at school. He'd be a good man if just he didn't keep getting led astray by his schemes.

Olivia Redding greeted him with a smile as she opened the door. She had been his uncle's woman for years and was like a mother to him. He only wished his Uncle would give in and marry her.

"Olivia, you look just as pretty as you did when I left for school," he said as he warmly embraced her, "Is my uncle around?"

Olivia shook her head and Tyler could tell from the sympathetic look in her crystal blue eyes that his Uncle was once again up to no good. "Where is he, Olivia? Damn him, he promised me. I graduated second in my class and he could've at least kept his end of the bargain."

Tyler slammed his bags down on the floor in fury and Olivia picked them up. "Come along, Tyler. I'll give you some tea to calm your nerves and take your bags up to your room. We'll discuss your Uncle later."

Tyler stomped into the boarding house and slammed his fist on the oak kitchen table. Olivia gave him a kindly smile as poured him a cup of steaming tea. He really liked Olivia and didn't mean to take his anger out on her so he attempted to smile back.

"I'm sorry about the way I acted. I know you can't control Uncle Josiah any more than I can." He pulled out a chair and sat down. "It's just that I really hoped he could change. Maybe I was shooting too

high."

Olivia sat down next to him and set the tea cup down next to him. Tyler always wondered her exact age. He thought she was quite pretty for a middle aged woman. Her silver streaked black hair was neatly tied up in a prim bun and the only sign of aging in her kind face were two little wrinkles under her eyes.

"Your uncle can have his moments and be a very good man, Tyler," she sighed as she patted his arm, "but when he gets together with his shady friends, I don't know what happens. They just give him these ideas and..."

Tyler grasped her shoulders and looked her straight in the eye. "Do you know where he is?"

Olivia nodded. "He said he had some business to take care of a in Northfield Township. I know you want to go and look for him but won't you please stay and have some tea first. I could really use the company."

Tyler reluctantly nodded, "All right, I'll stay. But just for a minute or two."

Tyler finished his tea and pretended to listen as Olivia rambled on about all the latest gossip. From the way she went on, Tyler wondered how much his Uncle had been around. It was almost as if she hadn't really chatted with anyone in months. He hated to leave her but he really wanted to go find his Uncle and stop him from whatever kind of trouble he was getting into. He gulped down the last of his tea and gave Olivia a kiss on the cheek.

"I'll be back with my Uncle in a little bit. I'll get him to change his ways if it's the last thing I do," he promised.

She gently touched his arm and replied, "Be careful."

Tyler arrived at the Town Square of Northfield about an hour later. He knew that his uncle often met his business "associates" in the bandstand there to make plans. He stepped into the bandstand and watched as various people passed through the town square. A young mother with a very small child at her feet entered the general store, a well-dressed gentleman entered the town hall, and several horses were drinking from the watering trough. He saw his uncle and his gang as they rode into the square.

Instead of heading directly towards the bandstand, they looked around the square as if they were surveying. His uncle pointed to a corner and a tall red haired man, who Tyler didn't recognize, and nodded. After talking for a bit, they finally all headed to the bandstand.

His uncle seemed genuinely surprised to see him. "Tyler, what are you doing here?"

"Olivia said I might find you here. I was disappointed when I didn't see you at graduation. I graduated second in my class you know." He folded his hands and glared back at his uncle.

"I know my boy and I'm sorry I couldn't make it to Cleveland to be there." He paused to pat Tyler on the back. "I'm proud of you and I'm sure your grandfather and parents would be too if they could be here now."

Tyler removed his Uncle's hand from his back, "Don't you dare change the subject, uncle. You promised me you'd stop this nonsense. I see that you're back with all of your old acquaintances." He began

pointing to the men surrounding his Uncle, "Let's see here. There's Aaron, Walt, Ben, and I don't know the redhead's name so he must be new. I know you're up to no good again. You always are when you get around these fellows."

"Gentlemen, can you excuse me for a bit? I need to have a word with my nephew."

The other men nodded and rode toward the general store. His uncle smiled at him and put his arm around his shoulder.

"Tyler, I hope you can believe I've changed. So have Aaron, Walt, and Ben. Our new business partner's name is Liam and he just joined up with us about a week ago. We have some real big plans now, and they are all legitimate. I promise you; my lawbreaking days are over. We came to the Square because we're thinking about buying some property here and starting our own business."

Tyler wanted to believe his uncle but in his heart, he knew he was lying. There was no way that his gang of horse thieves had changed into legitimate businessmen. He decided he'd have to keep a close eye on his uncle until he figured out exactly what he was up to.

"All right, Uncle. I guess I can believe you. Now can we please go back to the boarding house? Olivia looks like she could really use our companionship."

His uncle smiled at him. "Yes, Olivia sure does love to chat and unfortunately, her boarders of late haven't been very friendly. You run along, Tyler. I'll meet you there. I just want to talk to my partners for a bit."

Tyler nodded. "Fine, I'll meet you at the boarding house."

After enjoying Olivia's fine home cooked dinner, Uncle Josiah

excused himself and said he had some business to attend to. He barely spoke during dinner and seemed to be in a rush to leave the table. Tyler knew he was up to something. So he waited about a minute after he left and headed toward the door to follow him.

"I know he's up to something, Olivia." he said, "I have to find out what it is."

Olivia opened the door and nodded. "Well, promise me you'll be careful. It is getting late."

Tyler nodded, kissed Olivia on the cheek and lit the lantern before heading out the door. He caught up with his uncle at the stable and watched as his uncle climbed up on Hamlet, his favorite stallion. Tyler waited until he rode out and climbed aboard a grey mare named Misty. He followed his uncle to the town square of Northfield where he met the rest of his gang and then followed them to the Bauer Farm.

Mr. Bauer was a well known landowner as well as the town's blacksmith. He had many fine horses in his stables so Tyler knew exactly what his uncle was up to.

"Legitimate business, my foot," he whispered. "He's going to steal the Bauer family's horses!"

He watched as the other men headed to the barn. It was quite late now so he supposed the Bauer family were all fast asleep and unaware of what was going on their property. He had to stop his Uncle.

He climbed back up on Misty and galloped towards the barn. Liam, the new redheaded fellow was left as a lookout. He placed his fingers to lips and let out a warning whistle as Tyler drew closer. His uncle immediately rushed out of the barn.

"Tyler, what on earth are you doing here? You should be back at the boarding house."

"I should say the same for you Uncle Josiah. I can't believe you lied to me. I should've known better than to trust you. You are going to come back to the boarding house with me right now."

His uncle let out an exasperated sigh and placed his hand on Tyler's shoulder. "Tyler, I know we had a deal but if I can pull this off, I'll have enough money for us to go to China. I'll take Olivia there too and finally propose to her. Don't you see? This is the only way I know how to make that kind of money."

Tyler began to pull his Uncle's arm when suddenly a light when on in the Bauer house. Mr. Bauer came rushing out wearing only his nightcap and undergarments. In his hand he held a shotgun. Uncle Josiah broke free of Tyler's grasp and ran toward Hamlet. He quickly climbed back up on his horse and took off within a minute. Liam let out another shrill whistle and the rest of the men came scurrying out of the barn. Tyler ran toward the woods as the chaos ensued. Unfortunately, he was the first one noticed by Mr. Bauer and Mr. Bauer ran after him.

He could feel his heart race as he ran. It was pitch dark and Tyler did not know the area that well. He stumbled over a large oak tree root and as he attempted to get up, he was greeted by Mr. Bauer's shotgun.

"Don't you dare move, boy," the older man grunted, "What are you doing on my property? I saw the rest of Josiah Black's gang rushing about so I'm thinking you might be a member."

Tyler shook his head. "No sir, Josiah is my uncle. I tried to stop him that's all."

Mr. Bauer lowered the shotgun. "Well you don't look like a horse thief. Tell me where your uncle went and I'll let you go."

Tyler thought for a minute. He didn't think his Uncle headed back to the boarding house. He had many hideouts when he was on the run but Tyler wasn't about to turn his only living relative in to a crazy old man holding a shotgun.

"I don't know," he replied.

"Don't you lie to me, boy." Mr. Bauer repositioned the gun and held it to the side of Tyler's head. "Where is that no good thief?"

Tyler only had one chance for escape and he took it. He pulled Bauer's leg out from beneath him and the stunned man fell to the ground. He could hear the older man cursing him as he ran off into the darkness.

Bethany had the same nightmare she did right after Hagan's death. She woke up crying out his name, pleading with him not to take the deputy job his father offered. When she looked around her bedroom and realized it was only a dream, she got up and walked toward her window. Suddenly she heard a knock at the door.

"Bethany, are you okay dear," she heard her mother ask, "I heard you scream."

"I'm fine mother, I just had a bad dream. Go back to sleep."

"All right dear. I just wanted to let you know it wasn't your fault. I know you probably had the same nightmare so just remember you couldn't stop Hagan from taking that job. You'll find love again soon, my dear. I know you will."

"Good night, mother," Bethany said as she shook her head.

But it was my fault. He survived the Civil War and came back to me. I was a fool for letting him accept the deputy job. I was a fool and now I've lost him forever, she thought.

Suddenly the bugles blared from down at the canal. It was a warning that a boat was approaching the lock. She knew she wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, so she grabbed her maroon wrapper and met her brother and father downstairs.

"I can't sleep, Michael and papa. So I'm hoping you'll let me join you."

Her father nodded and she followed them both outside to the lock.

Bethany closed the left lock gate as her brother closed the right one.

Suddenly, she heard something bump the gate. She looked down and was surprised to see a man floating in the canal.

"Michael, Papa!" she cried out, "Come quick, I need your help."

She grabbed the man's arm just before he sank into the murky water. Her father grabbed his other arm and they both pulled him up.

Bethany looked down at him as they placed him on the grassy bank. His shoulder length blonde hair glistened in the moonlight. His clothes were soaked revealing the tight muscles under his shirt. A bit of stubble covered the tip of his rounded chin. Bethany guessed his age to be in his mid twenties. Considering that she hadn't looked twice at another man since Hagan's death, she was astonished by her attraction to the handsome stranger. She placed an ear to his chest and was relieved to hear the steady sound of his heartbeat and see the rise and fall of his chest.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her, "Are you my guardian angel?" he asked, "Am I in heaven?"

Bethany laughed and shook her head, "No, Mister. Believe me I'm about as far from an angel as they come. My name's Bethany Wilder. My papa, Colton Wilder is the locktender. We just saved your life, you know. What the devil were you doing in the canal?"

The young man shook his head. "I don't remember and my head hurts. You'll need to..."

He passed out before he could finish his sentence. Her father picked him up and hoisted his limp body over his shoulder.

"We need to get this young man back to the house. Come along, Bethany," he said. "Michael, can you finish up here?"

Michael nodded, "I'll see you back at home in a little bit."

Tyler was very nauseous when he finally awoke. He attempted to get up but the blonde haired girl he saw hovering over him earlier came running to his bedside with a washbasin. He leaned over it and heaved out the contents of his stomach.

"Thanks," he replied when he was able to sit up.

The girl smiled revealing two dimples and perfectly white teeth.

"You're welcome. You looked a bit green so I thought you might need this."

"Where am I?" he asked.

"You're at the Wilder house. I don't know if you remember me from last night, but I'm Bethany Wilder. I'm the locktender's daughter."

"Nice to meet you, Bethany. My name's Tyler, Tyler Brown. I think I might have a concussion. My head feels like a horse trampled over it."

"Well it should after you knocked it on the lock gate. You are very

lucky to be alive. What were you doing in the canal last night?"

Tyler thought back. The last thing he could remember was jumping into the canal while Mr. Bauer shouted at him in the distance. The crazy old man swore that he'd have every sheriff in Summit Country looking for him.

Oh no, Tyler thought. I can't tell Bethany the truth. There's no way she'd believe me. Especially if she finds out who my uncle is. She'll turn me into the sheriff for sure.

"I don't remember", Tyler lied.

Bethany gave him a warm smile and stared back him with her huge dark brown eyes. "Well I'm going to leave you now. I have some prior commitments to attend to. If you need anything, I'm sure my mother, father, or any of my six brothers can help. I'll leave this bell here." She placed a gold bell on the nightstand, "You just give it a ring if you need anything."

Chapter Two

Bethany knelt down on the soft dewy grass surrounding the grave. She placed a single red rose upon Hagan's headstone and blotted her tear streaked cheeks with her lace trimmed handkerchief.

"Hello, Hagan," she whispered, "I want to ask for your forgiveness. You see I rescued a very handsome young man from the canal yesterday and I have to admit I was tempted. He actually reminds of me of you a little. He has your eyes and dimpled smile but his hair is blonde. It's as gold as the sunlight. I am so sorry but don't you worry. He won't capture my heart. No one could ever take your place."

She paused to blow a kiss at the sandstone headstone, "I love you so much and I miss you every day. I promise you, I'll avenge your death someday."

She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief once more and blew her nose. She then walked back to the carriage at the entrance to the

cemetery where Rosie, Gil, and Mr. O'Neal waited for her.

"Tell me about your daughter," Tyler said as Mrs. Wilder placed a tray with his lunch over his bed, "I'd love to learn more about the young woman who saved my life."

Mrs. Wilder smiled and pulled up a chair. She was a stunning older version of her daughter. She wore a yellow calico dress and white apron. Her golden curls were neatly pinned high on top her head and just a few tiny wrinkles appeared above her bright turquoise eyes.

"What would you like to know?" she asked.

"Does she have many beaux? I would think a girl like that would have men fighting for her hand in marriage."

Mrs. Wilder shook her head, "No, Bethany just lost her fiancé last year. In fact, today is the one year anniversary of his death. She's at the cemetery right now paying her respects. She has had a few young men take interest in her but she wants nothing to do with them. She told me once that without Hagan, she's prepared to live the rest of her life alone. I keep telling her that's nonsense and she'll find true love again but she doesn't believe me."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear about her loss. If you don't mind me asking, how did her fiancé pass on?"

"He was the deputy sheriff of Boston and was out with his father, the sheriff, on the trail of a horse thief and counterfeiter named Josiah Black. He tried arresting on his own and Josiah shot him down. My daughter was devastated and still blames herself because he took the job to buy her an engagement ring."

Uncle Josiah, you strike again. Not only did you ruin my life but you had to ruin the life of that lovely girl as well. Poor, sweet Bethany, you didn't deserve this.

"I think my daughter shut herself off from the rest of the world after Hagan's death. She doesn't want anyone to get to know her. She used to tell me all her troubles but she won't even bare her soul to me, her own mother of all people," Mrs. Wilder sighed, "I pray for her every night that someday she'll meet a man who can climb the wall around her heart."

Tyler gently patted Mrs. Wilder's hand, "I'm sure someday she will. She just needs time."

"So tell me all about the young man you rescued from the canal last night," asked Rosie during the trip back to Boston, "Your mother said he's quite handsome."

"He's a little bit handsome but I have no interest in him," Bethany replied, "I was only doing my Christian duty by rescuing him from the canal."

"Christian duty," Rosie laughed, "Oh Bethany, you always use that excuse. When you came to my aid when the older boys picked on me in school, it was your Christian duty. When you brought home an injured wild animal, it was your Christian Duty to tend to it until it could fend for itself. You are quite the little saint, aren't you?"

Bethany laughed, "Oh, I wouldn't say that. Saints don't swear when they prick their finger's sewing. Saints would never fire a gun either."

"Oh that reminds me, how are your lesson's going? Father told me it's too bad you're a woman because you've become quite good with a

pistol and would make an excellent deputy if you were a man."

"I think I've come a long way. All I can say is that I can't wait for the day when that no good counterfeiter sets foot in the Boston Township area. I'll be waiting for him."

"So you're really going through with your plan of revenge?"

"It's all I've been dreaming of since Hagan's funeral. Josiah destroyed my dreams so I'll destroy him."

Liam sat at the bar of Red's Saloon in Boston. He ordered another shot of whiskey and looked around to see if Josiah had arrived yet. When he didn't see the no good counterfeiter, he guzzled down his whiskey and slammed the glass down on the maple bar top.

He had been working undercover as a member of Josiah's horse thief gang for about a month. He hoped that if he got close enough, Josiah would let him in on his side business and he would have enough evidence to bring him to Washington on federal charges of counterfeiting. Everything went to hell though after the attempted horse theft at the Bauer farm.

He begged his boss in Washington for this assignment as soon as he was hired as a member of the secret service. Little did anyone know he had his own personal reason for wanting to take Josiah down. Josiah was responsible for killing his only nephew.

His brother, Sean, was lucky enough to have found a wonderful gal to settle down with and have children with. Although his sister-in-law, Melissa, passed away after just five short years of marriage, his brother had the perfect family. Hagan was the closest thing Liam had even known to having his own son and then that bastard, Josiah Black

shot him down. He just had to get the evidence to bring the coward to justice.

He glanced around the room again. Some boisterous boatmen were playing cards in the corner of the room. The smell of their cigar smoke filled the air as two of them puffed away. A scantily clad blonde flirted with a young man sitting at the end of the bar but still no sign of Josiah. Suddenly Aaron Webber, a member of Josiah's gang, walked in. Aaron sat down next to Liam, took off his wide brimmed straw hat, and set it down on the bar.

"What will you have?" the bartender asked.

"Give me a glass of ale and another shot here for my friend," Aaron replied as he patted Liam on the back.

The bartender nodded and filled a large glass stein with foaming ale. He filled a small shot glass with whiskey and set both on the bar. Aaron handed the man a few crisp bills and smiled at Liam.

"I'm sure your wondering where Josiah is. I don't know for sure myself but I found a letter saying I should meet you here. It seems Josiah has a project for us and is prepared to pay us quite well if we do it."

"Well what is this project?"

Aaron went into his pocket and produced a folded sheet of paper. He placed it on the bar. "The detail's are all in here. I'll let you read it & you can let me know if you're in or not."

Liam opened the paper. It was a map to Van Horn's Pond in Northfield. A black x marked a spot next to the pond and detailed instructions were at the bottom of the map. Liam's eyes wandered down

to the instructions.

Dig about a foot or down or so at the spot marked by the x. You'll find a black box with a skeleton key inside. Bring the key to back to Red's Saloon. You'll receive payment then.

Liam folded the map back up and placed it back on the bar.

"Sound's simple enough. We'll just have to do it at night to avoid the Van Horn family. Will tonight work for you?"

Aaron nodded, "I don't have anything planned. I'll meet you there after sunset."

"Have you seen Josiah since our little mishap? I'm curious to know where he's hiding at."

Aaron shook his head, "No, word is that after the mishap at the Bauer farm, everyone in Summit County is out for him though. They've also got it in for his nephew. Poor boy just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time but everyone thinks he knows where Josiah is. Hell, like I said, I don't even know for sure where Josiah is."

What kind of coward would abandon his own flesh and blood like that, thought Liam. I know the boy was only trying to stop him and now he's on the run too. Liam figured if all else failed and he couldn't find Josiah on his own, maybe he could the nephew to help. First things first though, he had a mission to accomplish for Josiah that would hopefully bring the counterfeiter out of hiding.

Liam got off the barstool. "I'll meet you at Van Horn's pond at 8 o'clock tonight then. Don't be late," he said before walking out for the saloon.

Later in the afternoon, Tyler met a few of Bethany's siblings. Michael, the eldest of the Wilder boys was the first to introduce himself.

"Me, my sis, and my pa brought you out of the canal last night," he said, "Here, I brought you some of my clothes," he paused to place a folded white shirt and a pair of trousers on the nightstand, "You can borrow these since your clothes are still drying. I'm sure you'll want to get out of bed soon and you can wander around in just your long johns."

Tyler nodded and thanked Michael. Michael smiled revealing two dimples. He didn't really look like his mother but he had dark brown eyes just like Bethany. Tyler figured he was about eighteen because he looked like someone who was caught between boyhood and manhood.

"Thank you so much for everything. Your family has been wonderful to me," Tyler said with a smile.

"Well if you need anything else, don't hesitate to give us a holler."

A few minutes after Michael left. Tyler heard arguing in the hall outside his room. He got up and peered through the doorway. He saw a tall, lanky boy with black hair and bluish green eyes, pushing a shorter blonde haired boy against the wall.

"She batted her eyes at me, not at you!" the black haired boy shouted, "Why would Diana Crowley even pay one bit of notice to a scrawny little boy like you? I'm her age and your not."

"Diana is just a year younger than me," the blonde haired boy

protested, "She's always smiling at me. Why would she want anything to do with someone who has long, chicken legs like yours?"

The black haired boy clenched his fist and drew it back just inches away from the other boy's cheek. "You take that back, Jacob. I'm older than you and taller than you. I can pound you in a minute flat."

"I won't take it back, Zachary. Besides pa will pound you if you pound me."

An older man with black hair and dark brown eyes walked in at that moment and stopped the fight from going any further. He got right in between the two boys and scolded them.

"Boys behave yourselves. Honestly, you two are worse than Cain and Able. We have a guest in our home who is probably trying to rest but can't with you two quarrelling. Now we need more firewood, so why don't you two put your pent up energy to good use and go cut some down."

"Yes, father," the two boys reluctantly agreed.

Tyler couldn't help but chuckle at how Mr. Wilder was able to keep his two boys in line. Mr. Wilder must have heard him because he opened the door and grinned at him.

"Sorry about Zachary and Jacob, Tyler. Those two are only a year apart and some times they drive us all crazy with their bickering."

Tyler laughed, "I can only imagine." Since he was only child and lost his parents in a fire when he was just twelve years old, Tyler couldn't help but be a bit envious of all the brothers and fine parents Bethany had, "I wish I had a few brothers to argue with when I was growing up. I understand that there are three more boys in your family, Mr. Wilder. Will I get to meet them soon?"

"Robert, Frank, and Matthew are down at the River fishing our dinner out right now. I plan to check on their progress soon. If you're up to it, you can meet the other three at dinner."

Tyler nodded. Most of the dizziness he experienced in the morning was now gone and other than the large bump on the top his head, you couldn't even tell he had run in with a lock gate last night.

"I'd like that, Mr. Wilder. I'll see you then."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner, Bethany?" Gil asked as he helped her into her buggy, "Rosie's a wonderful cook."

She shook her head and looked at Gil. In school, many people had mistaken Gil and Hagan for brothers. Gil, however, was now much taller than Hagan. He still had the same dark hair and warm smile as her beloved Hagan though.

"No, but thank you for the offer. I promised mother I'd be back home by sunset."

Rosie, who was standing next to her husband, tried to embrace her best friend but it was difficult to get to close as her large belly kept getting in the way. Bethany laughed and placed her hand to Rosie's stomach. She giggled with delight as she felt the baby kick.

"I think you have a future boxer in there, Rosie," She laughed, "and I can't wait to meet your little one."

Rosie rolled her eyes, "Oh, I'm eager myself. According to Doc Bliss, I'm about a week past due."

Bethany smiled, "You'll meet your child soon enough, Rosie. I suppose these things just take time. Well I must be going. I'll visit

you again soon."

Tyler looked around the large oak table sitting right in the middle of the Wilder family's kitchen. Zachary nudged Jacob a bit as he tried to grab the gravy from him. Their mother gave them a stern look and reminded the boys to mind their manners because they had a guest at the table. Little Matthew, the youngest of the Wilder boys, sat at the edge of the table and with a huge dimpled smile announced he'd like to say grace.

"Of course you can say grace, Matthew, dear," Mrs. Wilder replied, "Now let's all bow our heads and clasp our hands."

"Thank you dear lord for the food before us," Matthew said with his little blonde head bowed, "and thank you for my big sister and all of my brothers and for the new frog I caught in the river today, amen."

Everyone at the table replied, "Amen" but Mrs. Wilder gave Matthew a stern look. "That was very nice, Matthew. However, I hope you will return your frog back to the canal after dinner. I've told you many times that frogs do not belong in the house."

Bethany giggled at her younger brother. Her golden locks were pulled in a tight plait and her dimpled smile was brilliant. In the candlelight, Tyler noticed a slight bend in the bridge of her nose. He decided to ask her about it tomorrow.

More than ever, Tyler was envious of Bethany's family. He wished he had six rambunctious brothers to share dinner with. He did like all of the Wilder family. Especially Bethany, he longed to get to know her better. Maybe, he would have a chance to get to know her better.

A day had passed and no one had come looking for him yet. Maybe he

could hide out in Peninsula. He could easily get a job at the quarry or one of the mills. He smiled at Bethany. She smiled back as she passed him the butter. I think I'll go and look for a job at the mill tomorrow, he thought.

Liam really hoped Josiah would be at Red's Saloon to give him his payment. Instead, he and Aaron were greeted by the bartender who pulled two envelopes out of his pocket.

"Josiah said you two would be here about this time," he paused to set the envelopes down on the bar, "Said I'm to give you these and you're to give me the key."

Liam nodded and pulled the skeleton key out of the pocket of his grey trousers. Damn coward didn't even have the courage to meet us here himself. He slammed the silver key down on the bar and took one of the envelopes.

"So you've been in contact with Josiah then?" he asked.

The bartender nodded, "He dropped by yesterday. Seemed very nervous too. Don't blame him though; word is that the law is really out for him this time. The Bauer Family's connections run deep all through Summit County. He picked the wrong family to steal from. Said he wouldn't be back but he did say he'd leave me instructions on where to leave the key."

At this rate, Liam knew he'd never track Josiah down. He was better off hunting down his nephew. He was certain that his nephew knew all about his uncle's various illegal schemes so maybe he could provide him with the needed evidence. He tucked the envelope in his pocket and

bid farewell to both Aaron the bartender. As he climbed on his black colt, he decided he'd send word of his change in plans to Washington first thing in the morning.

Tyler woke up the next morning as the aroma of fresh ground coffee filled his room. He quickly dressed into the brown trousers and white button down shirt, Michael had loaned him. Mrs. Wilder greeted him with a smile as he entered the kitchen.

"Have a seat," she said as she pulled out a chair from him, "Michael, Bethany, and my husband have headed down to the canal to help the first morning boats lock through. The rest of my boys are at school now but I do have some coffee brewed and I can make a wonderful omelet for breakfast if you'd like."

"That sounds great, Mrs. Wilder," Tyler said as he sat down. Thank you so much for being so kind to me. I've really enjoyed your hospitality."

Mrs. Wilder smiled as she cracked the eggs. "Oh it's been no trouble at all. You've been a wonderful guest. I suppose since you've recovered though, you'll be moving along soon?"

Tyler shook his head, "No I rather like Peninsula from what I've seen of it. I'm thinking about heading into town today and looking for work. I understand that they're always looking for help at the mill."

Mrs. Wilder nodded, "Yep, and I think there's even a boarding house nearby where a lot of the mill workers live. I do hope that if you find work there and decide to stay, you'll drop by to visit from time to time."

Tyler nodded thinking about how he planned to call on her pretty

daughter, "Oh I'm sure I'll drop by every once in awhile."

After enjoying Mrs. Wilder's hearty breakfast, Tyler walked outside and began his trek into town. Sure enough, he found Bethany right where her mother said she'd be, helping her father and brother at lock 30. He watched as her slender arms pulled the lock gate shut and was amazed by the strength of the slender blonde haired gal. He smiled and decided to go see if he could help.

When he reached the bank, Bethany was kneeling on the beam and opening the valves to release the water from the lock. He tapped her on the shoulder and asked if there was anything he could do to help.

She stood up and shook her head. A golden curl dropped on to her forehead and Tyler had to resist the sudden urge to tuck back into her bonnet for her. He had sworn an angel had rescued him from the canal two nights ago and now, starring at Bethany he knew he was right. The girl was angelically beautiful. She was very tall and the blue calico dress she wore nicely accentuated the feminine curves of her body. A few golden curls framed her face like a halo and her skin was the color of fine porcelain. Her only imperfection was the slight bend in the bridge of her nose he had noticed during dinner last night.

Bethany narrowed her huge dark brown eyes and asked, "Why are you staring at me?"

He smiled, walked up to her and traced the crooked path of her nose with his thumb, "How did that happen?" he asked.

"Oh," she laughed as he stepped away, "Well I took it upon myself to attempt to break up a fight between Zachary and Jacob when we were children. Zachary's arm went flying and he accidentally hit me right in

the nose. I suppose you think it was foolish of me to try to make peace but..."

"No," Tyler interrupted, "I don't think it was foolish at all. In fact I think it was very brave and sweet," He paused and smiled, "Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are, Bethany?"

"Yes," she softly replied, "My deceased fiancé, Hagan told me I was beautiful many times. If you'll excuse me, Mr. Brown, I really must return the house. I promised my mother I would attend a quilting bee with her today."

"I'll walk back with you," Tyler replied, "Just let me ask you father's permission first."

Bethany shook her head, "No, that won't be necessary." Before Tyler could stop her, she went running off. He smiled as he watched her calico dress bounce as she ran down the towpath. He couldn't help but be fascinated by her inner strength and sweetness as well as her beauty. He just hoped she'd never learn who his uncle was. He would never stand a chance with her if she did.

"So tell us about this young man you rescued from the canal?" asked Ruth Bronson as she stitched away on the quilt block, "He's the talk of the town and I've heard tell that he's quite handsome."

Bethany shrugged her shoulders, "I don't find him the slightest bit attractive," she lied, "and might I remind you I'm still mourning Hagan. I only did what I thought was my Christian duty when I saved his life."

"Oh really, then why is it you haven't been wearing your mourning locket?" her mother asked as she raised an eyebrow. "I haven't seen you

wear it since the night you found Tyler."

Bethany realized her mother was right. She'd worn the golden heart locket with Hagan's hair inside ever since his funeral. It means nothing, she told herself. I've just forgotten to put it on as all. She decided to change the subject.

"This will be a fine Ohio Star Quilt for Rosie's new babe," she said with a smile. She looked down at the bright red blue star pattern. It was just about completed and she couldn't wait to surprise her best friend with it, "I know she'll just adore it."

"I hope she does," Mrs. Riley chimed in. The frail grey haired woman sat against the far corner of the rack. At 70, she was the oldest woman in the quilting bee but by far the most skilled seamstress, "We've put a lot of work into it."

"She's the closest thing I've ever had to a sister so I know she'll love it. I just hope she doesn't go into labor early before we finish."

"If she does," her mother replied with a smile and a pat to Bethany's back, "I'll just let her borrow one of your brother's old baby quilts. I've saved all of them you know."

Bethany smiled and went back to stitching. She tried in vain to concentrate on her work and to erase Tyler Brown from her mind. He was very handsome but he wasn't Hagan. No man would every make her stray from her one true love. David and Edwin whom she had known for years hadn't succeeded so she was determined not to let some handsome stranger get to her.

Tyler was quite pleased to learn that they still needed help at the mill. "Business has been brisk ever since they built the canal," Tom Wallace, the miller explained, "and the trustees are trying to bring a railroad through the valley so that's sure to bring even more business our way. You look like a strapping young man and we need help to load the boats as they come on through."

"I'd be happy to help. How much is the pay?" Tyler asked.

"About ten dollars a week," he extended a large hand to Tyler, "I'll see you first thing tomorrow morning then."

Tyler couldn't stop smiling as he walked out of the boarding house. So far, everything had gone according to his plan. He had a job, he had a place to stay, now all he had to do was go make his intentions known to Bethany.

"Bethany, sweet little gal," he sighed as he walked down the towpath. She wasn't the first girl to catch his eye. He met a sweet young gal in medical school but the moment she learned who his Uncle was, she turned her pert little nose up at him. Tyler just brushed her actions off. He was used to it. People assumed he was no better than his uncle before they ever got to know him. If he could just get under Bethany's skin before she learned the truth, maybe he would stand a chance of courting the sweet girl.

When he arrived back at the Wilder house, he found Bethany outside hanging the washed clothes on the line. A soft breeze blew her loose golden curl over her eyes as she worked and she pushed it out of the way. He watched as her long slender fingers carefully pinned each garment to the line. She smiled when she saw him approach her.

"Hello there, Mr. Brown. Nice to see you're feeling better today."

"Yes, I am, thank you."

"I suppose you'll be on your way then."

"No actually, I like Peninsula. I just came back from town. I've taken a job at the mill."

Bethany widened her dark eyes. "Oh, Well I'm certain I'll see you around then."

Tyler nodded. He walked closer to her. "Yes you will. I promised your mother I'd visit often." He brushed the golden curl away from her forehead. She tried to back away but he grabbed her arm. "I don't think I've properly thanked you for saving my life."

Her pale cheeks began to flush. "It really isn't necessary."

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead, "Thank you, sweet gal." He let go of her arm and backed away, "I plan on seeing a lot of you Bethany and look forward to getting to know you better."

Chapter Three

"It doesn't mean a thing," Bethany whispered as she picked up the now empty laundry basket, "It was just a little peck on the forehead and it doesn't mean a thing."

Yet, the world seemed to stand still as Tyler brushed her curl out of the way and placed his lips to her skin. And then there was the way he looked at her, with his sapphire blue eyes glaring into her very soul, it was enough to bring her to her knees.

"Hagan," she whispered, "Please help me to be strong and not to forsake your memory. Oh sweet love, I don't know how I can stay true to you now."

She knew she had to find a way to resist Tyler. She could do it. She was able to resist two other men who wanted her hand.

I'll just have to ignore his good looks and charms. Tyler Brown will not get through the wall I've built around my heart.

Her mother was sitting on the rocking chair beside the fireplace when

Bethany walked back in. She was stitching up a hole in the knee of Matthew's trousers. She looked at Bethany and set down the needle and trousers.

"What's wrong, dear?" she asked, "You're so pale it looks as if you've seen a ghost."

Bethany shook her head and sat down on the oak chest next to the rocking chair, "I'm fine, mother. I just had a very interesting conversation with our former guest, Mr. Brown. It seems he's decided to stay in Peninsula. He went down to the mill today & got himself a job."

"Oh," her mother replied, "Yes he did say he was thinking of staying. He asked about you yesterday."

"And what did you tell him mother?"

"I told him that you're still in love with Hagan. You don't have feelings for him, do you?"

Bethany shook her head, "Of course not. Don't be foolish, mother. He might be a bit handsome but I barely know him."

"Bethany, I love you daughter but I don't know why you still cling to your foolish dreams. Hagan is gone. He's never coming back and you are a beautiful young woman. Why won't you give any man a chance?"

"Because Hagan's the only man I've ever loved and will ever love."

"Dearest, it is possible to fall in love more than once in a lifetime. Just look at your grandmother. She loved your grandfather more than anything else in the world. However, she met your step grandfather, John, and fell in love with him."

But grandmother wasn't responsible for grandfather's death. Her eyes welled up with tears, "Mother, will you just leave me alone. I've told

you many times if I can't be with Hagan I am prepared to become an old maid." She stood up, and rushed off into her bedroom without another word.

Bethany opened her dresser and pulled out the velvet box containing Hagan's pistol and star. She wiped her tears away and pulled out the pistol. She never kept it loaded, for fear one of her younger brothers might venture into her room and let their curiosity get the best of them. The bullets were kept in a silver jewelry box that she received as a gift from her grandparents. She ran her fingers across the ivory handle. She knew very little about guns when she first received it but Mr. O'Neal explained a little bit about it's origin during their first lesson.

"It's a Colt 1860 Lawman model. I have the same model," he'd explained, "I bought it for Hagan the day he took the deputy job. It's fairly easy to fire."

He pointed at a target pinned to a large oak tree. He stood behind her and showed her how to aim. Her heart was pounding as she pulled the trigger.

Her first try was only off by about a few inches from the center of the target. "Not bad," he told her with a smile, "A little more work and you'll be a regular pro."

She pulled the bullets out of the jewelry box and began to load the pistol. A little bit of practice would do her good right now and might just help her clear her head. She walked out of her bedroom with Hagan's pistol gripped tightly in her hand and was finally able to erase all her thoughts of Tyler Brown.

She sauntered out of the house and into the valley. Their home was only

about ten minutes away from the town of Peninsula but there was still plenty off woods for her to practice her shooting in. She wandered down through the hills and deep into the woods. The summer sun beat down upon her so she tied her blue bonnet tight to prevent her fair skin from burning. She found the perfect target in an old tree stump. Soon the blasting of the pistol drowned out the rushing melody of the Cuyahoga and the chirping of the woods.

Slowly she approached the stump to see how she did. She hit her mark perfectly. The bullet hole was right in the center of the tree.

"Not bad," she heard a male voice behind her say, "You're getting so good with Hagan's pistol that I reckon you're not the kind of gal to mess with."

She was startled at first but was relieved when she turned and saw one of her two would-be suitors. Ed Walsh smiled at her as he leaned up against a sturdy oak.

She'd known Ed since their days at the Academy, a private school in Peninsula affiliated with the Bethel Episcopal Church. He graduated first in their class and was still as smart as a whip but he gave up going to college to help out at his parents Saloon after his father fell ill.

Bethany smiled back at him. She liked him well enough and he wasn't really unattractive. He was tall and slender with brown hair. His light blue eyes were framed by gold rimmed spectacles. However, she refused his romantic advances because he was more like a brother to her. She had no feelings other than friendship for him.

As he approached her, he must have noticed her eyes were still red and

her cheeks were still tear streaked. His smile faded and he asked, "Bethany, why have you been crying? It doesn't have anything to do with the rouge you rescued from the canal, does it?"

Bethany rolled her eyes, "Gossip sure runs rampant in town doesn't it. No, Ed, this has nothing to do with Tyler. I was just thinking about Hagan. I still can't believe a year has passed since his death."

"And you're still sure you want to live the rest of your life as old maid without him? Bethany, I would do anything for you if you'd only let me. You know I've been in love with you since we were school children. Why won't you give me chance?"

"You're a good man, Edwin, and I know we'll always be friends but I feel nothing else for you. I'm sorry. The only man I'll ever love is now in heaven and I'm saving my heart for the day we're reunited."

Ed let out a hearty sigh, "Well, you can't blame me for trying. I do think you feel something for the fellow you fished out of the canal though. I saw the look on your face when I mentioned him."

Bethany shrugged her shoulders, "Maybe there is a slight physical attraction. However, I'm not giving into temptation."

Ed laughed, "We'll just see about that, Bethany. Just remember if your rouge breaks your heart I'll still be here if you need a shoulder to cry on. I was just on my way to town but I suppose I could escort you back home if you need the company."

Bethany nodded, "I'd like that, Ed."

As they walked back home, Bethany wondered if her attraction to Tyler was that obvious. Her mother noticed it, as did Edwin, and he seemed to be convinced it was something more than a silly little case of infatuation. She would have to try to hide her feelings better, she did

not want to encourage Tyler. She was determined not to be lured by Mr. Brown's charms.

Tyler watched as Bethany walked down the towpath with the slender brown haired fellow. He felt a twinge of jealousy as he watched them embrace at the front door of the Wilder home. Who was this skinny young boy? Was he one of the two suitors her mother spoke of? He didn't look like much from the distance but Tyler knew he had to deal with his competition swiftly, before Bethany learned his true identity. He decided to go visit the confectionary store he saw in town and pick up a sweet gift before paying a visit to Bethany.

After walking out of Cuddy Ingersol's Confectionary Store, Tyler realized he needed a good excuse to visit the Wilder home. He would feel awkward just knocking on the door uninvited. Suddenly he remembered he still had the clothes Michael had loaned him yesterday. His own clothes were dry now and he bought new trousers and a new suede hat from the Peninsula Mercantile. He really had no use for Michael's clothing anymore. He rushed back to the boarding house and grabbed the neatly folded pile from the nightstand. Then with a smile on his face, the box of fudge and clothing in hand, he set off for the Wilder home.

Liam was worried about going back to the Bauer House. However, Mr. Bauer was the last one to see Tyler so his search had to begin with him. He only hoped that either Mr. Bauer wouldn't recognize him as being a member of Josiah's gang or if he did, would believe he was a secret service agent sent to bring an end Josiah's counterfeiting ring.

He knocked at the door of the large blue clapboard farm house and waited for someone to answer. An old woman with grey plaited hair and a slightly wrinkled face answered the door.

"May I help you?" She asked.

"Yes, is Mr. Bauer around?"

She shook her head. "No my husband is still working at his blacksmith shop. He should be home in a little bit. Would you like to wait?"

Liam nodded. He had to talk to Mr. Bauer as soon as possible and was prepared to wait for him, "Yes, I can wait."

Liam followed Mrs. Bauer into the sitting room. He sat down on an ornately carved rosewood sofa as Mrs. Bauer offered him some tea. He accepted figuring that maybe he could chat with Mrs. Bauer and see what she knew about the attempted horse theft while he enjoyed a nice cup of tea.

She returned a few moments later with a blue and white china tea cup in her hand. He thanked her as she handed it to him.

"I'm actually here to talk about the attempted robbery at your home a few nights ago. Has your husband spoken much of it?" Liam asked after swallowing a sip of tea.

"Are you a lawman of some sort?" she asked, "We've had all kinds of lawmen visit to ask about the robbery."

"I actually work for the government. I was sent here to track down Josiah Black and bring him to Washington to face federal counterfeiting charges. I understand your husband chased Josiah's nephew away that night."

She nodded. "He said he would've caught him to if the boy hadn't

jumped into the canal. My husband can't swim."

If he jumped into the canal, there's a good chance he's hiding out in one of the towns along the canal. His brother was the sheriff in Boston Township so maybe he could help. He hadn't seen Sean or his niece, Rosie, in years.

He thanked Mrs. Bauer for her help, finished the last of his tea. "I think I have the information I need to put me on the right track. I no longer need to speak to your husband and I'll be on my way."

She smiled and led him back to the door. He hopped on his horse and headed in the direction of Boston.

The sun was beginning to set as he set out to visit his brother and Liam hadn't eaten anything all day. He knew of a small tavern just up the road from the village of Brandywine Falls. He decided to go get his dinner, spend the night in a room there, and visit his brother first thing the next morning.

The sun was setting as Tyler knocked on the door of the Wilder house. Mr. Wilder answered the door and greeted Tyler with a friendly smile.

"It's good to see you again, Tyler. What brings you our way?"

"Your son, Michael lent me some clothing yesterday and I just dropped by to return it. I've brought a small gift for your daughter. It's just a little something to thank her for saving my life."

"That was mighty nice of you. Come on in. We're just about to sit down to dinner and my wife makes the best fried chicken around. You're welcome to stay for dinner if you haven't eaten already."

Bethany looked very surprised to see Tyler as he walked through the door. She was helping her mother set the table and she dropped a fork on the floor.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Brown" Bethany's mother giggled. "Now if you two will excuse me, I'm off to get started on dinner."

"Here let me get that for you," Tyler offered as he knelt down beside her.

He handed her the fork and touched the soft skin of her long index finger. He never lost eye contact with her and she just stared back at him. Her dark eyes were as wide as a doe's eyes would be if the doe was cornered by a hunter. He smiled and handed her the box of fudge.

"I brought you a little something to thank you for your kindness when you rescued me from the canal."

She took the box and cleared her throat, "Thank you, Mr. Brown. What are you doing here?"

"I forgot to return some clothing your brother loaned to me. Your father invited me to stay for dinner. I told you'd be seeing a lot of me, so don't look so shocked."

He watched as she nervously bit her pink satin lip and had to fight the urge to kiss her. "I hope you're not trying to court me, Mr. Brown. I've told my parents many times I plan on becoming an old maid if I can't be with Hagan."

Tyler snickered, "It would really be a shame, a gal as pretty as you shouldn't waste her life that way. I think if you see enough me, I might just wear your resistance down."

"You'll never get to me, Mr. Brown, never," she protested glaring back at him, "Now if you'll excuse me; I'm going to see if my mother

needs anymore help with dinner."

After dinner, Bethany excused herself from the table and ran outside. She really needed to get away from Tyler. How was she going to resist him if he was going to be visiting her on a regular basis? She touched her forehead and recalled the gentle kiss he placed there earlier in the day. His lips were so gentle as they touched her skin and she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to kiss his lips. She felt her face flush at the thought.

She picked up a rock and watched it skip twice into the canal. It was a beautiful summer night and the moonlight shimmered across the pitch black water. She picked up another rock and watched as it skipped three times.

"Not bad," a male voice behind her said, "But my record for skipping stones is six. Bet you can't beat that?"

She turned and saw Tyler grinning smugly at her. His tall muscular frame was casting a magnificent shadow over the murky canal waters. She handed him a stone.

"Okay, let's see what you can do with that," she said with a smile.

"Let's make a little friendly wager here," he said, "If I can skip my stone farther than yours, you'll have to give me a goodnight kiss."

She turned away. "Mr. Brown, I don't think I can agree to that wager."

He put his hand on her shoulder, "Did your fiancé ever kiss you? It's really not such a big deal."

She turned and gazed into his dark blue eyes. They were like two

shinning gemstones in the moonlight. "Of course I've been kissed before. My fiancé kissed me once or twice."

"Well then," Tyler laughed, "Let's see how he kissed you."

She glared back at him and shook her head. "No, I don't think it would be appropriate to kiss a man I barely know."

He laughed at her. "Are you afraid of being kissed by me?"

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes you are. You're chicken."

Chicken? She was tempted to swipe that rock from him and knock him in the head with it.

She picked up a rock of her own and walked toward him. "You take that back, Mr. Brown! I'll throw this rock right at you if you don't take it back."

He laughed again. "I won't take it back. I think you're chicken and I don't think that fiancé of yours taught you one thing about kissing"

"I am not chicken!" She protested as she kicked the cattails at her feet. "And Hagan and I kissed plenty of times!"

"Well show me how you're fiancé kissed you Miss Wilder. It's not as if I'm asking for much. I just want one kiss."

Bethany rolled her eyes, dropped the rock, walked up to him, and planted a small peck squarely upon his lips. As she backed away Tyler began to laugh and shake his head, "No, sweetheart that is not a kiss." He grabbed her arms and pulled her close, "This is."

She tried to resist him but couldn't turn away as his lips met with hers. He dropped the stone and his long fingers began to play with the loose golden curls surrounding her face. A swift summer breeze

slightly blew her calico dress and it lightly touched his ankles. Her bosom pressed against his muscular chest and she could feel the stubble on his chin rub against her soft skin. She couldn't resist him as his tongue explored her mouth. Lord above, she tried but she couldn't resist.

He suddenly broke away leaving her more stunned and confused than she'd ever been. He smiled at her, "Well it looks like despite your best efforts, I am slowly getting to you, my dear. Goodnight, Bethany."

He took her hand and placed a small kiss upon its center. She was still too stunned to move. After he walked away, she put her hand to her mouth. For the first time since her beloved Hagan passed away, she was no longer numb. Tyler's kiss, while it scared her to death, had awoken all kinds of emotions deep inside of her. She rushed back to her home hoping she could get Tyler Brown out of her mind and heart.

Liam knocked on the door of his brother's home. Sean opened the door and greeted him with a surprised smile. Liam grinned back.

"Hi there, brother," Liam said as he stepped in, "Bet you're surprised to see me."

"Sure am. You haven't dropped by since Rosie's wedding. I thought your new job in Washington was keeping you too busy to return to Ohio.

Liam followed his brother into the parlor. He sat down on the rocking chair which once belonged to their father. "Actually, that's exactly why I'm here. I begged the chief, Mr. Wood to let me take down Josiah. I became a member of horse thief gang and hoped he'd let me in the counterfeiting schemes. Everything went wrong though after the

incident at the Bauer Farm. I'm now trying to track down his nephew, Tyler."

"You think Tyler might know where his Uncle is?" Sean asked as he pulled up a chair and sat down beside Liam.

"I'm hoping he does. I talked to Mrs. Bauer last night. She said her husband chased Tyler down to the canal. Do you know of any strangers who have showed up recently in the area?"

Sean nodded, "My girl, Rosie, said that Bethany recently rescued a handsome young fellow out of the canal. Bethany hasn't spoken much of him though. Rosie's not even sure what his name is."

Ah, Bethany, Hagan's fiancé. He remembered Bethany quite well and coming to the aid of a stranger sounded just like her. He'd pay her a visit next.

"How's Bethany holding up?" Liam asked, "I know it was rough on her after she lost Hagan. Does she still blame herself?"

"Yes, she does. Every time I see her I try to convince her it wasn't her fault. It doesn't do any good though. I'm still giving her shooting lessons and she's become quite good with Hagan's gun. It breaks my heart though to see the gal who was so full of life before Hagan's death so somber and so full of vengeance."

Liam nodded and scratched the back of his neck. "I know how she feels. Well, brother, I'm going to head to Peninsula. Maybe I'll drop by later and visit Rosie and Gil as well. Haven't seen those two since the wedding."

"Rosie is as big as house now," Sean laughed and shook his head. "She's quite eager for that babe to be born. I know they'd both love to see you. Well give my regards to Bethany."

A little while later, Liam stood in front of the Wilder House in Peninsula. He hadn't seen Bethany since Rosie's wedding and she barely smiled then. Before Hagan's death, Bethany was always laughing and smiling. She was an extremely friendly and caring young lady, the kind of girl willing to help anyone at anytime. When he last saw her, she tried hard not to let anyone see the pain inside but all her smiles seemed forced. He hoped he could bring some peace to the lovely gal by finally brining Hagan's murder to justice.

Moments later, Liam knocked on the door of the Wilder home. There was no answer. He waited a bit and knocked again, still no answer. Suddenly he saw a tall blonde haired man walking to the door of the Wilder home. He recognized him as Edwin Walsh, a friend of Bethany's who escorted her to Rosie's wedding. He smiled and called out to the young man.

"Ed, I don't know if you remember me or not, I was at Rosie O'Neal's wedding last year. I'm her Uncle Liam."

Ed nodded, "You do look familiar. What brings you to Bethany's home?"

"I wanted to talk with her about a young fellow she rescued from the canal a few nights ago. I believe he might be the nephew of Josiah Black and I was hoping she might be able to tell me where I can find him."

"Bethany's not here now. She usually attends a quilting bee with her mother every afternoon. I was just dropping by to leave her and her family and invitation for the church picnic."

"And what about the rest of her family, where might they be?"

"Her younger brothers are all at school and I last saw her father working at the lock. I might be able to help you though. She did tell me a little about the fellow she rescued."

"Do you know if his name happens to be Tyler Brown?"

Ed went pale at the mention of the name. He averted Liam's eyes. "No, No, she didn't mention his name." Liam knew he was lying. He would have to wait and talk with Bethany later to find out the truth.

"Well thank you for your help, anyway," Liam replied as he shook Ed's hand. "I'll drop by again later and see if Bethany's returned."

Bethany was quite surprised to find Ed standing outside the Bronson home. She greeted him with a smile, "So have you come to walk me and my mother home?" she asked.

"No Bethany," He shook his head. He wasn't wearing his usual love struck smile so Bethany knew something was wrong.

"What is it, then? Why are you here?" she asked.

He took her arm and whispered something so unbelievable that Bethany nearly dropped the newly made baby quilt. She shook her head.

"I never thought you'd resort to lying to win my heart, Edwin Walsh. There is no way Tyler is related to the evil man who took my Hagan from me."

"I just spoke with Hagan's Uncle Liam, Bethany," he whispered, "I wanted you to know the truth because I care so much about you."

She refused to believe Tyler was related to him. It just can't be, she thought as she recalled his tender kiss. She did have a shooting lesson to attend so she'd ask Mr. O'Neal. If Hagan's Uncle really had spoken to Ed there was a good chance he spoke to Mr. O'Neal as well.

"I'll believe it when I get some proof. Now, if you'll excuse me, Edwin, I must get home immediately."

When Bethany knocked on the door of the Boston Township Jail an hour later, she heard Mr. O'Neal call out from the other side. "Come on in, my dear. I'm just putting up some new wanted posters."

"Now's my chance to prove Edwin wrong," she whispered.

Mr. O'Neal was just unfurling a new poster as she walked through the door. She smiled at him and asked if he needed help.

"Yes, my dear," he replied, "There's one more poster on top of my desk. Could you please bring it me?"

Bethany grabbed the poster and curious to see who was on it, she unfurled it. She put her hand her to her mouth in shock when she saw the drawing of Tyler on it. Beneath the picture it read, "Wanted, Tyler Brown. Nephew of the infamous counterfeiter, Josiah Black. Wanted in connection with an attempted robbery at the Bauer Farm on July 18th. \$200 Reward."

"Mr. O'Neal, I have to go," she quickly said, "Can I borrow this poster?"

"Of course, Bethany. Just as long as you return it."

She found Tyler walking out of the mill. She watched as he waved farewell to his new co-workers and tried not to think about how his long fingers felt as they gently stroked her hair. After he was alone, she looked around to make sure no one was watching and crept behind him. In a matter of seconds, she had the cold steel of the pistol's barrel pressed against the tan skin of his neck.

"I know who you are, you lying bastard," she sneered holding the

poster in front of his face, "Now you're going to pay for betraying me."

"Bethany, please put down the gun," Tyler whispered as she folded the poster back up, "It's not me you want to kill. We both know I'm not the one who killed your fiancé. My Uncle did it. Shooting me will do you no good whatsoever."

"Oh, it will do plenty good. You're Uncle killed someone I loved and now I can kill someone he loves. Well, at least slightly cares about. I highly doubt that murderer is capable of love."

"I'm sorry I lied to you. I had no other choice but I can lead you to my uncle. He's the one you want to settle the score with. Not me."

Bethany lowered the gun but still held Tyler close. She wasn't about to risk letting him go. However, he did bring up a good point.

"Tell me where your Uncle is and I'll let you go."

"I don't know for sure," he admitted, "He has several hiding places. We can go search for him together though. We both want something from my Uncle. You want revenge and I need him to help me clear my name. I had nothing to do with the robbery and he's the only one who could prove it."

She thought it over for a moment. There's no denying, I want justice for my Hagan. I hope Tyler's telling the truth. How do I know if I can trust this incredibly handsome man?

"How do I know you're not lying? You could be in on robbery with your uncle. I mean, you did lie about being related to him."

Tyler shook his head and put his hand on her shoulder. "I never lied to you, Bethany. I just forgot to mention it. And if things don't work out and we can't find my uncle, you're free to go back home." He smiled at her and pointed to the gun. "Besides, you'll have a weapon."

I'm not armed so you have the advantage over me."

Your charms can count as a weapon, Mr. Brown. I'm not sure if I trust him or not but I can't let Josiah get away. Oh, what the hell. I can shoot him if he gives me any problems.

"All right, How long will it take to track him down?"

"I don't know for sure, it could be a few days or it could be months."

"I'll need to go back home and pack. I can get a few horses for us from Rosie and Gil. Can I trust you to wait for me here?"

Tyler turned around and smiled. She nearly dropped the pistol as she gazed at his perfectly white teeth and watched the sunlight dance upon the strands of dark blonde hair sticking out from his brown suede hat. Lord, above, she thought. Does he have to be so good looking?

"You can trust me, Bethany. As I said, I need to find my Uncle as much as you do."

"Good, I'll be right back. Just to let you know, I plan on bringing Hagan's gun with me on our little journey. If you think about kissing me like you did yesterday, I won't hesitate to use it!"

Tyler laughed, "You can trust me, Bethany. I'll be a perfect gentleman"

His charming smile and mischievous blue eyes told her otherwise. Yet, she needed him to get her revenge on Josiah. Like it or not, she was stuck with the incredibly handsome Tyler Brown.

"I'll be back in a little bit," she stated and then turned and walked away.