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OF

THE SON

by John V. Saffran

Madison County, Montana

A cattle ranch located on the Madison river in Madison County Montana bustles with activity as the ranch hands are branding cattle from the spring roundup. A large frame ranch house with weathered clapboard siding sits between a large barn and a small holding corral. Although the ranch house has an austere outside appearance, the inside is furnished in a somewhat elegant fashion. Inside the ranch house in an office is Sam Evans and his son Ben Evans. Sam is sitting behind a large mahogany desk smoking a cigar. Ben is standing facing his father.

Sam and Ben are both tall and lean. Sam has long grey hair and a closely cropped almost white beard. Ben has shorter dark brown hair along with a mustache and goatee. Both men have rugged but handsome features and bear a very strong resemblance to each other. Were it not for Sam's grey hair, they could almost pass for brothers.

Sam puffed on his cigar and said "Come on Ben? I need you here to help me run this ranch. It's roundup season. You want to travel over 8,000 miles to South America just to shoot wild animals. That doesn't make a bit of sense. The trip alone will take you over two months by boat".

Squirming slightly Ben said "Well I know it doesn't make any sense to you father but I've been working on your ranch forever. I really need to get away for a while. This is a good opportunity to do just that. You've got enough hands for the roundup. I'll be back in seven or eight months. Consider this a well deserved vacation. Hell, I might even look for a wife when I get back".

"Have you checked out this Hilary fella? He's offering a lot of money just to shoot wild animals" said Sam with a frown as he flicked ash off his cigar.

"He's wealthy rancher who owns one of the biggest spreads in Bolivia. I figure I'll only be there a month or two. When I get back you can start to think about retiring" said Ben with a smile.

Sam stands and said "Ben, this whole thing still sounds strange to me. Promise me you wont take any chances". He offers Ben a handshake.

Shaking his father's hand, Ben said "Don't worry father. I'll be careful. OK if I take one of your Rolling Blocks? I'll be doing a lot of long range shooting and I like a longer barrel".

"Better bring plenty of cartridges with you. 45-70 Rounds might be hard to find where you're going" said Sam.

The Penitenciaría Nacional in Buenos Aires 4 months later

The Penitenciaría Nacional was a place of humiliating repression, with prisoners who were worked hard and didn't have uniforms. This "medieval castle" was filled with 300 prisoners who had overpopulated the Town hall Penitentiary. Its walls were punctuated with towers and sentry boxes for prison guards. It was in a smooth ravine, with an iron gate.

Ned Hilary, a handsome man in his mid twenties with sharp angular features and long dark hair enters the wardens office. The Warden, a well built man in his fifties with short cropped grey hair is seated behind a large desk.

The Warden motions to Ned. "Come in Hilary and have a seat. Your discharge papers have come through and you are a free man".said the Warden.

"Well that's good news" said Ned with a grin.

The Warden folds his hands and a deep frown appears in his face. "Before you leave I have some very bad news for you. Today I received a wire from Bolivia. Your father and all of his hands have been killed. His ranch and all of his holdings are now in government hands. You are lucky your father was able to pay off the governor before he got killed. Usually a person gets hung for murder here in Buenos Aires".

Ned stands up and puts his hands on the Warden's desk. "What happened? Was it those damn natives who harass my father?" said Ned.

"I'm afraid not. It was a man from the states named Ben Evans. He was an expert long range marksman with a big bore rifle. Your father hired him to take care of the natives who steal stock from his ranch. It seems Evans was a man of principles and didn't take kindly to shooting them" said the Warden.

Ned sits down and shakes his hands wildly in the air. "Why is my father's ranch now in Government hands?" said Ned.

"As I understand it, Your grandfather was given possession of the land by the government as long as he or his next of kin lived on it. Your father had no will or directive. After Evans left, the natives burned everything. The government also was not very happy that your father hired Evans to kill natives" said the Warden.

"Where is this Evans now?" said Ned.

"All we know is Evans skipped the country and booked passage on a steamer to San Francisco. He took one of the whores from your father's ranch with him. I believe Her name is Dirty Ellie. It's out of our hands now" said the Warden as he handed Ned his discharge papers.

Ned stands up abruptly. "Well it's in my hands now" said Ned.

San Francisco Harbor

It's a foggy night when Ben Evans and Ellie walk out of their hotel in San Francisco. Ned Hilary, wearing a black shirt and black trousers along with a black bandanna covering his hair is quietly following them at a short distance. He is careful to keep out of their sight.

Ellie's long blond hair and blue eyes flash in the dim lit street as she tugs at Ben's arm. "Ben, why haven't you wired your father that you are back? I wired my mother in Texas" said Ellie.

"I want to surprise him" said Ben.

"How do you think he'll take the news of us getting married?" said Ellie.

Ben stops and puts his arms around Ellie. “Oh I think he’ll be real happy. He’s been after me to settle down for the last ten years. I’m sure he will be quite surprised” said Ben, Ned pauses and pulls a nickel plated Smith & Wesson revolver from his belt. He breaks open the revolver and checks the cylinder. Ned mutters under breath “I’ll give him a surprise he won’t forget”.

Just as Ben is about to take a step, a shot rings out. Ben gasps and falls to the ground face first. Blood flows from a bullet wound just below his neck, Ellie screams and kneels beside Ben. She does not hear Ned coming up behind her. Ned grabs her hair and jerks her head back. With one swift motion he slashes her throat and lets her fall on top of Ben. Ned smiles.

Telegraph office in Virginia City

Sam enters the telegraph office and walks over to the Telegraph operator, a thin man in his forties with a scraggly beard. Sam smiles. “George, I hear you have a telegram for me. It’s probably Ben letting me know he’s on the way home” said Sam.

“Yes. Mr. Evans. I have one for you. It’s from San Francisco” said George in a very nervous tone. He is trembling when he hands the telegram to Sam.

As he reads the telegram, Sam’s smile turns into a look of horror. “Oh my GOD! Ben is dead. He was murdered in San Francisco along with some woman from Bolivia that he married. They say he was robbed and they don’t have any idea who did it. Damn, I wish I’d tried harder to stop him from going there” said Sam.

“I’m so sorry Mr. Evans. What are you going to do? Can I help you with anything?” said George.

“Thanks George. There’s not much anyone can do right now but I would like you to send a reply to this telegram.” said Sam as he wipes a tear from his eye.

George picks up a pencil and pad. He is still trembling. “What do you want me to say” said George.

Sam takes his hat off. “Tell them I’m coming to pick up my son and his wife. I want them buried in Wyoming. That’s the very least I can do” said Sam.

George hesitates to write Sam’s request. “That’s over a thousand miles. It’s a rough trip Mr. Evans” said George.

Sam frowns at George. “I’ve made that trip many times before. I ain’t that old. I can still travel besides it will give me some time to think” said Sam.

“What ever you say Mr Evans. I meant no disrespect” said George as he started to write Sam’s message.

The Sam Evans Ranch

Sam Evans is cleaning an 1866 Winchester when Tom, his ranch foreman, walks in Sam’s office. Tom is a heavy set man in his late forties with a walrus mustache. Despite

his bulk, he moves about briskly. He takes his hat off. "You wanted to see me Mr. Evans" said Tom.

Sam puts the rifle down and frowns at Tom. "Tom, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me mister?" said Sam

"Sorry Sam" said Tom looking down.

"Tom, I'm going to California to pickup Ben and his wife. I figure I will be gone a couple of months. I'll take the train to San Francisco and I'll buy a rig for the trip back. You're gonna be in charge while I'm gone. I've notified the bank to give you the hand's payroll and anything else you might need. Any questions?" said Sam.

"Mr. Ev... uh Sam, that's a long and dangerous trip to San Francisco. Why don't you have the railroad bring them back here? Said Tom.

Ignoring Tom's suggestion, in a stern voice, Sam said "I need to be at the train depot by 3:00 o'clock today. Have the buggy ready. You can take me to the depot yourself".

"I'll be ready by 2:00 Sam. Say are you taking one of your Rolling Blocks with you?" said Tom.

Sam picks up the Winchester. "This will do just fine. A Rolling Block rifle got Ben into this" said Sam.

"What happened to your Henry?" said Tom.

Sam pointed to the loading gate on the Winchester. "This one is easier to load and I don't get my hand burned on the Barrel" said Sam.

On the way to San Francisco

Sam Evans did not take to traveling in a train. He had to take a series of feeder lines in order to get the main line that would take him into San Francisco. He had trouble sleeping in a train's passenger car. His seat was roomy and comfortable but he felt uneasy and anxious as he pondered the task that lay ahead. He continually looked out window of the passenger car as the train lumbered over mountain passes and sped through open meadows. The scenery was beautiful but he could not shake the terrible feelings of guilt he had. Why did he ever let Ben go to South America? Why did he teach Ben learn how to shoot his Rolling Block at long ranges? He recalled his early days as a Buffalo Hunter. It was hard, grueling and dangerous work. Why did he work Ben so hard? Was he trying to show Ben what hard work was? Sam tried to sleep again but couldn't. He lit up a cigar. A elderly woman sitting a few seats away coughed and gave Sam a dirty look.

"Shit" said Sam under breath. He looked a the woman and smiled. "Excuse me ma'am. I'll put it out" said Sam.

The women forced a faint smile and said "Thank you sir".

Sam pulled out a silver flask from his coat and took a swig of whiskey. The woman looked at him and shook her head. He held the flask up and toasted her then took another swig. The woman gave Sam a disgusting look and turned away. Sam smiled. He was really not a drinking man but he found that a little bit of whiskey could make him sleepy.

Sam put the flask away and eventually dozed off. Sam came to rely on his silver flask to put himself to sleep. Eventually the train pulled into the terminal in San Francisco.

San Francisco

It is a warm and sunny afternoon in San Francisco when Sam Evans walks down a brick paved street in San Francisco's harbor district. He stops by a white brick building with a sign on it that reads "Bay View Funeral Parlor, John Benson, Mortician". Sam looks up at the sign and entered the building. He is greeted by John Benson, a tall thin hawk faced man in his sixties with a thin mustache. Benson is wearing a black frock coat."

"Ah, Mr. Evans. I've been expecting you" said Benson.

"How did you know I'm Evans?" said Sam.

"You bear a very strong resemblance to your son. Welcome to San Francisco Mr. Evans. How was your trip? said Benson, smiling, as he offers Sam a handshake.

Sam ignores the handshake. "Where is my son?" said Sam in a somber tone.

"I've already embalmed your son and his wife. I have them in an ice house just down the street. Would you like to see him?" said Benson in a more serious tone.

"Yes. I would. Thank you" said Sam.

Benson leads Sam down the street to the ice house. Sam Evans and Benson look into a coffin with the lid off. Both men are holding their hats. A tear runs down Sam's cheek.

"Oh Ben" said Sam

"Your son was a handsome man. He sure looks like you. Would you like to see his wife?" said Benson.

"No. That will be not necessary" said Sam shaking his head.

"Will you be taking your son's wife with you?" said Benson.

"Yes. I'll bury them side by side next to my wife. I'll be back in two days with a rig. I do appreciate your help with this Mr Benson" said Sam in a more friendly manner.

"Mr. Evans, I suggest you take your last look now. It's a long trip back to Montana and I'm going to place them in sealed lead coffins. You will not want to open the coffin again. Oh, I forgot to mention that your son was shot in the back. His wife had her throat cut. I figured you'd want to know that" said Benson.

"Yes. Thank you" said Sam with a sigh.

It's none of my business but if I were you I'd ship the coffins back by train. You have a long and possibly dangerous trip ahead of you" said Benson.

Sam is annoyed by Benson's suggestion. "I'll be OK. I used to be a Buffalo hunter" said Sam.

Benson sensed Sam's annoyance. "Everything will be ready when you come back" said Benson.

Smith Firearm Supply in San Francisco

Ned Hilary, wearing a brown frock coat, is standing in front of a glass counter stocked with pistols. Behind the counter is Smith, a portly bald headed man in his fifties wearing a pair of thick round spectacles.

“Tell me about long range rifles” said Ned as he points to a display rack stocked with an assortment of rifles.

“What do you want to know?” said Smith as he starts to sweat.

“Well for starters, is it really possible to hit something at 1000 meters?” said Ned in a smug voice.

“Well I don’t know about meters but a while back a scout named Billy Dixon knocked an Indian off of his horse at 1500 yards” said Smith smiling.

“How long would it take to learn how to do that?” said Ned.

Smith touches his chin. “Well it depends on a person’s ability. I don’t know about 1500 yards but if you fitted a Sharps rifle with a Malcolm scope, you could learn rather quickly to hit things at 500 yards or so” said Smith.

“You don’t say. Let’s have a look at one” said Ned with a slight grin.

Mr. Smith lays an 1874 Sharps rife and a Malcolm scope on the counter. Ned picks up the rifle and aims it on a Buffalo head mounted on a far wall. So you say I could learn how to hit something at 500 yards with this?” said Ned.

“Well sir, I ain’t a very good shot and my eye’s are bad but I can easily hit a bucket at 300 yards with one of these fitted with a scope. Of course, I’d be resting the rifle on a set of cross sticks” said Smith with a slight smile.

“I’ll take one of these. How do I attach the scope to the rifle?” said Ned.

Smith picks up the scope. “I’ll mount it for you for free and throw in three boxes of cartridges. Is there anything else you need?” said Smith.

Ned points to the display of pistols in the glass counter. “I’m going to need a handgun. I somehow misplaced mine. What do you recommend? Said Ned.

Smith pulls a pistol from the display case and hands it to Ned. “I’d get one of these. It’s a Colt single action Army model in 45 Caliber. Good stopping power and very reliable” said Smith.

Ned aims the pistol at the Buffalo head. “I’ve heard of this one. It’s got a good feel to it. I’ll take one and can you throw in a couple boxes of cartridges?” said Ned.

“Sure. By the way, if you’re going to carry this pistol, I’d suggest you just load five cartridges in it and leave the hammer down on an empty chamber. If you drop it with the hammer on a live round, it could go off and hit you” said Smith.

“If you say so” said Ned in a slightly sarcastic tone.

Ned notices an 1873 Winchester Carbine on another wall. He motions to Smith. “Is that the famous Winchester repeater?” said Ned.

“Yes sir. It’s the carbine model. It holds 10 rounds” said Smith.

“10 rounds you say. Put one of these on the list for tomorrow” said Ned.

‘Do you want me to go over how to load the rifle and pistol with you?’ said Smith.

Ned gives Smith a hard look. “Not really. I think I can figure out how to load them myself. Just make sure you have everything ready tomorrow” said Ned in a harsh tone.

Smith dismayed by Ned’s sudden abruptness, starts to sweat profusely and wipes his brow. “Yes sir” said Smith.

Outside the Bay View Funeral Parlor

Sam Evans is seated in a Chuck wagon pulled by two mules. John Benson is standing next to Sam. Two lead coffins are in the cargo area of the wagon.

Benson examines the Chuck wagon. That’s quite a rig you have there Mr. Evans. You don’t see many like this one in these parts” said Benson.

“It belonged to a rancher from Utah who had no more use for it. It’s in good shape and we can use a new one at our ranch” It’s perfect for this” said Sam.

“I still think you’d be better off putting your son and his wife on a train back to Montana. It’s not too late to change your mind” said Benson.

Sam offers Benson a handshake. “It’s less than a 1000 mile trip and it will give me time to think. Thanks for all of your help Mr. Benson” said Sam.

Benson shakes Sam’s hand vigorously. “Well you have a safe trip Mr. Evans. Which route will you be taking?” said Benson.

“I’ll be taking part of the old California trail” said Sam.

Sam Evans tips his hat and reins the mules forward. As Sam moves down the road, Ned Hilary steps out from between a nearby doorway. He watches the Chuck wagon move down the street and smiles.

On the trail back to Montana

Sam is camped by a stream below a mountain range. His is sitting on a rock smoking a pipe. A rabbit is roasting on a spit over a fire. Sam takes a swig of whiskey. He hears the sounds of rifle shots off in the distance. Sam stands up and looks toward the sounds.

Sam mutters on his breath. “By golly, that sounds like a Sharps. Must be a hunter nearby” said Sam.

In a valley near Sam’s camp, Ned ejects a round from his Sharps rifle and sets the rifle against a tree. He walks two hundred yards and stops by a small tree with a 24” square piece of canvas hanging from a low limb. There are three bullet holes spaced within a 12” area on the canvas. Ned examines the canvas and smiles. “200 yards. Maybe that clerk was right” said Ned under his breath.

A week later Sam is driving the Chuck wagon up a slight grade. Mountains are seen in the foreground. He stops the Chuck wagon and winces then rubs his lower back. Sam takes a long drink of water from a canteen.

“Might of bit off more that I can chew” said Sam as he slowly gets back in the wagon.

Sam is about to spur the mules forward when he hears several rifle shots in the distance behind him. The shots sound further away than the previous shots he heard. He dismounts the wagon and looks off into the distance towards the sounds of the shots. Sam waits for a few minutes. He hears no more shots. He mounts the Chuck wagon and reins the mules forward. In a wooded area west of Sam, Ned is holding a piece of canvas with five bullet holes spaced within a 6” area on the canvas.

“400 yards” said Ned with a big grin.

Sacramento, California

Sam pulls into Sacramento, California. It’s hot and humid and a brisk wind is kicking up dust. He stops the Chuck wagon by the railroad depot and dismounts. Sam wipes his brow and then stretches for a bit. He walks into the depot office and goes to the ticket window. The Railroad clerk, a man in his early twenties with a pock marked face and unruly hair ignores Sam.

Sam raps his knuckles on the counter. “Excuse me Son. You got a minute to answer a question?” said Sam.

“Yeah. Whadaya want old Timer?” said the Clerk in a snotty tone.

“My oh my” said Sam with a slight smile. His slight smile turns into a serious look. Sam looks the Clerk in the eye. “Son, Somebody ought to teach you some manners. Do you have a train that goes into Virginia City, Montana?” said Sam in a harsh voice.

“I’m sorry sir. Didn’t mean to be rude. Guess I just got too much to do around here. There’s a train that leaves tomorrow at noon towards Montana. You will have to take some feeder lines to get to Virginia City” said the Clerk.

“I’ll take a ticket. I have two coffins that have to go with me along with my gear. Can you help me with that?” said Sam.

“**Coffins?** Yes sir. Meet me in back by the loading dock” said the Clerk nervously.

“Do you have a wagon shop here In Sacramento? I won’t needing my wagon anymore and I want to sell it if possible” said Sam.

“If you would like to keep it we can load it o a flat car. They always have plenty of room” said the Clerk courteously.

Sam smiles and shakes his head. “Never thought of that. Yes, I’d like to keep it. Thanks for suggesting it” said Sam.

The next afternoon Ned Hilary walks up to the ticket window. The Clerk is writing in a ledger. He looks up at Ned. “What can I do for you Sir?” said the Clerk.

Ned gives a big smile to the Clerk. "I missed my uncle by one day. I believe he's going back to Montana. He's a tall man with long grey hair. Could you please tell me which way he's headed? I need to attend a funeral with him" said Ned.

"He bought a ticket to Virginia City" said the Clerk.

"When does the next train leave for Montana?" said Ned still smiling.

"The next train leaves in three days at noon. Do you want a ticket?" said the Clerk.

"Yes sir. I wouldn't want to miss that funeral for anything" said Ned.

Virginia City

The train is pulls into the railroad station in Virginia City, Montana. Sam's Foreman is standing on the dock smoking a cigarette. Sam gets off the train and greets Tom. They shake hands.

"How was your trip Sam?" said Tom.

Sam ignores Tom's question. "I see you got my telegram and brought the mules with you. I bought a pretty decent Chuck wagon for the return trip but I guess I'm not as young as I thought. I ended up taking a train back from Sacramento. The Chuck wagon is on a flat car. You can help me load the coffins on it. How did things go at the ranch?" said Sam.

Tom stomps his cigarette out. "Good except for a bad storm last week. We lost a few head to some nasty lightning" said Tom.

Sam pats Tom on the shoulder. "Tom, I appreciate your taking charge for me. I'm going to need your help more then ever now with Ben gone. I know all of the hands respect you" said Sam.

"Thank you Sam. Did they ever find out who killed Ben?" said Tom.

Sam again ignores the question. "Tom, I want you help me bury Ben and his wife. I want Ben buried next to Mary" said Sam.

Tom examines the Chuck wagon. "That's a decent Chuck wagon Sam. We can sure use a new one. The cook will be happy" said Tom.

Sam and his Foreman load the coffins into the Chuck wagon and hitch up the mules. Sam mounts the Chuck wagon and reins the mules forward. Tom follows on a horse.

The Sam Evans Ranch

In an open field near the ranch house Sam, and Tom along with a group of ranch hands and neighbors are gathered around three graves. The wooden markers read Mary Evans, Ben Evans and Ellie Evans. A white haired Minister with a black frock coat leads everyone in singing "Shall we gather at the River". After the song is finished, the Minister followed by everyone else file past Sam and pay their respects. After everyone leaves Sam goes down on one knee next to Mary's grave.

“Mary, Oh Mary. I’m so sorry. I should have stopped Ben” said Sam as he wipes tears from his eyes.

Sam buries his grief by doing several tasks around his ranch with vigor and enthusiasm including rounding up cattle, roping cattle and branding cattle along with grooming his horse. On day after grooming his horse, he saddles the horse and rides past the graves of Mary, Ben and Ellie. He pauses and takes off his hat. He lingers for a minute then puts his hat back on and rides to a small bluff overlooking his ranch. He stops, lights a cigarette and surveys the landscape. Sam finishes the cigarette and rides back to his ranch.

Two weeks later, Sam wearing a pair of spectacles with gold frames, is seated at his desk looking at a ledger. He frowns and shakes his head. Tom walks in and takes his hat off.

“Mr. Evv... uh Sam, you have a visitor” said Tom..

“Well show him in Tom” said Sam.

“It’s not a him. It’s a her” said Tom sheepishly.

“Well then show **her** in Tom” said Sam impatiently.

An attractive and well dressed woman in her mid fifties with streaks of grey in her long dark brown hair enters the office. She walks up to Sam and offers him her hand.

“How do you do Mr. Evans. I’m Eliza Johnson” said the woman as she shakes Sam’s hand.

“How do you do Mrs. Mrs. Johnson. Please call me Sam. What can I do for you?” said Sam.

Eliza gets a puzzled look. “You don’t know who I am?” said Eliza.

Sam motions to Eliza to sit down. “I’m afraid I don’t ma'am” said Sam as he sits down.

Eliza smiles. “Oh come on now Sam. Ellie must have told you about me” said Eliza.

Sam frowns “Lady, just who the hell are you?” said Sam.

“Why I’m Ellie’s mother. She must have told you about me” said Eliza.

“Ohhh. Mrs. Johnson, I’m sorry for being so rude. I’m afraid I have some very bad news for you” said Sam in a very somber voice.

Eliza takes on a worried look. “What’s wrong. Didn’t Ellie tell you I was coming here? She sent me a telegram from San Francisco saying she married your son” said Eliza.

Sam looks down, bites his lower lip then looks up at Eliza. “Mrs. Parker, your daughter is dead” said Sam.

Eliza stands up and screams. “Oh my GOD. What happened?” said Eliza.

“Please sit down. Would you like some brandy or whiskey?” said Sam.

Eliza sits down and starts to sob. “Yes. I’d like a whiskey. Please tell me what happened Mr. Evans” said Eliza.

Sam gets up and pours Eliza a whiskey. He hands it to her then sits down. "All I know is my son Ben brought your daughter back from South America and they were married in San Francisco. My son was robbed in San Francisco and the thief killed both of them. I went to San Francisco to get their bodies. I wanted my son buried next to my wife. I buried your daughter next to my son. Apparently my son was going to surprise me. I'd been after him for years to find a wife. I really don't know anything about your daughter except her name was Ellie" said Sam.

Eliza wiped her eyes. "Ellie wired me about Ben and your ranch here in Montana. My visit was going to be surprise. I had not seen Ellie since she went to New Mexico and married a rancher by the name of Dan Porter. What he did to her was terrible and cruel. The son of a bitch is dead now, killed by renegade Comanche's. Someday I'll tell you what Dan Porter did to Ellie" said Eliza.

"Mrs. Johnson, why don't you stay for supper. I'd like to tell you more about Ben and learn about your Ellie" said Sam.

Eliza stands up. "Sorry but I have to go into town and find a hotel. Could you please show me where my daughter is resting?" said Eliza.

"It's getting late. You're more than welcome to stay here at my ranch. I have a nice spare bedroom. You'd be much more comfortable here and we can talk about Ben and your daughter" said Sam.

Eliza gave a slight smile. "Why Yes. I believe I'd like that. Could I see my daughter now?" said Eliza.

Sam takes Eliza over to the graves of Ben Evans, Ellie Evans and Mary Evans. Sam is holding his hat in his hands. Eliza Parker is wiping her eyes with a white handkerchief.

That evening Sam and Eliza are seated at hand carved oak dining room table. They are finishing their meal and are drinking a glass of wine.

"That was a very good meal Sam. I'm not much of a meat eater but I did enjoy that beef steak. The wine is excellent" said Eliza smiling.

"I've got a pretty good cook. He used to be a chef in some fancy hotel in New Orleans. He's real happy cause I finally bought him a decent Chuck wagon. Do you mind if I smoke Mrs. Johnson?" said Sam as he studied Eliza's smile.

"Sam, call me Liz. Please do smoke. I've always liked the smell of a good cigar. You have told me all about Ben. I'm sure Ellie would have been very happy with him. There are some things I want to tell you about myself and Ellie. I was a sporting woman in Ellsworth, Kansas before I met Ellie's father. He didn't care about my past and we got married. Jacob owned a ranch in Texas. He was a good man and we had a good life together. I still wear the gold band he gave me" said Eliza. She holds up her left hand to show Sam a heavy gold band worn on her ring finger. "Ellie was very young when Jacob drowned crossing a river while on a cattle drive. Jacob's holdings were enough to provide a comfortable life for Ellie and me. I opened up a dress shop but Ellie grew up without a father and became very headstrong. I tried to talk her out of marrying Dan Porter but she wouldn't listen. When Dan was away their home was raided by Apache's. The Apache's raped Ellie and killed their baby boy. Dan went crazy. He wouldn't touch Ellie after the

rape and blamed her for the death of their son. He said she should have hid him better. He and sent her off in bondage to South America to become a whore like her mother was. I was so happy to see her come back to the states and now this. Eliza Parker starts to cry.

Sam gets a sad look on his face. “Truth be told, my Mary was a sporting woman in Dodge when I met her. She was only seventeen when her parents were taken by the typhus. She was left on her own and did what she had to do to survive. It was lucky for Mary that I met her right after she started working in Dodge. She was a strong woman but she would not have lasted long as a sporting woman. She died many years ago. I miss her terribly” said Sam.

Eliza dries her eyes with a handkerchief. Sam lights a cigar and blows a puff of smoke in up in the air. “Mrs. Parker, You didn’t have to tell me about yourself. I’m sure you did what you had to do” said Sam.

“Please call me Liz. Yes, I did what I had to do also. My mother left me in a railroad station in St. Louis. She ran off with a Gambler who did not want children tagging along. I was only fourteen years old. I fell in with some bad company and ended up in Ellsworth. I was also young when Jacob met me. I doubt I’d have lasted long either. It’s a terrible life. I never forgave my mother for what she did to me. I tried to give my Ellie a better life that I had” said Eliza as she started to cry again much harder than before.

“You don’t have to rush back. Your welcome to stay here for a while. A little change of scenery might be good for you. I’d like to show you our part of the country. I’ve been to Texas many years ago. Too flat for me” said Sam.

Eliza stops crying. “I hate to impose on you Sam but a change of scenery would be nice” said Eliza.

Sam stands up. “Good. I’ll have one of my hands bring your luggage inside. We will put your buggy in our corral” said Sam.

They are interrupted as Tom hurriedly enters the dining room with a worried look on his face. He notices Eliza and removes his hat. “Sam, someone shot your horse. One of the hands heard the shot. He said it sounded like the shooter was a long way off” said Tom.

“Excuse me for a minute Mrs. Johnson” said Sam with a worried look on his face.

Sam goes into his office and straps on a cross draw rig with an 1873 Single Action Army Colt in the holster. He removes his 1866 Winchester from a cabinet and re-enters the dining room.

“Mrs. Johnson, I don’t want you to go outside tonight. My cook will show you where the guest bedroom is and get you anything you might need. I’ll see you tomorrow at breakfast” said Sam as he opens the loading gate on his Colt and spins the cylinder.

Eliza notices Sam is handling his Colt gets a frightened look on her face. She starts to tremble slightly.

Sam holsters his Colt. “Are you okay Mrs. Johnson? You don’t have to worry. You’ll be safe here” said Sam.

“I’m not worried about myself. It’s just that guns scare me. I’m sorry” said Eliza.

Sam follows Tom into a corral and leans his Winchester against a post. He walks over to the fallen horse and kneels down to inspect the wound.

“Slim thinks the shot came from that bluff to the west of here” said Tom.

Sam puts his finger below the wound. “A head shot! This is gotta be from a big bore rifle. Who ever did this was a pretty good shot. That bluff is at least 400 yards from here. Let’s ride over there” said Sam as he stands and points to the bluff.

Sam Evans and his Foreman ride to a bluff overlooking Sam’s ranch. They dismount their horses next to a wooded area on top the bluff. Sam and Tom walk along the edge of the wooded area examining the ground.

Tom stops and picks up an empty brass case. “Hey Sam, take a look at this” said Tom.

Sam studies the brass case. “It’s a 45-70 round. I wonder why someone would leave empty brass out here for us to find” said Sam.

“There’s some footprints and markings over here” said Tom as he points to the ground.

Sam kneels down. “Looks like he sat here while he was shooting. Also looks like he used cross sticks” said Sam.

“What do ya wanna do Sam?” said Tom.

Sam looks up at the sky. “It’s too late to do anymore looking tonight. I’m sure whoever did this is long gone by now and if he is still around, I don’t want to risk an ambush. Let the hands know what happened and tell them to wear their sidearms. I need to think this one out” said Sam.

The next morning Sam and Eliza are eating breakfast. Sam takes a swig of coffee and then lights a cigarette. “Are your accommodations okay Mrs. Johnson?” said Sam.

Eliza smiles and stirs her coffee. “They are fine Sam and please call me Liz. Sam, what happened last night” said Eliza.

Sam takes a puff on his cigarette. “Someone shot my favorite horse. He shot from a long distance and I’m quite sure it was deliberate. I don’t know of anyone who would have it in for me. I’ve always treated my hands good, paid them well. Never had to fire anyone” said Sam. He pauses for a few seconds and then looks at Eliza. “Liz, I’m hoping you can stay for a while. Maybe we can help each other forget what happened to our children. I’d like to show you around the country. I’ve been all around the west and this place is like heaven to me” said Sam.

With a sad look, Eliza said “I’d like that very much Sam but would you still want me around here knowing what I’ve been”.

“I told you about my Mary. She did what she had to do and I know you did the same. Let’s not dwell on the past” said Sam.

Eliza smiles. “That’s very kind of you Sam” said Eliza.

Sam raises his index finger. “One thing though, please don’t wander away from the ranch unless I’m with you. I need to get a handle on this horse shooting business” said Sam.

A week passes by. Sam and Eliza are sitting on the ranch house front porch. Sam is smoking a pipe. There are two glasses of wine on a small table between the chairs they are sitting on. It is a clear night with the stars in the sky sparkling like diamonds.

Eliza takes deep breath. "It's beautiful here Sam. I've never seen so many stars in a sky. The air is so fresh here. My Ellie would have loved this place" said Eliza as she tears up slightly.

Sam takes a puff on his pipe. "I'm glad you like it here Liz. I heard someone once called Montana the Big Sky Country. You know I wish I could have met your Ellie. I'd sure liked to have met the woman who got Ben to settle down. She must have been very special" said Sam.

"She was" said Eliza.

Sam taps the ashes from his pipe. "It's been over a week since my horse was shot. I think it would be safe to go for a ride. How about if I hitch up a buggy and we go for a ride tomorrow? I'd like to start showing you the country" said Sam.

Eliza smiles. "I'd like that Sam but I know how to ride. I'd rather be on a horse if you don't mind" said Eliza.

Sam looks pleased. "Well that's good to hear. Truth be told, I'd rather ride a horse myself" said Sam.

Sam & Eliza

The next morning Eliza is standing in a corral by her mount when she sees Sam enter the corral. She notices that he is wearing a cross draw holster rig and carrying an 1866 Winchester rifle. Eliza gets a nervous look on her face. Sam inserts the Winchester into a scabbard on his mount. He notices the nervous look on Eliza's face. "I know you are scared of guns but you don't want to venture out into open country in these parts unarmed" said Sam.

"I understand Sam. I'll be okay" said Eliza as she pats her mount's head.

Sam and Eliza ride towards a snow capped mountain range north of Sam's ranch. They stop by a stream to water their horses. Sam dismounts his horse and walks over to Eliza. He helps her dismount. Sam holds Eliza in his arms for a few seconds. Sam looks into Eliza's eyes and kisses her gently on the lips.

"I'm glad we met Liz" said Sam with a smile.

Eliza blushes slightly. "So am I Sam but I wish it could have been under different circumstances" said Eliza.

Off on a distant mountain peak, Ned is aiming his Sharps rifle at Sam Quigley. Through the Malcolm scope He sees Sam and Eliza embrace and kiss.

Ned smiles, "Well now, looks like Mr. Evans has a wife. She could be useful" said Ned.

Sam and Eliza walk over to a large rock and sit down beside each other. Sam takes his hat off then holds Eliza's hand and looks into her eyes.

“Liz, I hope you will stay here for a while. I’d like to get to know you better” said Sam.

“I’d like to Sam but I really should be getting back to my dress shop” said Eliza.

Sam puts his hand on Eliza’s cheek and strokes it gently. “Liz, I’m, uh, uh” said Sam in a nervous tone almost to the point of stuttering.

“Your what, Sam?” said Eliza with a slight smile.

Sam stands up. “We should be getting back” said Sam.

“Yes. We should” said Eliza.

Sam and Eliza mount their horses and head toward Sam’s ranch. They are both strangely silent on the way back.

Later that evening, Sam and Eliza are finishing dinner. Eliza notices that Sam appears to be studying her rather intently.

“I really enjoyed myself today Sam. This truly is beautiful country” said Eliza as she neatly folds her napkin.

Sam lights a cigar. “Please think about staying for a while. There’s a lot more of this country I’d like to show you” said Sam.

Eliza smiles. “I guess I could stay for another week Sam. I’ll need to wire my dress shop” said Eliza.

“Good. I’ll have one of my hands ride into town tomorrow and send a telegram out for you” said Sam as he fills Eliza’s goblet with a dark red wine.

During the next week Sam shows Eliza several different scenic areas. They pause at times to admire the view. Towards the end of week Sam and Eliza stop at a mountain stream. They dismount and water their horses. Sam and walk along the stream holding hands. Sam stops and throws his hat back on the stampede string. He takes Eliza in his arms and gives her a passionate kiss. Eliza Parker responds by embracing Sam tightly and returning his kiss.

Sam looks into Eliza’s eyes “Liz, I never thought I’d say these words to anyone again but I’ve fallen in love with you. I want you to stay here and become my wife. I love you. I need you Liz” said Sam.

“Why Sam, I don’t know what to say” said Eliza.

“Just say yes Liz” said Sam as he hugs Eliza firmly.

“Oh Sam. Yes, yes. I need you too Sam” said Eliza as she kisses Sam.

Sam smiles. “After we get settled, lets do some traveling. I ain’t getting any younger” said Sam.

“Oh Sam, what should I do with my dress shop?” said Eliza.

“We’ll go back to Texas and I can help you sell it. Tomorrow I’ll go into town and make a some travel arrangements. That can be our honeymoon” said Sam.

Sam and Eliza kiss again. From a distance Ned observes them kissing through his Malcolm scope. Ned smiles as he puts his Sharps back into the scabbard.

The next morning Sam and Eliza are standing on the front porch. Sam is holding his 1866 Winchester. He notices her nervousness and leans the Winchester against a hitching post. He gives Eliza a gentle kiss on her cheek

“My hands are out in the hills rounding up strays. My cook can help if you need anything. I’ll be back by this evening” said Sam.

Sam walks over to a saddled horse. He inserts the 1866 Winchester into a scabbard and mounts the horse. He turns toward Eliza and tips his hat then rides off. Eliza watches Sam ride off into the distance and goes back inside the ranch house. Ned is off in the distance watching Sam ride off and Eliza go inside the ranch house through the Malcolm scope. He smiles then returns the Sharps rifle to a scabbard and mounts his horse.

Terror strikes

Later that day as the sun is beginning to set, Sam rides up to his ranch house. Several of his hands are standing by the front porch. Some of them are carrying rifles and shotguns. Sam dismounts. Tom comes running out of the ranch house and walks over to Sam.

Sam dismounts his horse. “Tom, what the blue blazes is going on here?” said Sam.

Tom looks terribly distressed. “Oh Sam, I don’t know where to start” said Tom.

“Well just start from the beginning Tom” said Sam impatiently.

“Mrs. Johnson has been kidnapped and...” said Tom.

Sam abruptly interrupts Tom. “What? How do you know she was kidnapped? Where in the hell was our cook?” said Sam.

“I found him with his throat slit. Someone left a note inside for you. Sam, you won’t like what’s in there” said Tom as he bites his lower lip.

Sam and Tom enter the ranch house. On the dining room table is a note with spots of blood on it. Next to the note is a woman’s bloody severed ring finger with a wide gold band on it. Sam recognizes the band. He picks up the note and reads it.

Evans

Your son killed my father and ruined my inheritance. I killed him and his wife. You are also going to pay. Go to the telegraph office in Virginia City Montana in three days for further instructions. I have your wife. If you ever want to see her alive again do not try to follow me. If you do I will kill her very slowly. You know I mean it by the souvenir I left for you.

Ned Hilary

Sam puts the note down and stares at the bloody finger. “**Ohhh GOD**” said Sam.

Tom takes his hat off and looks at the note. “Sam, who is this Hilary guy?” said Tom.

“I think he might be the son of the rancher who hired Ben to shoot wild animals in South Bolivia. I never did find out how things went for Ben in South America” said Sam.

“What are you going to do Sam?” said Tom.

“Not much I can do right now. I’ll have to see what this Hilary fella wants. Now I know why Ben was killed” said Sam as he folded the note.

“How about I get some of boys to keep an eye on the telegraph office in Virginia City for this Hilary fella?” said Tom.

“No. I can’t take any chances as long as he has Mrs. Johnson” said Sam.

A wooded area east of the Sam Evans ranch

Ned Hilary is camped next to a small brook. Eliza Johnson is sitting down and leaning against a tree. Her hands and feet are bound with rope. She has bruises on her face and a bloody rag on her hand. Ned is chewing on a piece of jerky.

“Do want some of this? I need to keep you alive until we meet your husband. You know you probably looked pretty good in your day Mrs. Evans” said Ned grinning.

Eliza shakes her head and refuses. “How many times do I have to tell he’s not my husband” said Eliza.

“Shut up Bitch. I think you will say anything to help your husband” said Ned with a snarl.

Ned takes swig of whiskey and offers the bottle to Eliza. She again shakes her head in refusal.

Telegraph office in Virginia City

Three days later Sam enters the telegraph office and walks over to George. “Have you received anything for me George?” said Sam.

“Yes. Mr. Evans. This just came in a little while ago. It’s from Dillon” said George as he hands a telegram to Sam.

“Thanks George” said Sam as he starts reading the telegram.

Evans

In one week bring \$25,000 in gold coin to Dillon, Montana. Go to the Dillon Post office. A letter will be there for you with further instructions.

Ned Hilary

“Son of a bitch. This bastard is really playing a game with me” said Sam as he folds the telegram and puts it into his vest pocket..

“Is there anything I can help you with Mr. Evans. Do you want to send a reply?” said George.

“Thanks George. No, just keep this telegram private” said Sam.

“Yes Sir” said George.

The Sam Evans Ranch

Sam is sitting at his desk. Tom is sitting across from him. A bottle of whiskey is on the desk. “Have a drink Tom” said Sam.

“No thanks Sam. What did you want to see me about?” said Tom.

Sam takes a swig of whiskey and then lights a cigar. “Tom, you have been loyal to me for many years and I trust you. I’m going to be straight out with you. I’m being black mailed by the son of a big rancher Ben killed in Bolivia. Judge Gordon has some contacts in South America and did some checking for me. I believe Ben was justified in what he did. I would have done the same. This Hilary fella wants me to bring \$25,000 in gold coin to Dillon or he’ll kill Mrs. Johnson. He thinks she’s my wife. Truth be told, I’ve gotten rather attached to her and I asked her to marry me. I don’t want to lose her. I had to put the ranch up to raise the \$25,000. If I don’t come back the bank will take over the ranch. I told them that the ranch would be worthless without you and the hands. You and the hands will be OK but there could be a new owner if I don’t come back. I wanted you to hear that from me.

Tom nervously pours himself a drink. “Sam, do you want me and some of the boys to go with you?” said Tom. He takes a swig.

“Thanks Tom but this is something I need to do alone. Hilary killed Ben and his wife and there’s no doubt in my mind that he’ll kill Mrs. Johnson. He’s one mean son of a bitch. I’ll be leaving tomorrow. I’m going to take that Chuck wagon I brought back from San Francisco. I’m also bringing one of my Rolling blocks. I have to stop at the bank on the way to pick up the gold coins. I figure I can easily make it to Dillon in two days.

Tom stands up and offers Sam a handshake. “Good luck Sam. You be careful” said Tom.

“Thanks Tom” said Sam as he shakes Tom’s hand vigorously.

Dillon, Montana

Sam pulls into Dillon, Montana and stops the Chuck wagon outside of the Dillon post office. He enters the post office and walks up to the counter. The Postmaster, a thin grey haired man in his sixties is busy sorting letters.

“Excuse me. Name’s Evans. There’s supposed to be a letter waiting for me here” said Sam.

The Postmaster stops sorting letters. “Yes. We have something for you. A person dropped it off two days ago” said the Postmaster. He walks over to set of cubby hole shelves and puts out a letter. He hands it to Sam.

“Do you remember what the person who dropped this off looked like?” said Sam.

The Postmaster scratches his chin, “I didn’t see him but my assistant did. He said the person had some sort of an accent and gave him the willy’s” said the Postmaster.

“The willy’s you say? Thank you sir” said Sam.

Sam walks outside and sits on the Chuck wagon’s seat. The letter is addressed to Sam Evans. He puts his spectacles on, opens the letter and reads it.

Evans

Take the north trail on the Beaverhead River out of town. Follow it for five miles. You will come to bridge. Cross the bridge and follow the road to a buggy. Put the money in the buggy and go back over the bridge. I’ll release your wife. No tricks or your wife dies.

Ned Hilary

Sam Evans folds the letter and puts it in his pocket.

The Beaverhead River

Sam drives the Chuck wagon out of town along the north trail and reaches the bridge. He crosses the bridge and slowly follows the road for a half mile. He sees a buckboard with two horses hitched to it and stops. Sam opens the buckboard’s tailgate and places the said strong box on the floor of the buckboard. He notices a Sharps rifle and an 1873 Winchester carbine on the floor of the buckboard. He surveys the area and then mounts the Chuck wagon. Sam slowly drives the Chuck wagon back towards the bridge. He reaches the bridge and crosses it. Sam dismounts the Chuck wagon. He walks up a rise where he can view the buggy. Sam is carrying his Rolling block rifle and a telescope with him. He flips up the Vernier sight on his rifle and sights in on the buggy. He patiently watches the buckboard through the telescope. Ned Hilary slowly approaches the buckboard. He is pulling Eliza Johnson along with a noose around her neck. She is weak and has trouble walking. When they reach the buckboard, Ned throws her to the ground.

“Well lets see how your husband did” said Ned with a smirk.

Ned opens the strong box and views the gold coins. He grabs a handful of coins and smiling, he lets them fall through his fingers back into the strong box.

“You bastard. Sam will come after you” screamed Eliza.

“Oh I’m sure of that my dear, especially after I kill you. He’ll follow me and then I’ll kill him too. And here’s the best part, I’ll and up buying his ranch with his own money” said Ned.

Ned closes the lids on the strong box. He draws a knife and walks towards Eliza. Sam sees Ned walk towards Eliza with his knife drawn. He drops the telescope and picks up his rifle. Ned is about to slash Eliza Johnson's throat when a shot rings out. The knife flies out of Ned Hilary's hand.

"Shit!" yells Ned.

Ned gets a look of panic on his face and runs to the buckboard. He mounts the buckboard and whips the horses up to a quick start. The strong box slides off the buckboard and falls to the ground. Sam ejects the spent case and loads another cartridge into his Rolling block. He raises the rifle to shoot but Ned has driven the buggy out of sight. Sam gets in the Chuck wagon and heads for Eliza. He reaches Eliza who is laying on the ground trembling. She looks up into Sam's eyes as he cradles her in his arms.

"That was a fine shot Sam. You just saved my life" said Eliza.

Sam frowns. "That was a terrible shot. I was aiming for his head. Are you OK Liz?" said Sam.

"I'll be OK Sam. That bastard thought I was your wife" said Eliza with a smile.

"You will be as soon as we get back to my ranch" said Sam as he stroked Eliza's forehead.

Eliza gets a worried look. "Are you going to go after him, Sam? He said he was going to kill you and buy your ranch with your own money" said Eliza

"No. He's long gone by now. I don't think he'll come back but if he does, I'll be waiting. I believe he's headed north into the mountains. Let's go back into Dillon. We'll get a hotel room and have that finger looked at" said Sam.

"Sam, that still was a good shot" said Eliza smiling.

Sam spreads blankets on the floor of the Chuck wagon. He carries Eliza over and puts her into the Chuck wagon then covers her. Sam puts the strong box into the Chuck wagon. He picks up Ned's knife and notices blood on it.

Dillon, Montana

Sam and Eliza are settled in a hotel room. Eliza Parker is soaking in a large copper bath tub. She notices that Sam is cleaning his Rolling block rifle.

Sam stops cleaning the rifle. "Liz, I know guns make you nervous but I really need to clean this one" said Sam.

"I'm OK Sam. My goodness! This bath feels wonderful. Never in all my life have I ever been so dirty. He wouldn't even let me go in any the creeks we stayed by" said Eliza as she splashes around in the tub.

Sam continues to clean the rifle. He puts a small cloth patch on a cleaning rod and inserts it into the barrel. "Let's stay here one more night so you can rest up. It's a good two day trip back to my ranch. There will be a few streams along the way where you can freshen up if you wish" said Sam.

Eliza stand up with her back to Sam. “Sam, would you please hand me a blanket?” said Sam stops cleaning the rifle. He picks up a blanket and walks over to Eliza Parker. He covers her with the blanket. She turns around and looks into Sam’s eyes. They embrace and kiss.

Two days later, Sam and Eliza leave for Virginia City. Eliza sits next to Sam while he slowly drives the Chuck wagon through prairies, open fields, valleys, wooded areas and along streams. They stop to camp along the way. While Eliza swims and splashes in a small stream, Sam sits on a tree stump smoking a cigar. He watches Eliza and smiles. The next day they pull into Virginia City. Sam stops in front of the Virginia City National Bank. He dismounts the Chuck wagon and turns to Eliza. “Liz, I’ll be back in few minutes” said Sam. He retrieves the strong box from the Chuck wagon.

Eliza grabs Sam’s shoulder. “Sam, how much ransom money is in that strong box?” said Eliza.

“Oh, about twenty five bucks I reckon” said Sam with a grin.

Eliza playfully punches Sam on his shoulder. “**Samm**” said Eliza.

Sam enters the bank and walks over to the Bank President’s office. The door is open. He knocks on the door jamb and walks in. Henry Gordon is sitting behind a very large teak desk. Henry is a well dressed man in his sixties. His white hair and beard along with his impeccably tailored dress give him a distinguished appearance. Papers and ledgers litter his desk. Henry looks up. “Hello Sam. Glad to see you made it back safe and sound. How did things go for you” said Henry as he stood up.

“Good and bad. Bad news is the son of a bitch who kidnapped Mrs. Johnson got away. Good news is I got her back and all of the ransom money. Go ahead and count it” said Sam as he opened the strong box.

Henry closes the strong box. “I don’t need to count it Sam. Your word is golden. I’m glad you got your woman back” said Henry.

Sam smiles. “She ain’t my woman yet but she will be soon. I hope you and Martha will come to the wedding” said Sam.

“We’ll be honored to attend your wedding Sam” said Henry as he sat down and lit a cigar.

“One thing Henry, please don’t tell anyone especially my future bride about the note I had to take. Only my foreman knows what I had to do” said Sam.

Henry puffs on his cigar. “Sam, you ought to know that we hold all banking transactions as confidential. Speaking of confidentiality, please don’t tell Martha I smoked a cigar. I’ll never hear the end of it. Are you going after this fellow? He sounds like a mean one. You be careful Sam” said Henry.

Sam sighs. “I’ll make him come to me. I was real lucky to find Mrs. Johnson. I’m just going to count my blessings and leave things lay for now” said Sam.

Henry stands up and offers Sam a hand shake. “Good luck to you Sam” said Henry.

The Sam Evans Ranch

Sam Evans is wearing a grey frock coat with along with a maroon puff tie and Eliza Johnson is wearing a plain white lace dress as they take their wedding vows. In the crowd is Henry Gordon and Martha along with foreman Tom, all of the ranch hands, George the telegraph operator and several neighbors. After the wedding vows are taken, Sam and Eliza greet their guests. After greeting their guests, they dance alone for a while and then the guests join in the dancing. Tom, wearing a brand new sack suit, amuses the guests by dancing a lively Irish jig by himself.

“Sam, really how much was in that strong box?” said Eliza as they danced to a slow waltz.

“Never you mind Mrs. Evans” said Sam with a twinkle in his eye.

The guests bang their spoons on tin cups. Mr. and Mrs. Evans stop dancing and kiss. Everyone claps and cheers.

From a bluff overlooking Sam’s ranch, Ned Hilary is standing behind a large rock. He watches Sam and Eliza kiss through the Malcolm scope.

“Well now, looks like the bitch was telling the truth” said Ned under his breath.

Ned walks over to his horse and puts the Sharps rifle into a scabbard. He leads the horse into the woods. Ned unsaddles the horse and lays out a bedroll. He sits down resting against the saddle and takes a swig of whiskey. He looks at his heavily bandaged right wrist.

One week later, Sam and Eliza are finishing their dinner. Sam pours them both another glass of wine and smiles. “That was a good meal Liz. The boys and I really appreciate your taking over the cooking chores. You're quite the cook” said Sam.

“Why thank you Sam. I used to help with the cooking on Jacob’s ranch” said Eliza.

Sam lights up a cigar. “Liz, I think it’s time we went to Texas and settled your affairs. I have a new cook starting tomorrow. We can take the train and stop off in Denver for a few days. Let’s make this trip our honeymoon” said Sam.

The next morning Sam is sitting behind his desk in the ranch office. Tom is seated across from him. “Tom, Mrs. Evans and I are going to take a trip to Texas. We need to sell her dress shop. It will be sort of a honeymoon for us. You will be in charge. We’ll be gone around three weeks. I’ll drive the buggy to Virginia City and leave it at the livery stable next to the railroad station. That will save you a trip. When we get back lets talk about you becoming the owner of this ranch someday.

Tom gets a puzzled look. “Sam, how in hell could I ever buy this place” said Tom.

“We will work out a deal where you would pay me with the profits over say a ten year period. It’s been done before and I can’t think of anyone better to take over this ranch. I ain’t getting any younger” said Tom.

“Sam, I don’t know what to say. It’s always been a dream of mine to own my own spread. I’ll do my best to make this work for both of us’ said Tom.

Sam and Tom stand up and shake hands. “Sam, what about this Hilary fella. Do you think he’ll cause us any trouble?” said Tom.

“Naw, I don’t think so. Besides I’m the one he’s after” said Sam.

Two days later Sam is loading luggage into the buggy. From the bluff overlooking Sam’s ranch, through the Malcolm scope, Ned is watching Sam load luggage into the buggy.

“Looks like the lovebirds are going on a little trip. Well I’ll have a big surprise waiting for them when they return” said Ned to himself.

Sam helps Eliza into the buggy. She notice that Sam is carrying a side arm. “Sam, do you really need to carry a gun?” said Eliza.

Sam grins and pats his Colt. “Well, I’d feel naked without one in Texas” said Sam.

The Railroad depot in Virginia City.

In the shadows Ned watches Sam and Eliza board a train. After the train departs, Ned walks into the train depot office and goes up to the ticket counter. The Railroad Clerk is writing in a journal. “Excuse me. I just missed my uncle Sam Evans and his wife. Do you have any idea how long they will be gone?” said Ned in a very polite tone.

The Clerk looks up at Ned. “Let me see here. They booked tickets to Texas. They will return in exactly three weeks. Hope that helps you.” said the Clerk.

Ned flashes a big grim. “Oh yes. You have been a big help. Thank you” said Ned.

Denver, Colorado

Sam and Eliza are conversing over dinner in one of Denver’s finer restaurants. “I’ve never been to Denver before. I’m glad we stopped. Sam, this trout is wonderful” said Eliza.

Sam smiles and takes a sip of wine. “I always make it a point to stop here when I’m in Denver. One gets a little tired of beef for every meal” said Sam.

“Sam, my living quarters are above the dress shop. They are very nice but I don’t know of anyone who would want to buy my dress shop” said Eliza.

”Do you have anyone who works for you that could run it?” said Sam as he lights a cigar.

“Why yes. In fact she is running it right now while I’m gone. Her name is Rachel. She has been with me for almost five years. She lives on a ranch with her parents” said Eliza.

“She sounds perfect. Why don’t you let her pay you out of the profits like I’m going to do with Tom. It would be a good deal for both of you” said Sam as he puffs on his cigar.

Eliza touches Sam’s hand. “Why that’s a great idea. You’re a smart man Sam” said Eliza.

Sam grins. “Well, I’m dumber than I look” said Sam.

Texas

Eliza Johnson is in her dress shop talking with Rachel, a cute full figured woman in her thirties with curly blond hair. “Why Mrs. Johnson, I don’t what to say. I’ve always wanted a shop of my own someday. It will be so nice living in town again” said Rachel gratefully.

Eliza takes Rachel’s hand and squeezes it gently. “I know You will do well Rachel. Oh and it’s Mrs. Evans now but please call me Liz” said Eliza.

“I’m so happy that you found someone but so sorry about Ellie” said Rachel.

The door opens and a bell rings. Sam walks in and tips his hat. “Hello ladies” said Sam with a big smile.

“Well speak of the devil! Rachel, this is my husband Sam. It was his idea to have you buy my store” said Eliza.

Rachel is startled by Sam’s tall and imposing appearance. She blushes slightly. “Oh my! How nice to meet you Sir” said Rachel.

Sam tips his hat again. “How do you do Rachel. Good luck in your new business” said Sam.

The Sam Evans Ranch. Terror strikes again!

One week later, Tom and all of the hands are in the bunkhouse dining room eating supper when three shots are heard. They all stop eating and run outside. They walk over to the main corral where three horses are lying dead. As they enter the corral, two of the hands are shot and fall dead. The rest of the hands run for cover. The cook stands in the bunkhouse doorway and is immediately shot in the chest. The hands wait until dark and then saddle their horses. As they start to leave, Tom tries to halt them. Tom holds his hands up “Boys, wait. Don’t leave now. Mr. Evans will be back tomorrow” yells Tom,

The hands ignore the Foreman and leave the ranch in groups. Tom waves frantically. “Someone tell the sheriff what happened here” shouts Tom.

The next morning, Tom is dozing in a chair in Sam’s office. A Winchester is resting in his lap. He wakes up and looks at his pocket watch. “I better go into town and warn Sam” said Tom to himself.

Tom goes outside walks over to the main corral and starts to saddle a horse. Ned puts the Malcolm scope’s cross hairs on the back of Tom’s head. Tom throws a blanket over the horse and starts to cinch the saddle down, Just as Ned pulls the trigger, the horse bucks and moves Tom upward. Tom is hit in the thigh just below his hip and falls to the ground withering in pain.

“Damn horse” said Ned.

Tom crawls behind a water trough and pauses. He starts crawling slowly towards the ranch house dragging the Winchester behind him. Through the Malcolm scope, Ned watches the Foreman crawl towards the ranch house. Tom is very weak and makes it to

the porch. Ned decides not to fire again at Tom. "He's not going anywhere and he might be just enough to throw Evans off guard" said Ned to himself.

Several hours later, the train pulls into the depot in Virginia City. Sam and Eliza disembark the train and walk over to the livery stable to pick up the buggy. They head for Sam ranch. As they approach the ranch, Sam gets a worried look on his face. The ranch appears deserted. As they get closer, Sam sees Tom laying on the porch. He is holding a Winchester and a bloody rag is wrapped around his thigh. Sam dismounts the buggy and rushes towards Tom.

Sam cradles Tom's head in his arms. "Tom, what the hell happened here?" said Sam.

"Oh Sam. Sam..." said Tom in a raspy voice.

Tom passes out in Sam's arms. Eliza dismounts the buggy and helps Sam Quigley carry the Tom into the parlor. They gently lay him down on a couch.

Eliza looks at Tom's wound. "He's lost a lot of blood Sam" said Eliza.

Tom opens his eyes. "Sam, it was terrible. I tried to stop them. I, I..." said Tom in a weak voice.

"Just take it easy Tom. Can you tell me what happened" said Sam.

"It started last night after the evening meal. Someone starting shooting horse's in the main corral. When the hands came out to see what was happening, he shot three of them dead on the spot including our new cook. Anytime someone showed their face, He would fire at them. The shots came from that same place on the bluff. During the night all of the hands saddled their horses and took off. I tried to stop them but it was no use. I told them to tell the Sheriff what happened but I think they were all too scared to go into town. This morning I was saddling my horse and was going to warn you when I got shot. Sam, we, we... we..." said Tom as he passed out again.

Sam went to the gun cabinet and retrieves his 1866 Winchester. "Liz, can you look after his leg. Make sure the bleeding has stopped" said Sam.

Sam walks over to a window and looks to the bluff. He studies the bluff for a bit and then walks back towards the couch. He lays the Winchester on a table and sits down in a large leather chair.

"What are you going to do Sam?" said Eliza as she wipes Tom's forehead.

Sam shakes his head. "I don't know. I really misjudged Hilary. Poor judgment on my part" said Sam.

Ned Hilary steps out from a bedroom. He is pointing his 1873 Winchester at Sam. "You sure did misjudge me Evans. Don't make a move or I'll kill your bride" said Ned laughing.

"What do you want you son of a bitch?" said Sam.

"First of all take that pistol out of the holster and lay it on the floor, slowly. I want that \$25,000 in gold you owe me. Tomorrow morning you are going to the bank to get my money. Any tricks this time and I'll slit her throat sure as I'm standing here" said Ned with a snarl.

Sam Quigley stands up draws his Colt from the holster. He gently lays it on the floor. "Why did you kill my hands? They did you no wrong" said Sam.

Ned smiles."I wanted to give you a taste of your son's medicine" said Ned.

"You won't get away with this" said Sam.

"I believe I will Evans. This time I won't misjudge you. Just sit your ass back down in that chair. You will be leaving for the bank at daylight" said Ned.

Sam sits back down in the large leather chair. Ned pulls out one of the dining room chairs and sits down with his back to the couch. He keeps the 1873 Winchester trained on Sam. Tom opens his eyes and notices Ned sitting with the Winchester aimed at Sam. Tom draws a knife and slowly rises up. He slowly starts walking towards Ned. As he walks, he coughs and starts to shake. Ned hears the sounds and turns around. He levers the 1873 Winchester rifle and it jams. The lever will not close.

"What the hell?" screams Ned.

Ned throws the Winchester on the floor. Sam sees the 1873 Winchester hit the floor and gets up. He moves toward the table with the 1866 Winchester on it. Ned see's Sam moving toward the 1866 Winchester. He draws his Colt from the holster and shoots Sam Evans in the chest just below his shoulder. The force of the shot sends Sam to the floor. Ned cocks the Colt and takes aim at Sam's head. Eliza Evans picks up Sam's Colt from the floor.

"**Hilary....**" screams Eliza.

Ned Hilary turns and looks at Eliza Evans. Using a one handed grip, duelist style, she cocks the pistol and shoots Ned between the eyes. Ned falls backwards onto the floor. He is dead before he hits the floor. Sam looks up at Eliza Parker with a puzzled expression.

Eliza gives Sam a slight smile. "I said guns scare me. Never said I didn't know how to use one" said Eliza.

"Well I guess the \$25,000 in that strong box was worth it!" said Sam in a weak voice.

The dining room at Sam Evans Ranch

Sam and Eliza Evans along with Foreman Tom and Bank President Henry Gordon are seated at the dining room table finishing dinner.

"Here's to the future owner of this ranch. Tom, if you wouldn't have made that move om Hilary. We'd all be pushing up daisies" said Sam as he raised his glass in a toast to Tom.

Tom stands and raises his glass. "Thanks Sam. We also gotta thank that nag of mine for bucking. I don't think Hilary was aiming for my leg. Oh by the way, All of the hands are back now. I told them that you and I hold nothing against them for leaving me alone" said Tom.

Eliza gets a curious look on her face. "Sam, you never told me why Hilary's rifle jammed" said Eliza.

Sam smiles. "You can't chamber a .45 Colt cartridge into a rifle chambered in .44-40. Lucky for us Hilary never levered the rifle until he was ready to use it.
"Well I'll be dammed" said Henry Gordon.

The End