

Spores of Hatred

by

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Nick Norton sat wearily on the wooden bench of the Cheyenne train station, where he had spent the night. Rain rolled off the roof of the building, flowing briskly into the ditch along the tracks and on down towards the trestle. From there it was caught up in the reckless careenings of a creek which was threatening to overflow its banks. Flooding had temporarily stopped all rail road traffic south towards Greely, Fort Collins, and Denver. "If this doesn't let up pretty soon, I'd better get a hotel room," he told himself. "No telling how long I'm going to be here."

Nick dug his slicker out of his suitcase at noon. It hung loosely about his tall form as he picked his way across the muddy street to the hotel. He took a seat near the back of the dining room, facing the front so he could observe the crowd. He enjoyed watching the other diners as he lunched on coffee and a cold roast beef sandwich. Some were friendly, even jovial; some looked so much like they carried the weight of the world on their shoulders that it stirred up sympathies from somewhere deep inside him. He made it a point to smile at such people, though few seemed able to muster much of a response.

A steady rain was still falling when Nick arose from his leisurely meal. He stepped into the lobby and registered for a single room.

"First one down the hall ta the west," the clerk told him. "It'll be noisy this close ta the dinin' room, but it's all I got left."

"Thank you," Nick answered cheerfully as he pocketed the key. "I'm sure it'll beat another night at the station."

"Last rain like this shut 'er down 'most a week." The clerk replied. "Best pick a good book er two 'n' settle in. There's a couple a' cases full of 'em as has been left here on either side a' the fireplace. Just be sure ya leave 'em in yer room when ya check out."

Most of the tattered books in the cases were either classics that Nick had already read, or pulp stuff that generally repulsed him. He finally settled on a copy of *IVANHOE*, which he hadn't read since he was a child. "I'm too tired to read anything heavy," he mused.

The young doctor went directly to his room. After stowing his suitcase and the book, he proceeded down the hall to the men's common tub. He scrubbed away the railroad grime with lukewarm water and lye soap. Returning to his room, he sprawled on the bed with his book. For the next three hours he was lost in medieval Europe. Finally, the clatter of dishes and the dull roar of multiple conversations competing to be heard in the dining room brought him back to Wyoming. He stood up, brushed the lint and wrinkles from his clothes with his hands, and went to supper.

The dining room was overflowing that evening. Nick was forced to share a table with three other travelers who were stranded by the floods. They were a rancher and two of his cowhands, on the way home from Omaha after accompanying their cattle to market on an eastbound train. The rancher had been impressed with the ease and speed of shipping by rail as opposed to cattle drives. The cowhands said little at his enthusiastic endorsement of the rails, though their faces registered their disappointment at this victory for progress. Nick half-heartedly entered into what little conversation took place, his mind being on the beautiful and virtuous Jewish maiden, Rebecca, so skillfully created by Scott.

After polishing off the best part of a huge steak, Nick excused himself at the first polite opportunity to return to his book. He finished it by the light of a coal oil lamp just before midnight. He was downright disgusted with Sir Walter Scott's bequeathment of Rowena to Ivanhoe when Rebecca seemed to him to be the perfect woman. He blew out the lamp and went to sleep, only to rehash the book in his dreams. Even though he awoke to a gloriously beautiful day, his heart was still aching for the lovelorn Rebecca. How he longed for a girl like her!

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After a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, Nick moseyed over to the train station to find out when the service to Denver was likely to resume. The overnight westbound had just arrived; and the place was a confused chaos of stranded passengers trying to re-adjust their travel arrangements. The line to the telegraph window extended out the door and into the muddy street. Harried passengers, too anxious and exhausted to converse, converged at the ticket windows. Respecting the other travelers' dilemmas, the young doctor took a seat on a bench next to a seemingly unruffled Hispanic man. He had all the time he needed, and could wait until the confusion cleared a bit without significant inconvenience.

The man Nick sat by was dressed as a gentleman, but his hands and face marked him as an outdoorsman who wasn't afraid of work. "Quite a lot of disappointed people," he remarked to the middle-aged gentleman.

"Yes," he responded in English that would have been perfect except for a hint of the natural cadence of the Spanish language. "My niece has just reached the window to ask how long it will be before we can catch a train south towards Denver."

"That's what I came to find out," Nick replied. "Mind if I wait here until she gets back?"

"You are more than welcome, Sir," the man answered with a genuine smile.

Suddenly a vivacious young woman took a seat on the other side of the friendly Mexican. She also took the breath out of Nick.

“Hi,” she interrupted their conversation.

“I’m Juan Morales, and this is my niece, Miss Nita Morales,” the gentleman announced proudly as the well composed young lady reached a gloved hand towards Nick.

Noting her somewhat olive complexion, Nick’s mind screamed out, “This is Scott’s Rebecca, if anyone ever was.”

“I’m Nick Norton,” he managed to eke out as he shook the young lady’s proffered hand almost worshipfully. In his mind he was kissing it.

“What did you find out about the train?” her uncle asked causally.

“It will be two to three days for those who already have tickets, and another day or more for those who don’t,” Nita answered. “Anxious as we are to get home, we’ll just have to accept the Lord’s will about it. At least we have tickets.”

“We’d better try to beat the rest of this crowd to the hotel,” Mr. Morales stated as he started to rise from the bench. I want you to have a room, Nita.”

“The hotel filled up yesterday,” Nick announced. I got the last room, but Nita is welcome to it. I’d sure hate to see her have to sleep on a bench in here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Norton,” she replied. “But what would you do?”

“Your uncle looks like a man who enjoys the outdoors,” Nick answered. “I’m sure he and I could slip out of town and sleep on the ground quite comfortably, now that the weather has cleared.

“Thank you for your generosity, Nick. I accept your offer over my charge’s objections,” Mr. Morales announced firmly.

At that instant the report of a large bore hand gun boomed in the room. Mr. Morales slumped on the bench. Nick heard the hateful words, “There’s one less dirty Mex,” as he rose to see what could be done for the victim.

“I’m a doctor, Nita,” he assured her as he lowered Juan to the floor.

As he knelt on the floor beside the stricken man, Nita knelt on the other side. “Tell me what you need me to do,” she murmured without the slightest hesitation.

“Cross the street to the hotel and have them send some hot water and a clean old sheet to room 1A.” he directed. She was off like a flash. A few onlookers volunteered to help carry the unconscious man to Nick’s room, where He could examine him better. Others brought the Morales’s baggage.

Morales was lung shot. Nick cleansed the wounds with hot water and soap, swabbed them generously with Listerine, and covered the sucking entrance and exit wounds with Vaseline coated patches torn from the sheet the hotel had provided. He finished his treatment and laid the man on the room's only bed with his head and chest propped up on pillows.

It's very serious, Nita," he told her. We'll get some extra blankets so you can sleep on the floor, but I'll need to sit up with him tonight. I'll be praying for him, as I'm sure you will be too. Shall we pray together now?

The girl stepped up beside him at the bedside, and he took her right hand in his left as he laid his right on the patient's shoulder. "Father," he prayed in a subdued conversational voice, "We've done all that we can for Juan. He's in your loving hand, and we know that you always know what's best. Please comfort Nita, who I've come to, uh, admire in this unfortunate incident. Help her to accept your sovereign will as best. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

"Amen!" re-echoed a husky but firm voice from beside him.

As he dropped her hand, the young doctor saw a couple of unbidden tears starting down her cheeks. He spontaneously took her by the shoulders, pulling her into a slight hug, and she leaned her head on his chest and cried for a few moments. "Thank you for your support," she finally said as she began pulling away from him. It was all he could do to relinquish his hold on her. This, his heart told him, was his woman.

Nick sat at the head of the bed throughout the rest of the day. Nita sat at the foot as the hours dragged on. Finally they began to talk.

"He is a lawyer," she told Nick. "He has been working for the State of Colorado in Washington D.C."

"He is a U.S. citizen, then?" Nick asked.

"Yes," Nita replied. "My grandparents immigrated from Spain and became naturalized U.S. citizens in 1825. They tried to settle among the Spanish speaking people of Texas, but the political instability there disturbed them too much. They were of Basque decent, from the Pyrenees Mountains, and after two years of misery they moved up into Colorado--where they felt more at ease. They made friends with the Indians, who let them settle in a small valley isolated by mountains on two sides and a deep canyon on another. The valley opened onto the plains towards the east. My people were the first whites to settle in that area. We were there a whole generation before any of the ranchers came. We have always raised sheep for wool and mutton, which we sell to the Indians and to the Mexicans to the south of us. We will soon be shipping wool and mutton all over by rail."

“Uncle Juan and my father both filed for 160 acres right after the Homestead Act and got titles to that ground five years later. We were among the first to purchase land after Colorado was granted statehood in 1876. The whole little valley is now in our name, with all the mineral and other rights intact. We are not a large ranch, but we are comfortable and secure.”

“Where, exactly, is your ranch?” Nick asked as his eyes feasted on this charming young lady.

“It’s on the Chiquita River northwest of Estes Park,” she replied.

“Gracious!” he exclaimed. “Our ranch is the Lightning-N. Our brand is just a capital “N” with the first stroke lengthened downward and the last one lengthened upward so the brand looks kind of like a streak of lightening. We’re on the Chiquita, looking right up into the mountains. We must be neighbors.”

“We probably are,” she answered in a bit of an off tone, “But we raise sheep.”

The conversation trailed off for a half an hour or so while Nick changed the dressings on his unconscious patient. He was much too intrigued by this beautiful young lady to let it drop for long.

“Tell me about your parents,” he requested.

“My Dad is of pure Spanish descent, like Uncle Juan. Both of them were sent to Boston for their educations. While Uncle Juan studied law, Dad studied engineering. I got my mathematical bent from him. We are both fascinated with numbers.”

“And your mother?” he continued.

“She was a New England manufacturer’s daughter from Boston. She was on summer break from Mt. Holyoke when my Dad met her. They got married within a month, which almost got her expelled from school. Only her Dad’s money and Uncle Juan’s ability at law saved her. She loves botany, and has drawings and classifications of most of the wildflowers in Colorado. She has discovered nine or ten new species over her lifetime, and plans to publish a book on western wildflowers soon.”

“And yourself?” He asked breathlessly.

“I just finished my nursing degree at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. I passed everything including bedpans with flying colors,” she added with a cute blush. “I love the mountains and hope to work in a rural area as close to them as I can get.”

“Now you tell me about yourself,” Nita probed.

"I was raised on the Lightning-N," he began, "And was becoming a pretty fair cowhand. But when my baby brother got whooping cough and died without a doctor, I decided I was going to study medicine. After getting my M.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, I studied at several places in Europe. I'm twenty-six years old now, and am returning to Colorado after being away for eight years. I hope to practice somewhere along the Front Range."

Neither of the young people had even thought of eating until Nita suddenly felt hungry. She rummaged through a food basket and came up with a loaf of bread and a few slices of baked ham. As they finished eating, Uncle Juan suddenly pointed to the sky. "I see Him," he said excitedly. "There are scars in His hands." The effort brought on a coughing spell, and by the time it subsided he was dead.

"I'm sorry, Nita," Nick whispered as he took off his stethoscope.

Suddenly she flew into his arms and wept like a woman should. He held her tightly against his body, and she clung to him like she belonged there until the tears quit rolling. Finally she pulled away, reluctantly, it seemed to him.

"I guess I'd better call an undertaker," Nick finally suggested.

"Can't we keep him here until morning?" she asked. "He was like a second father to me."

"If that's what you want, I wouldn't think it would hurt anything," he mused. "But now that your uncle has passed away I can't stay here."

"Of course not," she agreed as she got her thoughts together.

"I'll be back as early in the morning as is reasonable," he promised as he tore himself away from her. He slept on a chair in the lobby, which wasn't conducive to a very good rest, especially with the lovely woman of his dreams was so near, and yet so far from his arms.

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Nick was at Nita's door at seven o'clock in the morning. She answered his knock promptly. She looked like she had been crying, and seemed to be very glad to see him.

"So what do I do now?" she asked him.

"Let's go to breakfast and talk it over," he suggested.

Over a light breakfast they agreed on a plan. First, they would contact the undertaker and the sheriff. Then they would catch the first train down to Longmont. From there they would travel by stage coach to Estes Park. They would have to use a livery rig to travel back up north from there to their respective homes.

The undertaker was a small somber man who seemed pretty well-versed in his business. First he removed the deceased's watch, ring, and wallet, handing them directly to Nita. "We can have the burial here today if you'd like," he told her, "Or I can embalm the body and you can ship it home to be buried with his relatives."

"I never thought of that," Nita responded. "I think he would have wanted to be buried by his wife. She was a wonderful Indian girl who died trying to give him a son. But we'll have to ship it to Estes Park and take it the rest of the way ourselves," she added.

"I'll get started right away," the undertaker promised. "But since he was murdered, I'll have to get clearance from the sheriff. Why don't you stay here until he comes to talk with you? I'll go get him now."

"A short time later the sheriff appeared. The railroad had notified him of the shooting, and he had already interviewed several eye witnesses. "What did you see?" he asked Nick and Nita.

"I just heard the shot and saw Mr. Morales slump in his seat," Nick said. "As I rose to help him, I heard something about a 'Dirty Mex,' although Nita tells me that he was of Spanish descent rather than Mexican. Some bystanders helped us get him to the hotel, where I treated his wounds. He never regained consciousness, and died about 10 o'clock last night."

"You're a doctor, then?"

"Yes."

"Anything to add, young lady?" the sheriff asked Nita.

"No, I had very much the same impressions. I'm a nurse, and we were more intent on saving Uncle Juan's life than catching the murderer. We hoped maybe you would do that."

"Looks like none of us were very successful," the sheriff answered. "The witnesses said he looked like a middle-aged cowpoke with a long jaw. One of them said he took his hat off to wipe his forehead just before he drew his gun, and he was bald. He had a red beard and wore a tan Stetson, a red shirt, and blue Levis. Better keep an eye opened for anyone that looks like that in case he's got it in for your whole family."

"I'm not part of the family," Nick told him. "Mr. Morales was a perfect stranger to me before I sat down beside him in the crowded railroad station. He had just introduced me to his niece when he was shot. She and I have both been at school out east for years, and now that we've met we find that were pretty close neighbors up north of Estes Park. I hope to escort her home, as least as far as propriety permits."

"Looks like a pretty pleasant responsibility," the sheriff remarked with a twinkle in his eye.

"It is indeed," Nick answered as a blush spread from his neck into his face. Nita turned her face to hide an irrepressible grin.

The good weather held. After two more days of constant interaction, Nick and Nita were able to board the first train southbound for Longmont. A pine shipping box containing Mr. Morales's remains was in a freight car on the same train.

The ride down to Greely, across to Ft. Collins, and on down to Longmont took less than half a day. Nita dropped off to sleep and slumped against Nick's shoulder. He placed his left hand across her lap to keep her from slipping off her seat and let her body twist with the bumps until it lay across his chest and he could support her right shoulder with his right hand. Her exhaustion was his rationale for an unforgettable trip from Ft. Collins to Longmont. He feared she'd be terribly embarrassed when she awoke, but she didn't seem to be in all that big a hurry to extract herself from her predicament when she began to stir a bit. When he finally leaned down and kissed her forehead he felt a shiver go through her body as she straightened up.

The young couple took rooms at opposite ends of the hotel in Longmont that night, and caught the stage to Estes Park the next morning. Uncle Juan's temporary coffin was strapped atop in the luggage rack. They disembarked in front of the hotel in Estes Park in time for a late lunch.

"How are we going to travel together from here on?" Nita suddenly asked disappointedly. We'll have to spend at least one night on the trail, and probably two.

"Nita," he answered hopefully, "I knew you were the girl for me the moment I saw you. If you feel the same about me as I feel about you, we could get married this afternoon and go home together as man and wife."

"Is that a proposal?" she asked point blank.

"It is, Honey. I'm so madly in love with you that I can't imagine being without you, ever."

"You know," she answered with a grin, "When I started my nurses' training I asked the Lord to give me a doctor for a husband before I returned home. It kind of looks like He made the deadline just in the nick of time, doesn't it?"

"In my short experience, when you give the Lord a deadline He pretty well holds you to it," he mused, grinning at her quip.

"Well, I'm glad He's offering me this particular Christian doctor, because after getting to know him I would never be able to settle for any other man," she said, pantomiming dreaminess.

"Nita," he said, pulling her into a total body hug, "I love you too much to take advantage of these circumstances. Are you absolutely certain this is what you want?"

“Positive!” she answered, locking her fingers behind his neck and pulling his head down for a kiss. “Let’s find a preacher.”

A brief inquiry at the registration desk of the hotel was all it took. By 4:00 o’clock in the afternoon they were standing beside each other with a church elder and his wife as witnesses.

As the Pastor lectured them rather lengthily on the sanctity of marriage, Nick was thinking, “I wish he’d get done with the ‘Dearly beloveds’ and on to the ‘I dos,’” which did indeed happen in due time.

When the minister asked, “Do you, Juanita Morales, take this man...?” Nick felt an urge to say, “No, she’s Nita,” before it dawned on him that “Nita” was simply a diminutive form of “Juanita.”

The nuptial kiss after the long-awaited pronouncement was worth the delay. Nick tipped the minister and witnesses appropriately; and the newlyweds walked back to the hotel hand-in-hand. They registered as Nick and Nita Norton and went directly to their room.

Nick and Nita rose early the morning after their wedding. A quick tally of their combined resources was a bit discouraging. The extra expenses of their delay at Cheyenne and Mr. Morales’ embalming fees had left them a bit short on pocket money. There was not near enough cash between them to buy a horse and buggy to carry the pine box in. They thought about borrowing from Uncle Juan’s wallet, but there still would not have been enough to buy a buggy, so they left his money alone. They scarcely had a hundred dollars between them, but it would be enough if they were frugal. They could keep back Uncle Juan’s seventy-five dollars to bail them out of any emergencies, if it came to that.

“How will we get Uncle Juan’s body home without a buggy?” Nita asked. “We can’t just leave it here. There must be a way.”

“Nita, we can buy two Indian ponies to ride and a pack animal to carry the body,” Nick remarked. “But we’d have to dispense with the pine box and tie the body over the pack horse like they do when someone gets killed out on the range.”

“It wouldn’t bother him any,” Nita answered, “And it would certainly be better than burying him here instead of at home beside his wife.”

They bought three Indian ponies that appeared to be reasonably sound for ten dollars apiece, a couple of old range saddles for fifteen dollars, and two blankets each. They also bought enough food for a two or three day journey, a cast iron skillet, and a blue porcelain coffee pot. Nick picked up a used Henry Yellow Jacket for another ten dollars at a pawn shop. He already had a colt .45 in his suitcase, which he strapped on his waist for the journey.

While Nick saddled the horses and tied on their paraphernalia, Nita went to their room to change. She left the key with the clerk and came back wearing buckskin trousers and a matching jacket, neither of which disguised her figure very well. "I'll have to ride astride on these rough trails," she explained, and she was absolutely right. They were the appropriate clothes for such a journey.

The newly-weds were well up the mountain trail wending north from Estes Park by noon. Nick was relieved to see that Nita knew how to avoid leaving unnecessary signs of her passage along the trail; and she admired his practiced eye which always seemed to be watching for danger both ahead of and behind them. They stopped by a whitewater creek for lunch, and did not stop again until dusk. Nick picked a well hidden campsite that impressed Nita. "I see you haven't lost your trail savvy after being in civilization so long," she complimented him.

"The privacy was what I wanted," he grinned; but his campfire showed all the marks of a seasoned man of the trails. As they sat around the fire enjoying each other's company with newly-wed delight, he wished he could keep her there forever. Nor would she have objected, but they had a body with them that desperately needed burying.

The young couple breakfasted on bacon and hotcakes. Nita took the skillet down to the stream to scour it with sand while Nick started packing the horses. Just as he finished Nita came running back.

"Sioux," she mouthed in a muted warning as she leapt on her pony and galloped up the trail.

Nick mounted instantly, jerking his mount around and urging it after her. The pack horse followed of its own accord.

Nick was impressed with Nita's horsemanship. Although she was tearing full-speed up the trail there was nothing reckless about her flight. She was in full control of her mount, her lithe body clinging to the pony like she was part of it. The other thing that impressed him was that about a half-a-dozen savages were closing the distance from behind him, their blood-thirsty yells emphasizing the need for speed.

Nita's Indian pony was holding its own, but with Nick's weight his pony was beginning to lag. The beleaguered man began looking for a defensible refuge when he heard the first wild shots fired from the backs of the Indians' horses. Veering into a nest of boulders, he jerked his mount to a stop and leaped into the marginally adequate shelter with his Yellow Jacket.

Nick's first shot knocked a brave from his horse. He could see the injured Indian writhing in pain as the rest of the savages thundered around a bend in the trail in pursuit of Nita. He grabbed the injured Indian's pony and took off after the other Indians, but he was hopelessly behind the frenzied warriors.

Nita was staying comfortably ahead of the Indians, praying more for Nick than herself. She had heard the shots fired in Nick's brief skirmish, and decided to circle back through the forest to find him. A rotting deadfall lay across the path, and she cut her horse to the right a step before they jumped it. Unfortunately, the ground behind the deadfall was damp, and the already unbalanced pony's hoofs slipped as they landed. Nita jumped free as the speeding pony fell hard, rolling over several times and breaking its neck.

The dismounted woman fled into the forest on foot. Within moments she noted that the Indians were no longer yelling. She was instantly aware that they had seen her dead horse, and would be stalking her as she fled. She ran away from the trail, leaving as little evidence of her pathway as possible. The fleeing woman was making good headway until she came to a sheer drop-off of several hundred feet into a stream that flowed along below it. Seeing a slight movement above her, she turned down-hill, watching for a way of escape as she ran. Suddenly a fierce brave stepped out of the undergrowth, blocking her retreat. She stood silently on the edge of the precipice as five armed Sioux braves formed a formidable semicircle around her.

Lust showed on one of the brave's face as he took a step toward the cornered woman. Well knowing what would happen if she were captured, Nita took a step closer to the cliff. Grinning, the Indian took another threatening step toward her, and she stepped dangerously close to the edge. The message was clear. She would hurl herself over the precipice before submitting to the degradation they had in mind for her. Guttural voices conferred with amusement as the other Indians looked on with anticipation.

The unabashed brave was crouching to make a grab for Nita when an arrow struck him in the back, piercing his heart as it protruded through the front of his chest. The stricken Indian sank to the ground as the others turned to flee. An instant barrage of arrows flew at the remaining Indians. Two of them died instantly. The other two were riddled with arrows, but still alive.

A band of seven or eight Utes stepped out of the undergrowth as Nita stepped away from the precipice. "Nita," one exclaimed in the Ute tongue, "You are a brave squaw. I would be honored if you would become my wife."

"Thank you for saving me, Sleeping Bear," she replied. "You honor me, but I am already married."

At this point Nick stepped into the crowd of friendly Indians.

"Nick," Nita called to him, "Come and meet a good friend of ours."

"Sleeping Bear," she addressed him in the Ute language, "This is my husband, Nick Norton. He is a learned healer."

"Greetings, friend," the Indian answered in the Ute tongue, raising his right hand with his palm facing forward. "I envy you. Your squaw is both beautiful and brave."

Nita blushed as she translated for him.

“Greetings, Sleeping Bear,” Nick answered. “Are you prospering?”

Nita translated a few polite inquiries between the men, before resuming her subdued conversation with the Indian. When the other Indians began scalping the dead and alive Sioux, Nick interrupted Nita to tell her that there was an Injured Sioux down the trail that needed his attention.

Several of the Utes accompanied Nick down the trail to where the gut-shot Sioux lay. The bullet had severed his spine and he had been unable to move off the trail. The savages looked on in amazement as Nick knelt to administer his services to the dying man. After disarming him, Nick built a fire close by and began heating water. He put a warm compress over the wound to help relieve the pain and injected some laudenum in his hip. Finally, he covered him with his own blanket

As the patient began to relax he reached out a hand and grasped Nick’s arm weakly. “You are good man,” he said in broken English. “Red rancher gave us fire water to kill sheep woman. “ He was mumuring, “I am sorry, ” as he dropped into his last sleep.

“He will die by nightfall,” Nick told one of the Utes who could speak a little English. “We will make him as comfortable as possible until then. He is a man, and when he dies, I will bury him with respect.”

While they waited for Nita and Sleeping Bear to rejoin them, the Indian told Nick of Nita’s standoff with the Souix. “What else would I expect from the perfect woman,” Nick told himself as he breathed up a prayer of thanks for the rescuers that had saved her life.

One of the friendly Utes shot a small deer, and the whole party roasted steaks over the fire as the Indians sat by to observe Nick’s strange behavior. The white doctor and nurse did everything within their power to to ease the wounded man’s passing, but he died while the moon was still low in the sky.

Come morning, the Indians helped Nick dig a shallow grave, and stood in awe as he prayed over the body before lowering it gently into the earth. They disappeared into the woods a somber crowd, deeply impressed by the white doctor’s respect and sympathy for the enemy he had had to shoot. This was incomprehendable medicine to their way of thinking!

“We won’t see them along the way again,” Nita remarked, “but if I know Sleeping Bear, they’ll be watching over us all the way home. “He tells me there is bad blood between the ranchers and my folks,” she continued as they started down the trail again. “He is not sure what the argument is about.”

“It’s probably the age-old argument between the shepherds and the cattlemen.” Nick surmised. “The cattlemen hate the shepherds because the sheep crop the grass so short it dies, especially if it’s overgrazed. The shepherds resent the fact that the cattlemen crowd them into the poorest graze, forcing them into overgrazing.”

“Sleeping Bear thinks the situation is pretty volatile at the moment,” Nita told her husband.

“I hope our families are not at odds with each other,” Nick mused to himself. “We need to get home!”

One of the Utes had caught Uncle Juan’s horse, as Nita and Nick called it. Shortly after the Indians took their leave, the white couple headed north, determined to finish their journey that day if at all possible. Nita rode Nick’s horse, and he mounted the Indian that he had shot’s horse. It was a bigger animal that would not struggle so much under his weight. Before noon they were beginning to see occasional familiar sights of their childhoods.

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Nick and Nita rode up to the Morales’ homestead at about two o’clock in the afternoon. As they approached the house, they could see her father standing in front of four mounted ranchers with his gun drawn. The cattlemen were facing away from the house towards the canyon of the river, as if the shepherd had slipped up behind them after they had addressed the house .

“This valley is titled ground,” Nita and Nick heard the Spanish American explaining. “You’d be welcome here if you came in peace, but don’t you ever come back here threatening my family again.”

The leader of the ranchers, a tall man with a clean-shaven face, answered vehemently. “Yah got the drop on us this time, ya dirty Mex, but we’ll be back. We ain’t ‘lowin’ no sheep in Colorado.”

“We were here long before any of you cattlemen came along,” Mr. Morales explained patiently, “And we’re staying here. The next time any cattleman crosses the stone wall across the mouth of this valley, he is liable to be shot without asking any questions, unless he’s alone and carrying a flag of truce.”

Nick rode up to side Mr. Morales while Nita hurried on to the house. As Nick’s approach drew the sheep rancher’s attention, the spokesman began a draw. Before he had cleared leather a shotgun boomed from an upstairs window of the house. The distance was too great for any serious injuries from the scattergun, but the ranchers’ horses’ rumps’ were stung enough to start them bolting and bucking. The offending cattleman was unseated, and Nick grabbed the gun that he had lost as he hit the ground.

Nick's gun was out before the other horses could be brought under control. Grabbing the riderless horse's bridle, he waited until the arrogant cattleman had remounted. Then, handing him his gun grip-first in a calculated dare, he barked out, "O.K.! You guys ride out and don't come back until you've made peace with Mr. Morales."

As the men rode off, the sheep rancher turned gratefully to Nick. "Thank you, young friend," he said as he offered his hand. "May I ask who you are?"

"I'm Nick Norton, Nita's husband," Nick replied. "I think whoever shot from the house saved our bacon."

"Looks like she picked a good one," the astounded man muttered. "Let's go inside so I can greet my daughter," he added in a more understandable tone of voice as he recovered from his shock.

The Morales's reunion was a joyful one, though saddened by the news of Uncle Juan's death. Nick really liked Nita's mother. She accepted him as part of the family simply on account of his obvious love for her daughter. The newly-weds were placed in a guest room in the second story of the original home that the Morales immigrants had built out of mountain boulders and cement. The only thing Mediterranean about it was the ceramic roof made from home-made tiles. The building looked nearly as impregnable as a medieval castle.

Uncle Juan was finally laid to rest next to his wife the next morning. The family held a graveside service, where Nick and Nita related the vision of Christ that he had seen just before he died. The priest reminded the family of the reality of heaven for all those who trusted in Christ. His homily lent a bittersweet essence to their tears, and made it much easier for the family to give him up.

Nick and Nita struck out for the Lightning-N shortly after the burial. When they went through the gate in the sturdy stone wall that delineated the eastern edge of the Morales property, Nick declared that they were on the Norton ranch. "Strange," he mused, "That we rarely crossed this wall. I guess it was solid enough that we never had occasion to look for any strays on the other side of it. We played a bit over there once in a while, but since we were not allowed to take our horses across we never penetrated the valley far enough to see your homestead. Dad hated sheep, so I guess we just naturally avoided the place after we found out that there were sheep in there."

Nick's enthusiasm at coming home was building so fast that he did not notice that the closer they got, the quieter Nita was becoming. By the time they finally rode up to the house she was scarcely responding to his comments at all. When he helped her dismount, she clung to him, trembling a mite.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart?" he asked, concerned.

"They'll hate me. I'm a shepherd's daughter," she answered.

"No, Honey, they'll love you because I love you," he assured her, placing an arm around her as if to ward off her anxiety.

Nick led his wife into the house through the back door into the kitchen. His mother was just taking a batch of cookies out of the wood-fired oven.

"Nick," she gasped out joyfully as she rushed to greet him. She hugged him tight as he stooped to place a kiss on top of her head. Her hair was much greyer than it had been when he left the ranch.

"Mom," he said, pulling away. I want you to meet my wife, Nita. We got married on our way home from the east."

"Where are you from, Nita?" Mrs. Norton asked sweetly.

"She's a Morales, Mom," Nick said. "She was raised just across that stone wall to the west of the Lightning-N."

"Oh," Mom said rather flatly. "Dad's over at the neighbor's and won't be back until evening. Why don't we sit down and have some coffee and cookies. The three of us need to have a talk."

"How is Dad?" Nick asked when they were served.

"Not good," Mrs. Norton answered.

"What's wrong?" Nick asked, concern written all over his face. "Is he sick?"

"No," Mom continued, tearing up. "He's just allowed himself to become so full of prejudice and hate that he's ruining himself."

"He hates my father?" Nita asked

"Yes, Honey," the rancher's wife answered. "He's going to be fit to be tied when he finds out that you and Nick are married. I wish I could make him understand what he is doing to himself and his neighbors, but he seems to be under some strange outside influence, and won't listen to me."

Nick's mother rose from her chair as she spoke. Walking around the table to Nita she threw an arm around her. "I'm going to love you, little daughter; but there's going to be some rough times for both of us before this is over with."

“Mom,” Nick broke in. “Dad might as well know from the start that Nita means everything to me. I will not stand by and have her demeaned, nor will I stand by and see her parents mistreated by him or anyone else.”

“You need to stand firm in that resolve, Son.” His mother answered. “A bunch of ranchers are over at the X-in-O ranch planning an attack on the Morales place right now. It’s the Rowe place. Their graze is just south of ours. Your dad will be full of liquor and hate when he gets back, and I’d suggest that you have Nita out of here by then.”

“I think we’d better leave now,” Nick suggested to Nita. “I need to have a talk with your Dad, and then I’m going to that meeting.”

“Thank you, Mom,” Nita said as she drew the older woman into a hug. “Whatever happens, I’ll know it’s not your fault. Please don’t let our marriage drive a wedge between you and your husband.” The ladies kissed each other before separating. Nick and Nita went straight home to the Morales homestead.

Mr. and Mrs. Morales were still sitting at the lunch table when Nita and Nick burst into the house,

“It didn’t go well?” Mrs. Morales asked as she looked at their troubled faces.

“Nick’s mother accepts me as her daughter, but she fears that her husband won’t,” Nita answered.

“Dad has no idea that I’m home, much less that I’m married to Nita. He’s at a meeting to plan an attack on us right now,” Nick added.

“Why would they start giving us trouble after all these years?” Mrs. Morales queried. “Our ancestors built that heavy stone wall to contain our sheep in this valley. We’ve never had any trouble with the ranchers or even the Indians before.”

“I’d better go out and start preparing the help for war,” Mr. Morales mused as he rose from the table.

“Can we talk a minute first, Dad?” Nick asked.

“Sure, come into my office,” the sheep rancher replied.

“I’m going to that meeting,” Nick announced. “I’m going to warn them that this is titled land again. They obviously didn’t believe you. Can you show me the titles so I can tell them I have seen them.”

“Sure,” Mr. Morales answered, turning to open a huge safe that stood next to his heavy Mediterranean desk.

“The top one’s the original homestead with the buildings, and the bottom one is the whole valley with both a description and a sketch of our holdings,” the older man explained as he handed Nick the papers.

After a brief but honest appraisal, Nick was completely satisfied that the documents were in order. The Homestead title was from the United States Land Grant Office and the overriding title for the purchase of the valley and its mountainous borders was from the State of Colorado. “Pray for me, Dad,” he said as he gave his father-in-law a token hug, and turned resolutely to strike out for the X-in-O.

* * *

The heat of the afternoon sun was tapering off a mite by the time Nick arrived at the X-in-O headquarters. He tied his mount at the hitching post near the house and knocked at the heavy wooden door to the cedar-sided house. A startlingly beautiful young woman about his own age answered his knock. “Hi, I’m Becky Rowe,” she said, welcoming him in.

“I’m Nick Norton,” the young doctor replied. “Is my father here?”

“Yes,” she replied in a noticeably less enthusiastic voice. “Dad’s guests are in the parlor. Just go through that door. No need to knock.” Then she turned and walked away without even excusing herself.

“They call her Rebecca, but she’s really just Rowena,” he muttered almost inaudibly as he stepped toward the indicated door.

Nick’s father stood up from the table to greet him the moment he entered the room. After a hearty hug, he introduced him to a group of about a dozen other ranchers. “This is my son, Nick Norton, he announced proudly. He just returned home from studying medicine out east and in Europe.”

Most of the ranchers that had seen Nick at the Morales ranch sat by rather sullenly, while those that hadn’t greeted Nick enthusiastically. The guest who was sitting by Mr. Norton moved across the table to allow Nick to sit by his father. A generous glass of whisky was poured for the newcomer, which Nick left untouched. As things settled back to normal, the host resumed his dominance of the conversation.

“Nick,” he began, “I know you didn’t understand things when we met yesterday. That Mex has moved in on us with a bunch a’ woolies. We’ve warned ‘im to get ‘is dirty hide out of here with all ‘is miserable sheep, but ‘e won’t listen ta reason. We ain’t a’gonna have ar’ government

graze ruined by sheep, and we ain't 'lowin' no Mexes in ar' part a' Colorado. We're chassin' 'im out er wipin' 'im out."

"We're gonna burn 'is house tamarry night just after dark," Nick's dad whispered in his ear." His voice was slurred from alcohol.

"Gentlemen," Nick stood as he addressed the guests, "You are being misled. I don't know if the Morales hire any Mexicans or not, but they are Spaniards who have been in that valley for three generations. They were here at least fifty years before any of us arrived, and their sheep have been contained in their valley by that huge stone wall the whole time. They have the title to that whole valley and an additional thousand feet into the mountains that border it."

"Them deeds will be Mexican land grants that ain't valid any more," Mr. Rowe assured the group. "They ain't got no right ta live here, un' we're runnin' 'em off."

"I've examined their deeds, Mr. Rowe," Nick cut in. "That valley was purchased from the State of Colorado in 1876, when the State was rather strapped for cash."

"Them Mexes poisoned a bunch a my cattle, 'n' we're runnin' 'em outta here," Nick's dad declared.

"Dad," Nick said clearly, "The Morales are Christian people who would never stoop to that. Nita Morales is my wife, and I'll be helping to defend her and her folks. I wouldn't shoot you for anything, but If one of my bullets takes you in the dark when I can't identify you, I'm sorry in advance."

Nick turned to go, but the young cowboy sitting next to him rose to face him.

"We'll settle this right now," he yelled. "Draw."

Nick's opponent's hand dropped for his gun. As it came up Nick shoved it wide with his arm as if he were blocking a punch, and stepped in with a driving right to the tip of the jaw. The surprised man fell backwards, his arms reflexively bracing behind him to break his fall. He was heavily built, and an audible pop was heard as his right elbow dislocated from the force of his fall.

The young man writhed in pain, his elbow bent significantly backwards. Nick stooped beside him, pushing his gun out of reach. "Your elbow is dislocated," he told the injured man. "I can stop most of the pain right away if you'll let me put it back in place."

"You would do that for me?" the young man grunted out in amazement.

"Of course," Nick responded, taking the subdued man's hand in his own as his other hand slid gently along his forearm to examine his elbow. A steady pull followed by a quick twist one way

and then the other had the elbow back in place. After the initial shock of the sudden maneuver, the pain subsided quickly to a tolerable level. Nick helped the young man to his feet and advised him to wear a sling on the arm for a couple of weeks. The doctor was out the door before anyone noticed he was leaving.

Nick galloped away from the X-in-O, slowing to a fast walk after a quarter of a mile or so. He arrived at the Morales homestead just after dark. Nita's anxiety spread into a lovely smile as she greeted him with a heartwarming kiss at the door. She clung tightly to him the way he loved her to as he recounted his visit to the X-in-O. "No one except Dad knows that he divulged their plans to me," Nick assured the Morales. "And he was so drunk that he probably doesn't remember telling me."

* * *

Mr. Morales took Nick for a ride around the valley the next morning as they planned their defense of the home place. The grounds around the house and outbuildings had been planted with a heavy "U"-shaped cover of trees that completely hid them from view except from the front, which relied on the canyon for protection. The trees stretched about a hundred yards beyond the front of the house to form a living colonnade along either side of a wide picturesque drive coming up to the front porch.

"They'll come as close as they can in the trees," Mr. Morales surmised, "So we'll have to watch for them from the outside edge of the cover. If everyone holds their fire until someone has to shoot to prevent their gaining cover, we should be able to break their backs before they get situated. We'll have all the help up here for dinner, and have them take up their stations at dusk."

Nick felt that the old man had planned an excellent defense. "Why don't you and Mom and Nita stay in the house to fire from there if needed?" he suggested. "The rest of us will be outside trying to hold them back."

"Good idea," Mr. Morales admitted. "We'll do that."

The two men rode through the valley explaining the plan to the hired shepherds. "If you will return home to protect the women," Mr. Morales suggested, "I'll contact sleeping Bear for some help too."

There were at least fifteen men at the dinner table that evening; Spaniards, Americans, Mexicans, and Indians interacting amiably. After a hearty meal they moved into the dusky shade of the trees to take up sheltered positions for the defense of the Morales homestead. About two hours after dark they could see an army of about thirty men creeping up to the trees by the light of the moon. A passing cloud threw the whole scene into darkness just as the first of them reached the trees, forcing the defenders to start firing.

If it had not been for the poor light, most of the attackers would have been cut down in that first barrage of fire. As it was, at least a third of the ranchers' ill-fated gunmen were wounded. The attackers were thrown into confusion, and those who were able fled for their horses.

All the outside defenders returned to the house without injury, but Mr. Morales had been shot in the shoulder as he watched from an upstairs window. Nick and Nita operated immediately, quickly and efficiently removing the bullet from the bone it was lodged in. "It will be fine if it doesn't get infected," Nick assured everyone as he dressed the wound. The tough old man never let it slow him down.

The following morning three wounded ranch hands and a couple of dead bodies were discovered on the grounds. Nick treated the wounds of the living and put the gut-shot one to bed in the house. He hog-tied the other two wounded men and loaded them and the two bodies into a buckboard. He carted them off to the Lightning-N, where he would not be likely to be fired upon.

The injured men were so sullen that Nick finally addressed them. "Don't act like we wronged you," he lectured. "You came trying to kill us, and you got your comings. If that cloud hadn't come along when it did, you'd be dead." They remained sullen and unbelievably hateful.

The young doctor tied the reins to the hitching post outside the door of his parents' homestead. As he slipped into the kitchen he heard sobbing in his parents' room. Opening the door softly, he saw his father weeping over a dead body in the bed. A sheet was pulled over the face, but it was the unmistakable form of his mother.

Nick stepped up beside his dad slipping a supporting arm around his waist. Without looking up, the distraught rancher murmured, "She had a cold last night, and she died this morning,"

As Nick stooped to peek under the sheet his father suddenly stepped away, and he heard the distinct click of a handgun being cocked. "Don't touch 'er," his dad warned. "Ya rejected us 'n' sided with that dirty Mex, 'n' ya ain't welcome here no more."

"Dad." Nick plead. "Nita and I had a nice visit with Mom two days ago. We love you both."

"Ya chose that Mex over us, 'n' married 'is daughter. Now git afore I shoot ya."

"OK Dad," Nick said, his voice cracking. "But I'm not rejecting you, you're rejecting me."

The younger Norton walked out the front door with a bleeding heart. He unloaded the bodies of the deceased onto the front porch. Then, lifting the two hog-tied cowpokes to the ground, he drew his knife and sliced through the rawhide thongs that bound their wrists. He left their feet tied to disable them long enough for him to get away from his birthplace safely, knowing that they would be able to extricate themselves within a minute or so. Turning his rig towards the Morales ranch, he urged the horses into a trot and never looked back.

Nita was heartbroken over her husband's grief. She sat on the couch, cradling his head on her lap for most of the afternoon. She encouraged him to talk about his childhood memories of his parents, patiently nipping each trace of resentment against his father in the bud. She had already eaten lunch, but neither of them ate any supper. When the emotionally exhausted man finally dropped off to sleep, she wiggled carefully out from under his head, placing a couch pillow under it. She spread a light blanket over him, and catnapped in an overstuffed chair beside him. She wanted to be there to share his grief if he needed her.

Three days later Nick and Nita rode towards the Lightning-N. Finding the foreman out looking over the cattle, he asked him how his dad was. "E's sleepin' off a douzy of a drunk," the foreman replied. "E ain't likely ta wake up 'til evenin'. Iffin' ya wanna see yer mom's grave, this 'ud be a good time," the sympathetic man added. "I'm sure sorry about what's goin' on, 'n' I'm doin' my best ta keep the boys outta ut. It just ain't right."

"Thanks Tom," Nick replied. "We'll go on over to see the grave before we head home. Please get word to me if you detect any softening in Dad's attitude."

"I surely will," Tom replied, offering his hand to Nick. After a firm handshake, Nick turned and rode to the grave with his wife. Holding hands with Nita, Nick was finally able to weep away at least a part of his pent up grief.

As the couple rode towards home, Nita spotted a dead longhorn bull. Several other cows stood listlessly by. Suddenly Nick noted a bloody discharge draining from the dead animal's mouth. A quick check of the nearby cattle confirmed his suspicion. All of the listless ones had evidence of bleeding from every orifice of their bodies. "Don't touch them, Nita," he warned. "That's anthrax."

Nick and Nita rode quickly back to the Lightning-N. "Tom," he began when they found the foreman unsaddling his horse, "We just found some sick cows. One's already dead. Don't touch them, it's anthrax."

A shudder rushed through Tom's frame as he comprehended what the couple had told him. "Show me where they're at," he requested.

"Why don't we take you there on our way home?" Nita suggested.

Within a half an hour the three brought up their mounts a short ways from the stricken cattle. Another had already died, and as they watched, a third one dropped to the ground. "Lord help us," the foreman breathed up a prayer. "No wonder Mr. Norton thought someone 'ud poisoned 'is cattle."

“Keep your horses’ heads up so they can’t eat any of this contaminated grass,” Nick warned the other two. Tom, you be sure your boys understand how contagious this is. It fits what Dad said about how Mom died.”

“I don’t know what ta do,” Tom said confusedly.

“Warn the boys tonight,” Nick suggested. “I’ll be back early tomorrow to get some samples. A German named Pasteur made a successful vaccination for anthrax in sheep four years ago. We’ll try his method for cows and maybe people, but it’s going to take a while. Meanwhile, I’d push all your healthy cattle except the ones right around here to the far side of your range.”

“How are you going to use Pasteur’s method, when it is a patented secret?” Nita asked as the couple rode on towards home.

“I see you’ve been keeping up with the best medical literature.” Nick complimented her.

“Yes, but how’s that going to help us when we don’t know how Pasteur did it?”

“Because I knew one of his assistants,” Nick answered a bit smugly. “He told me that Louie actually used Toussaint’s potassium dichromate method because he wanted to be the first to break with the vaccine. He had an idea for a similar way of weakening the bacillus with oxygen which would bypass Toussaint’s patent, but hadn’t perfected it yet. Pasteur’s method did pan out, but Toussaint’s method works too.”

“We should send back east and order some potassium dichromate right away,” Nick continued as they rode back home. “Obtaining it is liable to be the biggest delay in producing our vaccine.”

“I know a miner that has some for assaying,” she replied. “I’ll get him to bring us a box of it tomorrow.”

* * *

Nick and Nita were up at daybreak the next morning. She started boiling down some gelatin to prepare some sheep’s-blood medium to grow the germs on. He put on some of Mr. Morales’ oldest clothing, wore an old jacket, and rode to the spot where the anthrax infested cattle had been seen. Only one was still alive, and it dropped as he approached it. After putting on some gloves, the doctor obtained a syringe full of infected fluid from the orifices of the still struggling animal. Capping the syringe, he discarded the clothing in a heap, pouring coal oil on them and igniting them with a match. He rinsed his hands with Listerine before putting on some fresh clothes from his saddlebags. The couple plated out their cultures of *Bacillus anthracis* the next morning.

Meanwhile, Tom was having troubles of his own. About a third of the Lightning-N hands quit and left the area when they heard of the anthrax epidemic. The remaining faithful cowpokes

who truly rode for the brand helped move the healthy cattle to the far side of their range. When Mr. Norton reported Nick's findings at Mr. Rowe's next meeting, the brazen rancher convinced everyone that it was just a cover-up for more cattle poisoning by the "Dirty Mexes,"

Watered with the family's prayers, Nick and Nita got several pure colonies of *Bacillus anthracis* on their first attempt. By the middle of the second week they had their first batch of cattle vaccine fomenting; and two weeks later Tom was vaccinating the Lightning-N's healthy cattle, though no one was really sure if it would work. None of the vaccinated stock had sickened by the time they were ready for their second and final dose.

Nick was helping administer the second dose of vaccine to some sheep over by the edge of the valley about a week later when a shot rang out. He dove for the ground as a bullet stung the fleshy part of his forearm. He had seen the gun flash, and returned the fire with his Henry from a prone position. He heard a grunt that indicated that his bullet had found its target. When no movement was noted for some time, he went up to investigate. When he found a body behind a nest of boulder his face turned grey.

Nick staggered back to his horse, retching on the way. He sat down on a boulder in a sweaty daze. When he did not speak or move, one of the shepherds rode his horse to the house to get Nita. When she could not get him to respond, she got the shepherd to show her where Nick's victim lay. "Senora," he gasped out as he crossed himself, "It is his father."

Nita returned to sit silently by her husband. Placing her arm around him, she wept the bitter tears that the overwhelming anguish of his soul could not produce. About dusk, he rose and helped her up. They walked back to the house hand in hand without either one needing to say a word.

Mr. Norton's funeral was held in the little stone chapel in the Morales valley. The priest could say little to comfort Nick, except that the man had probably lost his mind. "We can hope that he trusted in Christ before he lost it," he suggested. The body was interred beside his wife's.

Nick inherited his father's cattle and the title to the Lightning-N homestead. The Rowe riders started crowding some of their stock onto the Lightning-N's graze during the funeral. Tom had anticipated the move, and his men were ready. It only took a few well-aimed shots to convince the Rowe riders that they wanted no part in a range war with the crusty faithful of the Lightning-N.

The next morning Nick had Tom and his men start dousing the skeletons of the deceased animals with coal oil and burning them to cinders right where they lay. "Anthrax germs form spores that can survive in the soil for fifty years or more if you don't eradicate them," he warned the cowpokes. We'll have to vaccinate for the disease for several years as a precaution against surface spores.

Several nights later Nick's injured forearm began to swell. He considered it no more than a bother since the arm was painless. He started soaking it in Epsom salts every morning and evening. Three or four days later the whole arm was swollen, and there was a black eschar of full thickness dead skin where the original bullet scrape had been.

Nick dressed the wound and went directly to Nita. He pulled her tenderly to a chair and sat down beside her. "Darling," he addressed her gently, "I wish I didn't have to show you this." As he exposed the wound she gasped out, "Anthrax!"

"Yes, Honey, it's cutaneous anthrax," he admitted. "It's not fatal quite as often as the pulmonary form of the disease. It's too late to try the cattle vaccine, but the infection itself will serve as a vaccination if I survive long enough. Prayer and good supportive treatment might save my life.

Nita put on a brave front. "Tell me what you want me to do," she urged.

"I'll probably get delirious," he surmised. "You can use frequent warm compresses to combat the infection," he told her. "And force me to drink plenty of water with a teaspoonful of salt and a tablespoonful of sugar or honey to the quart in it for hydration and nourishment. The most important thing is to burn all cloths and bandages, and disinfect your hands with Listerine every time you touch the wound. You can't let yourself get the disease too."

Nick demonstrated the treatment he wanted Nita to use as the day wore on. When he finally went to sleep in his chair, she went to their laboratory and injected herself with a dose of the cattle vaccine proportional to her weight. After offering up a fervent prayer for her husband, she went to bed.

Come morning, Nick was delirious. Nita treated him exactly as he had asked without fear of death. The vaccine had worked on the cattle, and she was sure it would work on her if she could just stave off the disease for the better part of two weeks. She would not let anyone else in the room for their own safety.

Nick remained toxically delirious day after day. Every time his eyes focused on Nita he began raving about his love for a girl named Rebecca. Sometimes he raved of her beauty, sometimes her bravery, sometimes it was her intelligence or her modesty, or her purity. Sometimes he spoke so intimately of his love for Rebecca that Nita blushed. One thing was sure. He was hopelessly in love with this Rebecca.

Nita was broken-hearted. The way she figured it, her husband had married her on the spur of the moment, when he was actually in love with someone else. Someday he'd wake up and hate her. "I should never have faked that sleep on the train," she berated herself remorsefully. "I wanted him to hold me so badly, but his holding me is what sealed his infatuation with me."

Nick's continual raving about Rebecca never diminished Nita's love for him a bit. "I wish I'd never taken that vaccine," she often mused. "Then I would die of anthrax and leave him free to marry his beloved."

Nick's arm was suddenly much better on the tenth day of his confinement, but Nita's throbbing heart was still agonizing over his love for Rebecca, whoever she was. When the somber silence of the home was broken by a knock at the door, Mrs. Morales opened it to find a beautiful young woman asking to see Doctor Norton. "He's been quite sick, but I can call his wife down to see you," Mrs. Morales ventured. "She's scarcely left his side for ten days, and it's time she took a moment's break."

Mrs. Morales coaxed Nita downstairs to see the visitor with difficulty. She was too crushed to see anyone, but she couldn't bear to tell her mother.

Putting on a brave front, she introduced herself. "Hello," she said as cheerfully as she could, "I'm Nita Norton, the doctor's wife."

"You must be blessed," the other woman answered. "I'm Becky Rowe."

"O," Nita gasped. "I've been wondering who Rebecca was. My husband has been delirious for ten days. He raves about Rebecca from dawn to dark. Were you his childhood sweetheart?"

Sensing Nita's brokenness, Becky placed an arm around the exhausted woman's waist. "Come outside, Nita, we need to talk," she urged gently. "You have nothing to fear."

"He's not in love with you?" Nita asked, her tearful eyes searching for the truth.

"No, Nita, I've only seen him once, for less than a minute. He's very much in love with you."

"You're positive?" Nita asked through quivering lips.

"Very," Becky assured her. "When I answered his knock at my dad's door, he evaluated me momentarily, as men do woman-only maybe a bit more intensely. I pointed him to the parlor door, and as I left the room he muttered something to himself so inaudibly that it took me several minutes to reconstruct it. I finally put it together as, 'They call her Rebecca, but she's really just Rowena.' I was a bit miffed until I realized that he was comparing me to his own sweetheart. Then I envied the woman who was so perfect in the mind of this devoted man."

Nita stared blankly at her visitor, not comprehending what she was getting at. "You're too tired to see it right now, Nita," Becky assured her. "Reread *IVANHOE* tonight and you'll see how much the doctor loves you."

"Thank you," Nita blurted out, still unconvinced. "Can I help you with whatever you wanted to see the doctor about?"

“Our cattle are dying,” Becky started. “Tom says that Doctor Nick can help us, but Dad’s too proud to ask. Besides, he’s coming down with a cold.”

“Is it anthrax?” Nita asked.

“Tom says it is,” Becky answered, anxiety showing on her face. “He says your husband has a vaccine for it.”

“My husband is just coming back from the brink of death from the milder form of the disease,” Nita told her. “But if you can get Tom to help you, he knows how to administer the vaccine and dispose of the dead stock properly.”

“He’ll help!” Becky assured her. “We’re engaged. You’re the first to hear it.”

“O Becky,” Nita shrieked. “He’s a wonderful man!”

After a bit of girl-talk, Nita’s mind returned to reality. She needed to get back to Nick. “Why don’t you take some vaccine home with you so Tom can get started right away?” she suggested. As Becky started for home with the vaccine, something somber dawned on Nita. “Bet her dad will be dead within a day or so,” she muttered.

Nick’s mind was completely normal the day after Becky’s visit, though he was terribly weak. Nita was confident that his full recovery was just a matter of time. She had borrowed her dad’s old leather-bound volume of *IVANHOE*, and when her husband dropped off to sleep she sat down at his bedside and took it up. It fell open to a picture of the beautiful and virtuous Rebecca.

Nita was still staring the picture when Nick awoke. He was reaching out to squeeze her hand when he saw the book. “Ivanhoe,” he broke the silence. “I’ll never forgive Scott for marrying him off to Rowena when Rebecca was the perfect woman. The moment I saw you, Nita, I knew you were my Rebecca. Sometimes I actually catch myself calling you that in my mind.”

She stood up to stare wonderingly at his face as his hungry eyes took in every detail of her form. Suddenly she threw herself on him with abandon, tears streaming from her eyes. His arms wrapped around her as he crushed her to himself. Their lips met in the confidence of love. She was the mystical Rebecca that had filled his every thought, even as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

* * *

“Mr. Rowe passed away on the second day after Becky had visited Nita. No one wanted the infected body in their church, so the Morales offered them the use of their little stone chapel. Since Nita claimed immunity to the disease, she volunteered to prepare the body.

“Thank you, Nita,” Becky choked out. “I’m ashamed to tell you this, but I owe it to you. The southbound train from Cheyenne was flooded out last time Dad came home from selling cattle, so he hitched a ride down the Soda Lakes spur from Laramie. He bought a mule from a prospector to ride on home, and ran across a dead mountain goat along the way. He picked it up in hopes of infecting your herd with it, but it got to smelling so bad that he abandoned the carcass on the Lightning-N before he got to your place. I guess he’s a victim of his own prejudice and hate.”

Mr. Rowe’s family asked that he be laid out in his best red shirt and blue Levis. Nita washed his body and put the clothes on it. She crossed his hands and laid his tan Stetson on his chest. When she stood back to critique how he looked it clicked. He had a bald head, red stubble, and a long jaw.

“It fits,” Nick agreed when she told him who Mr. Rowe was, “He was in Cheyenne during the floods, and was always projecting his own inadequacies on harmless Hispanics.” Neither of them ever told anyone else who shot Uncle Juan.

A Historic Timeline of Interest to this Story

- 1820 Sir Walter Scott published IVANHOE. Sold 10,000 copies in the first two weeks.
- 1837 Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary was established
- 1858 Denver City was founded. The area was virtually unsettled until the late 1850s
- 1859 Estes Park was established
- 1862 U.S. Congress passed the Homestead Act
- 1867 Cheyenne, WY was established/The Union Pacific Railroad reached it from the east later that year.
- 1868 Denver Pacific RR Company built a link from Cheyenne through Greely to Denver.
- 1869 Eastern and Western segments of the transcontinental railroad joined at Ogden, UT
- 1872 Vaseline was invented by Robert Cheesebrough
- 1873 Levi Strauss's rivet-re-enforced blue jeans were patented.
- 1873 The Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing was founded on Clara Barton's principles of nursing in NYC
- 1875 Robert Koch identified the bacillus of Anthrax
- 1876 Colorado statehood was granted by U.S.A.
- 1877 Colorado Central Railroad built a link from Golden through Longmont to Hazard, WY.
(Colorado Junction Station west of Cheyenne?) (See 1883)
- 1877 Stage coach line from Namqua (Now Longmont) to Estes Park was established
- 1879 Listerine was formulated as a surgical antiseptic by Lawrence and Lambert.
Lawrence sold out to Lambert Pharmaceutical Co. in 1885
- 1880 Laramie North Park and Pacific RR built Soda Lake Spur South from Laramie to UP RR Soda Lakes
(Now Meboor & Gelatt Lakes). The spur was used until 1901
- 1881 Louis Pasteur demonstrated 100% efficiency of his anthrax vaccine on 25 vs. 25 sheep
- 1883 The Railroad from Ft. Collins to Colorado Jct. was re-routed back to Greely and up to Cheyenne
- 1885 Ideal part of the American cowboy era for this story to take place
- 1915 Rocky Mt. National Park was established
- 2012 Although Mt. Chiquita lies north of Estes Park, the Chiquita River had to be invented for this story.
Place it anywhere you find a picturesque mountain stream rushing down Mt. Chiquita, through a small pastoral valley, and on to the plains of eastern Colorado. The stone wall is probably long gone, but you might find remnants of it.