

Fired Up



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author’s imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Fired Up is dedicated to my daughter Wendy. When I talk about what inspired me to write a book, I always mention Wendy because she wrote a book when she was ten years old and it was really good. I asked her if I could take it and work on it, make it longer. (It was really short, but not all that short for a ten-year-old!) Wendy said, “Write your own book. Leave mine alone.”

So I did. And here I am today a published author, thanks to Wendy.

Wendy has the sweetest heart of anyone I know, and a great sense of humor. She’s also got an independent streak that I admire and she loves reading. When she got up to mischief as a kid, I’d say, “Go to your room!” And she’d perk up and ask, “How long can I stay in there?” She always had a book she wanted to read.



CHAPTER 1

NOVEMBER 10, 1868

Sitting high on the wagon seat, a breeze fluttered Glynna Greer's skirt. The near horse reared, sending the buckboard rolling backward. The other horse in the team whinnied and shifted nervously.

"Whoa there." Jonas Cahill dragged on the brake.

Glynna's blond hair whipped into her eyes and blinded her for a moment as she grabbed at her skirts to control them. They were a half mile down the trail heading for home, nearing a narrow pass.

"Mama!" Janet cried out from right behind Glynna.

Glynna had sworn she'd never let her children feel another moment of fear. A stupid oath to take as it turned out.

Janny and Paul were tucked into the bit of empty space in the back of the small buckboard. Glynna turned to ease their fears, and a gust of wind blew her skirt again and set the horse to rearing.

Dare Riker rode up to the wagon, wrapped an arm around Glynna's waist and wheeled his horse, carrying Glynna away. "Let Jonas calm the team."

Dare turned to Vince. “Your horse is as steady as they come. Switch that mare for your gelding.”

“No, wait.” Glynna was so eager to leave, she couldn’t bear to have to wait around to change horses. “There’s no need for that.”

It had taken her weeks to come out and get her meager possessions from that house she’d lived in before her loathsome husband died.

She didn’t want anything that was his.

Glynna hadn’t thought to gather so much. But despite her protest, her friends hauled things out until the buckboard was stacked high with crates. She had to admit that the very sparse rooms she lived in with her children could use a lot of these things, detestable memories or not.

Redheaded Jonas, Broken Wheel’s parson, quieted the horses. Dare, with his shaggy blond hair and droopy mustache, and Vince Yates, tidy and dark and too charming for his own good, each had a horse and rode alongside the wagon. These men had risked their lives to save Glynna from her husband, and they were still helping.

Glynna realized how nice it felt to be held in Dare’s strong arms. She looked at her son, Paul, who sat beside Janny in the wagon box. Her young daughter’s golden eyes were brimming with tears, while Paul’s blue eyes blazed with fury that his newly widowed ma was so close to a man.

Quietly, Glynna said, “Put me down, Dare.”

They exchanged a look. Dare glanced at Paul, gave a quick nod, and set her on the ground well back of the wagon.

“My skirts spooked the mare, but I’ve got a firm grip

on them now.” Glynnna looked from the horse to her young’uns. She had to sit up on the high buckboard seat beside Parson Cahill, as there wasn’t room for her in the wagon box. “Changing the horse will take some time. I’d just as soon get going. Let’s give the mare another chance.”

Dare rubbed a hand thoughtfully over his mustache, then swung off his horse, handed the reins to Vince, and went over to the hitched mare’s head and held her. He moved so his body blocked the horse’s view of Glynnna. “Okay, try it. Move easy now.”

Glynnna gathered her skirts securely against her body and moved toward the wagon. But the horse must have smelled her. It tugged on the reins, twisting its head to watch Glynnna. Its eyes were white all around, wide with fear.

Stepping back until the horse calmed down, she crossed her arms, annoyed by the delay required to hitch up another horse.

“Can you ride?” Vince asked.

Glynnna looked back at the handsome lawyer. “Yes, I’ve been riding all my life.”

“Instead of switching teams, you take my horse. I’ll go with the buckboard.” Then he added the warning, “You’ll have to ride astride.”

The chance to leave this instant made her almost giddy. Glynnna looked at Dare. She shouldn’t look to him, she knew it, yet how often had she caught herself doing just that? “I’d enjoy riding. It’s been a long time.”

In fact, it had been a long time since she’d enjoyed much of *anything*.

She strode to Vince's big red gelding and swung up in the saddle, enjoying the feel of a horse under her. She adjusted her skirts. They were wide enough for modesty, also wide enough to scare a skittish horse, apparently.

Vince climbed up to sit beside Jonas, and soon the heavily laden buckboard was rolling again.

With the buckboard taking the lead, Glynna lost sight of the children. They sat on a bench right behind the driver's seat, surrounded by boxes and furniture and other leftovers from their miserable life with Flint, Glynna's late husband.

Her tension eased as they rode away. Dare guided his horse to her side, smiling. "You ride that horse like you were born in a saddle, Mrs. Greer."

A twist of humiliation surprised her. "Can we not attach the name Greer to me ever again? Call me Glynna."

"It ain't exactly proper, but I don't mind burying that sidewinder's name along with him." Dare's smile was gone. Glynna was sorry she'd had a part in wiping it away. Dare had killed Flint in a gun battle. Dr. Dare Riker wanted to heal, not kill, but Flint had given him no choice.

The buckboard creaked along. The weather had turned cool, as even Texas had to let go of summer at some point. Vivid yellow cottonwood leaves still clung to the trees lining the road to town. A few fell and fluttered down around them, dancing on the breeze.

The bluffs rose to the left and right. The edges were striped red, strange pretty layers of stone in this rugged part of north Texas some called Palo Duro Canyon. Juniper, cottonwoods, and mesquite were strewn here and there among the big blue stem grass and star thistles. Some

places the trees were taller and thick, other places they were stunted and clung to patches of dirt over stone that didn't look deep enough to support roots.

Glynnna looked at those highlands, remembering the guards Flint had posted to keep Luke Stone out and to keep her in. In the end, Flint had failed at both.

The bluffs were studded with boulders large and small. Looking ahead at the trail, she saw many had rolled down and been strewn about over the years. The bluffs got closer. A stretch not far ahead was almost a tunnel where the canyon walls nearly formed an arch over the road. It was a tight passage for about a hundred feet.

"Luke said he's going to start an avalanche deliberately one of these days. A rock comes down now and then. He'd like to wipe them out at a time of his choosing."

"He'll end up blocking the whole road if he does that." Glynnna watched the buckboard ahead enter the narrow mouth of the canyon and realized she was mentally pushing it. She didn't like her children in there.

"If he does, Luke'll just clear the rubble. Not much backup in that boy."

Laughing, Glynnna took a break from her constant worry, a sin she was working on with God's help. "Boy? Luke Stone has to be your age."

"Close." Dare was smiling again. "But still younger. The youngest of all of us."

Glynnna was glad she'd teased. It put thoughts of Flint behind him. A sharp crack drew her attention forward, and she realized the buckboard was almost through the passage. She and Dare had just entered it.

The crack, though, what had caused . . . ?

“Ride!” Dare slapped her horse on the rump. “Avalanche!”

Her horse leaped forward as a rock struck the ground behind her. A low rumble pulled her eyes up to the bluff on the left side of the trail. Rocks were pouring down, rolling, crashing into others. Knocking them loose. Bouncing off the far side of the canyon walls, starting an avalanche on that side, too.

Her horse made a wild surge forward, changing from walking to a gallop in a single step. Glynna lost her grip on the reins and fell backward.

Dare caught her wrist and jerked her forward with a hard hand. “Stay with me!”

Clawing at the pommel, she leaned low over her charging horse’s neck to make a smaller target. Thundering rocks sped up. One the size of Flint’s fist hammered Glynna’s shoulder, knocked her sideways and she lost her grip.

She fell between the racing horses and slammed into the ground. Crushing, iron-shod hooves thundered around her. The whole world was a tumbling whirl of hooves and blinding grit and falling rocks. She heard herself scream over the deafening noise that swamped her. Then her borrowed horse ran on.

She scrambled to her feet. A powerful grip sank into the front of her calico dress and she was airborne. Dare yanked her up in front of him. He’d spun his horse around, come back for her, and now turned again to the far side of the pass—closer than going back. Tiny rocks pelted Glynna’s face. A boulder whizzed past her eyes, barely missing her.

She looked ahead to see stones tumbling down on the wagon. Jonas slapped the reins and shouted. Vince threw himself back, twisting his body, sheltering her children.

Vince's now-riderless horse sprinted past the wagon and cleared the narrow stretch. A heavy rain of dust and gravel cut off the world outside the deadly corridor.

"Hang on!" Dare yelled to be heard over the onslaught. Overhead, the rumble changed to a roar. He looked up as he spurred his horse forward.

One second they were galloping, the next Dare threw them off the horse and rolled with her toward the sheer rise of the bluff. Dare's weight knocked the wind out of her as he landed on top, shielding her. "Keep your head down!"

A boulder pounded in the ground only feet in front of her. Dare's horse reared and staggered backward, which saved it from being instantly crushed. As the boulder slammed past, the horse leaped forward and disappeared into falling stone and grit.

The huge boulder then bounced. How could something so enormous bounce? It hit the far side of the tunnel and ricocheted.

"Get up. Move!" Dare dragged her to her feet. The chunk of granite was careening toward them. They got past it just as it crashed into the spot they'd just been.

Staggering forward, raining pebbles hit like little bullets, cutting her face and neck. Choking dirt blinded them until they wouldn't be able to see the next boulder coming.

Dare picked up speed to a full sprint. He stumbled in the debris, went down, and she went with him. Soon they were back up, moving again. Surely they had only a few

more yards to go. A jagged rock crashed into Dare's back and knocked him to his knees. Another cascade of smaller stones knocked him sideways.

Glynnna snagged a handful of Dare's shirt and yanked him to his feet. She shouldn't have been able to lift him, but desperation somehow gave her the needed strength.

His knees wobbled. His head slumped forward, but he wasn't unconscious, just stunned. She wrapped an arm around his waist and plunged on through the raining stones.

Then out of the tumult, Vince and Jonas appeared. Jonas caught her. Vince got his arm around Dare, and they stumbled on.

The blinding debris finally thinned, and she could see again. A moment later the roar was behind them. They'd made it through.

Dare pitched forward. Vince held tight or Dare would've fallen on his face. Jonas had been hanging on to her, but he left and caught Dare to keep him moving forward.

The intensity of Vince and Jonas as they carried their friend brought tears to Glynnna's eyes as she rushed behind them. They'd run *into* a landslide. They'd risked death to save their friend.

Glynnna hadn't known men like this existed.

Her children shouted as they clambered down from the buckboard and hurled themselves at her.

"He's hurt. A big rock hit his back." Glynnna stumbled and might have fallen except her children ran into her, holding her up just by being there.

Jonas and Vince knelt at Dare's side. Glynnna saw blood. Too much blood.

His shirt had a huge tear right by his left shoulder blade. Jonas grabbed the frayed shirt and ripped it right off Dare's back.

"Ma, your face is torn up." Paul, his voice tight with fear, pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her.

A crash shook the earth. Glynna looked back at the canyon pass. An immense red rock slab, taller than a horse, fell and crashed into the smaller stones, bounced and rolled straight for them, standing up on its side like a gigantic wheel.

"Run!" Glynna caught her children, saw Vince and Jonas drag Dare to his feet, one of them on each side, and together they ran. How far would that slab come?

Glynna heard an almost explosive thud and looked back. The stone rolled straight for them. The horses—those attached to the buckboard and the ones they'd ridden—were just ahead. The team would be killed, too. Rearing and bugling, the animals pulled the buckboard, but the brake was on.

"Glynna, get the children behind those trees." Vince shouted with all the force of a commanding officer. "Jonas, get that wagon out of here."

One glance told her he'd thrown Dare over his shoulder and was charging forward, running at her side. Jonas sprinted for the horses. He shouted at the saddle horses Glynna and Dare had ridden, and they bolted. Jonas threw himself onto the buckboard seat and jerked the brake loose. With a roar at the horses and a slap of leather on their backs, the horses lunged forward.

Glynna veered for the side of the canyon, hard on Vince's

heels. Her children needed no urging; they were outpacing her now, dragging her along.

As they reached the trees, Glynnna glanced back to see the slab of stone coming straight for them.

They reached the shelter of a clump of undersized junipers and dashed behind them just as the huge rock hit. The slender trees bent backward, and for a few terrible moments they seemed about to snap and crush all of them.

Janet flung herself against Glynnna's legs. Paul grabbed her too, coming from the other side.

The trees held. The rolling stone stopped at last, then tipped over to land flat on its side with a thud that seemed to shake the ground.

Vince charged out of the trees, still carrying Dare. He took a fierce look at the avalanche.

The pass was choked with dirt, and stones still trickled down with a grating racket. But the worst seemed to be over. Some of the tension left Vince's shoulders.

"I think it's done." Glynnna emerged from behind the trees, the children still clinging to her. She inhaled silted air and coughed. "Of course I thought it was done before."

"Yeah, me too." Vince, his face coated in dirt, flashed his glowing white smile. "But this time I'm sure."

His words were casual, but his actions said he wasn't being careless. He walked well away from the pass before he crouched, easing Dare off his shoulder to lay him gently down on a grassy stretch alongside the canyon road. Blood flowed from several scrapes on Dare's face, and two big knots were visible on his forehead. But the ugliest wound was on his back.

Jonas had left the buckboard again, shaking his head. “How much control you got over that horse of yours, Vince? We need the water in your canteen.”

Vince saw puffs of dust in the air where his horse had galloped away. He paused from examining Dare, lifted his fingers to his mouth, and blasted a deafening whistle.

Dare flinched and his eyes flickered open, then closed again.

Glynnna wanted to go to his side with an urgency that was shocking. Her children held her back. She realized blood was dripping onto her dress and that she still clung to Paul’s handkerchief.

Dabbing at the raw scratches on her cheek, she watched Vince and Jonas tend to Dare.

“What’s going on?” Dare slurred his words and tried to roll over.

Vince’s horse came trotting around the corner toward them. Glynnna noticed its flank was bleeding. Then, far behind, she saw a second horse—Dare’s—coming much more slowly, acting skittish, and who could blame it?

A gasp of pain from Dare got her full attention.

Vince, on his knees, tore what was left of Dare’s shirt off. Dirt stuck everywhere. Vince grabbed the remnants of Dare’s shirt, folded it roughly and pressed it against the gash above his shoulder blade.

Dare groaned in pain and pulled both arms up so he wasn’t quite flat on the ground anymore. He propped himself on his bent arms enough to lift his head.

Running footsteps turned their attention. Luke Stone appeared at the other end of the canyon’s narrow neck,

barely visible through the thinning grit. “I heard the avalanche.”

“Can you get through?” Vince yelled.

Luke paused and studied the hillside. “Yep, I’ll have to do some climbing, but I can make it.”

“Wait,” Vince shouted, “bring us water. We’ve got some on our horses, but we might be a while rounding them up.”

“Hang on.” Luke turned and ran as if his friend’s life depended on it. Another decent man.

Glynna turned back to Dare. “He saved me.”



CHAPTER 2

Jonas and Vince looked up at her tearful statement. Their faces were smeared with dirt, their clothes and hair gritty with dust and gravel.

Glynnna felt her eyes burning. “And you both came back for us. You got my children to safety and then came for me.”

A trickle of blood ran down Vince’s neck. He’d been hurt pulling her and Dare out of the avalanche and protecting her children.

She’d cried a lifetime’s worth of tears in the last year. She’d hoped, with Flint dead, maybe she wouldn’t need to shed any more for a while. But this generosity touched her so deeply. “I didn’t know there were men like you.”

“There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother,” Jonas said. He heard footsteps again and spun around.

Glynnna saw Luke, canteen in hand, charging toward them, running flat out to help his friends. Despite her struggle to stop them, tears ran down her cheeks. She swiped at them.

“Now’s no time for crying.” Vince sounded aggravated

by her tears, almost past bearing, which oddly made Glynnna want to smile. “We got work to do here. You can cry when you’ve got nothing better to do. And I think it’s best that you pick a time when you’re alone. For right now, I need something bigger to stop the bleeding, and you could better occupy your time by helping me.”

Jonas threw off his coat, tore his shirt open, ripped it off and handed it over. In the chill November breeze, Jonas dragged his coat on over his long-sleeved undershirt.

Glynnna took a step toward Dare. Only when she tried to move did she realize her children surrounded her still and held her fast. She wondered if they were clinging to her in fear or did they, especially Paul, want her to stay away from all these men?

Vince fought Dare’s fast-bleeding gash. Jonas had given up the shirt on his back. Luke was clambering through a dangerous canyon gap. Glynnna saw their bond, and because they’d mentioned the war, she assumed they’d met there, but she knew little about these men who were so loyal to each other.

Dare propped himself up a bit higher.

“Lay down,” Vince ordered.

Dare ignored them. His eyes were clearer and focused, though he moved slowly.

Glynnna pressed the kerchief against her cheek. She wasn’t that steady on her feet, and although she wanted to go to Dare and help care for him, she wasn’t completely opposed to her children holding her upright. “Parson Cahill, you said, ‘There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.’ What does that mean?”

“It’s from the book of Proverbs,” Jonas answered.

Dare added, “Jonas is fond of quoting it when he thinks about us.”

“Us?” Glynnna knew they were friends, but this sounded like they were more than that.

“The Regulators.” Flinching as Vince pressed down, Dare didn’t say more.

“What’s a Regulator?” Glynnna should probably leave him alone.

“It’s how we all met.” Dare winced.

Then it occurred to her that he might want to distract himself from what was going on. She knew she’d rather forget the pain of being stoned half to death. So she kept talking. “But what does it mean, Regulator?”

“Luke, Jonas, Vince, and I and a whole lot of others teamed up to keep the peace in Andersonville Prison.”

“I’ve heard of that. It was a prison camp during the War Between the States. In Georgia, wasn’t it?”

“Yep,” Dare said. “And as mean and hungry a place as has ever been known on earth.”

“Well, I’ve heard there were some awful prison camps in the North, too.” Glynnna hadn’t meant to sound indignant, but she was a daughter of the South, after all.

“True enough, the North had their camps and their harsh treatment, no doubt about it. Anyway, in Andersonville, they called those of us who were in charge of law and order ‘Regulators.’ It is a bond between us. It’s why we came down here. Luke is one of us. He needed help when he found his father killed and his ranch stolen, so we came and fought at his side.”

“And saved me in the process by killing my no-good husband.”

Dare turned his head enough to look her in the eye. “It was always going to be a fight, we knew that. But our hopes were to lock Greer up for what he did to Luke’s father. We didn’t go into it hoping to kill.”

“I’m sorry it came to that, but you rescued me from Flint’s brutality as surely as you rescued me from this avalanche. Thank you for—”

The sound of stones rolling turned her attention, and she could tell they’d all braced themselves to run. Luke was across the rubble and climbing down. He got on level ground and rushed for them. “How is he?”

“His shoulder is cut and he took a whack on the head. He needs stitches, but he’s the only one around here that knows how to set them.”

“I can do it.” Glynna’s stomach twisted as she remembered the stitches she’d sewn into human flesh in the past. And the price she’d paid for helping a deserter.

Vince gave her a sharp look. She could feel herself being assessed. At last he jerked his chin in agreement. Which might mean she’d passed whatever test he’d been giving her. Or it might mean he realized their choices were very limited. “We don’t have any supplies to do it here.”

“There’s a sewing box in my crates.” Glynna pulled away from her children and hurried to the buckboard. Most of the crates were open, as there’d been no sense in nailing them shut for the ride to Broken Wheel. She identified the right one and clawed through the packed clothes until she found the small satchel containing needle and thread.

Whirling back to Dare, she rushed over. “These are silk threads.”

“Let me see ’em.”

Glynnna found treating a doctor was more of a trial than treating someone who had no idea what she should be doing. She handed over the thread.

“These aren’t as heavy as they should be. Where’s my horse? My doctor bag is on it.”

Vince glanced in the direction the saddle horses had run. “I see him and my horse. I can probably catch mine, even spooked like this. He’s a mighty well-trained critter. Yours isn’t so well behaved, though, and not likely to know my voice. If I catch mine, I can use him to lasso yours, but I’d be a while.”

“No. Let’s get this sewed up. This silk thread will do. Just double it.”

“All of you get away from Dare for a second.” Luke held the canteen but didn’t hand it over. “You’re covered in dirt and sand. Knock it off yourselves before you touch him again.”

“Yep, there’s no sense sewing gravel into my back.”

Glynnna backed away, as did the rest of them, except Vince, who kept holding down the compress. The rest of them shook the grit off. They kicked up quite a cloud.

Coming back to Dare’s side, she knelt across from Vince and held down the pressure bandage while Vince dusted himself off.

“Okay, let’s see if the bleeding’s stopped.”

She lifted the rags and saw the rest of Dare’s back. Three ugly scars. Stab wounds. Old ones. One on each shoulder

and another lower down. She had to clench her jaw to keep from asking about them.

“Dare’s covered with dirt, too,” Glynna said. “But most of it’s been washed off his back by the blood.”

“Lucky me.” Dare twisted to look.

“There isn’t any chance you might feel a bit faint, is there?” Glynna would have preferred him unconscious as she needled him in the back. But she had no hope. The man was wide awake and that was that.

“Nope.” He looked at the needle she was threading. “Are you any good at this at all?”

“*Good* is such a vague word.” Glynna took the canteen.

“So be specific. I don’t mind putting off the minute you plan to—Ouch! That’s cold.”

Glynna let the water from the canteen flow over the injury. “You’ve got one main cut on your back.” She thought information might make him feel more in control. “But the skin all around it is scraped and bleeding. The skin is kind of ragged, not like a straight . . .” She felt dizzy for a second and decided to shut up before she talked herself into fainting.

“A straight what?”

“I’m ready now. Be still.” Glynna reached for Dare’s back, then paused and looked at Janet and Paul. Janet was pale, her hazel eyes riveted on Dare’s back. Paul had his arm around his little sister so tight he might have been holding her up. Glynna’s eyes shifted to Jonas. “Can you take the children away? They don’t need to see this.”

“I’m fine, Ma,” Paul said, his usual sullen attitude on full display.

Glynnna met his glare, worried about her son more every day. “I want Janny to step away. And I don’t want her alone. Go on now.”

Jonas rose and went to the children. “I’m going to need help clearing out the back of the wagon so we can carry the doctor to town. C’mon, let’s go.” He urged the children toward the buckboard.

“I’ll round up the horses,” Luke said and then walked off.

Vince stayed on his knees beside Dare.

“I can ride,” Dare said. He narrowed his eyes, tough guy to the bitter end.

Watching until the children were well away, Glynnna bent close to Dare’s ear and whispered, “I can do this a lot better without them watching.”

Dare nodded. “Get on with it. You’re right it needs to be cleaned before you sew. I’m not sure if that means you know what you’re doing, or it’s just common sense and you’ve got some.”

“Well, you’re the doctor. Feel free to dispense advice.”

“I’m not a doctor.”

Jonas dropped the tailgate with a sharp clink of the metal chains and started lifting crates. The children pitched in.

It took a long time for Glynnna to be satisfied with her efforts in cleaning the wound, but finally she drew the skin into place. “Vince, can you hold it for me?”

Vince, cool as ever, replaced her hands with his.

There was no way around it, so Glynnna went right through with the needle in Dare’s poor, already-violated flesh. She flinched.

Dare didn't even react.

"You're tough," she said.

Dare gave her a half smile. "Don't ever forget it." He then folded his arms so he could rest his head.

Glynnna turned to the next stitch. A wave of nausea surprised her. She'd always kind of enjoyed sewing up her first husband. Of course, he'd deserved being stabbed in the back. Which reminded her. "Did someone stab you in the back?"

Looking over his shoulder, his lips curled without a speck of humor. "Yep, I got all three of those in Andersonville."

"I thought that was where you learned to be a doctor. Who stabs a doctor?"

"You'd be surprised. The list was pretty long."

"Yeah, we stopped a whole lot of them," Vince added without looking up from where he held his friend together.

"Were you a bad doctor?" Glynnna asked, trying desperately to distract herself from what she was doing—to stave off an unfortunate graying of her vision and buzzing in her ears.

Vince found a real smile. "He was about the worst doctor you've ever seen at first. Not as bad as Luke, though. They found Luke another job."

"I'm not a doctor." Dare sounded disgruntled.

"And yet you have a doctor's office and dispense treatment to everyone in the area."

"There aren't many folks who need anything fussy done. I can handle the basics."

"You just described about every patient who goes to a doctor," Vince said with a disgusted shake of his head.

“Why don’t you just admit you’re a doctor and quit caterwaulin’ about it?”

“Can we tend this wound and get to town?” Dare, sprawled on his belly in the grass, glared at Vince over his shoulder.

“I’m going to be at this for a while. Why don’t you tell me more about the Regulators and how you became a doctor. I could stand the distraction. Unless you want to talk about me opening a diner. I’m slow getting it opened.”

“You needed to heal up first.” Dare turned to her. His voice was deep with a hint of roughness, like he had some of the grit and gravel from the air stuck in his throat. His blue eyes were kind.

“Broken Wheel is going to be glad to have that diner open again.” Vince seemed willing to talk even if Dare wasn’t.

“There’ll be nothing fancy. I’m a decent cook, but it’s not my greatest gift.”

“Most likely the cowboys you’ll be cooking for are worse than you. And they like a meal cooked by a woman. Besides that, a lot of the time they’re about half starved, so you’ll be okay.”

Glynnia didn’t think Dare’s expectations were overly high, and that was just as well. “So who stabbed you?”

“Just finish up.” Dare quit watching her as if he could put distance between them. All things considered, that wasn’t likely.

“Listen, my hands are coated in blood. I almost got buried under a rockslide, and all my earthly possessions are right now being set along the trail to be abandoned. I don’t

really mind; they remind me of that no-account rattlesnake I was married to. But I think I deserve something for sewing you back together. You could tell me who planted a knife in your back. Was it one person who stabbed you three times? Or did three people attack you all at once, or—”

“Three different times,” Dare cut her off. “Those are from three different people on three separate occasions.”

“Were you really that bad of a doctor?”

Dare let out a chuckle, which moved his shoulders.

“Stay still.” But the distraction was helping. Glynna’s stomach quit fluttering like laundry in the wind, and she went on sewing with a steadier hand. She wasn’t sure how many stitches to put in. In truth, she had no real training. Instead, she sewed Dare up like she was hemming a skirt. “There. That’s the last.” She hoped. “And the bleeding has finally stopped.”

“Mostly.” Vince dabbed at the jagged cut.

“Bandage it tight and let’s go.” Dare muttered out his doctoring orders, then raised his voice so it reached the buckboard. “You don’t have to unload. I’ll ride my horse.”

Jonas ignored him and kept working.

In the distance, Luke was riding Vince’s horse, which he’d managed to catch, and was now easing toward Dare’s, shaking out a loop from the lariat hanging from the saddle horn.

“Let’s get going.” Dare shoved himself up until he could sit back on his knees. He wobbled and fell to all fours. Shaking his head, he said, “Give me a minute.”

“I’ll get a bandage on while your head clears.” Vince sounded mostly reasonable, but Glynna heard the sarcasm

beneath it. Only a true friend could comfort you and mock you at the same time.

Dare nodded, which meant he'd probably missed the sarcasm, which meant he was close to unconscious.

Vince wadded up the remnants of Dare's shirt and pressed on the wound. "Hold this in place, Glynna."

The groan of pain when Glynna pressed the makeshift bandage down tore at her heart.

Vince jerked his own shirt off his back, twisted it into a thick rope of cloth, then used the arms to bind it around Dare, going over his right shoulder and under his left arm. Vince knotted the wrists on top of the bandage to hold the cloth in place and keep pressure on the wound. Now Vince was left in his long woolen undershirt for the ride to town.

"We've got space cleared. Let's get him loaded up." Jonas came walking over. Luke rode up, leading Dare's horse, dismounted and lashed the horses to the buckboard. The children had climbed in the wagon and were perched on the bench seat behind the driver's seat.

Dare wasn't paying attention. When Jonas caught him under one arm and Vince under the other, he shook his head again like he didn't need help. Then his knees turned to jelly.

"He blacked out." Jonas looked across Dare's body at Vince.

"Be careful of his stitches." Vince shifted his grip to draw Dare's arm across his shoulders. "We haven't even tended the goose egg on his head. Let's get him back to town." They walked him to the buckboard, bearing all of his weight.

“Facedown.” Jonas was practically speaking in code, he was so terse.

“You know you’re bleeding, too, Vince.” Glynnna came along carrying her thread.

Vince glanced back at her. “You too, ma’am.”

Glynnna had forgotten about that.

They got Dare in, and he took up every available inch of the half-emptied wagon bed. Vince fastened the tailgate. “Jonas, you drive. I’ll watch from my horse.”

Vince eyed the children. “You holler if you think he needs help.”

They exchanged a nervous glance and looked at Glynnna. She shrugged and nodded. “Just watch him. Honestly you young’uns are as close to being doctors as I am.”

Looking at the stack of crates being abandoned by the side of the road, she knew it wouldn’t break her heart if they got left there permanently.

“Is he going to be all right? Do you want me to ride in with you?” Luke looked over the edge of the buckboard as Jonas climbed up to the wagon seat.

“I hope he’s just fainted.” Vince clapped Luke on the back, then mounted up. “Most likely he’ll come around when he’s ready. Doubt there’s much you can do. Ruthy’s most likely fretting by now, so go on home.”

Nodding, Luke said, “When you come back for the crates, holler at the house. I can help you load up. In the meantime I’m going to get my men busy opening that pass. No wagon is coming through for a while, but I’ll clear a passable trail right away if I have to hack it out with a hammer and chisel. I may need dynamite to break up some of the larger boulders.”

“What do you think caused the avalanche?” Glynna looked at the bombarded trail. In all the madness they hadn’t talked much about the rockslide.

“I dunno. I reckon one boulder broke loose and started the whole thing going.” Luke studied the top of the bluff. “How’d it come down all along that canyon neck, though? It seems to have swept the whole length of it clean. Almost like it started in more than one place.”

Vince reined his horse away from the rockslide. “I’ll be out to pick up those crates and help you clear the gap tomorrow.”

Glynna swung up on her horse. “Be careful going back through it, Luke. The avalanche may have knocked more stones loose that are just looking for an excuse to come rolling down.”

“I won’t linger, that’s for sure. But it looks mostly clear up there. I hope we won’t have to worry about rockslides anymore. Strange that it happened right while you were riding through it. That was a long shot.” Luke tugged the front of his hat and turned to cross the mess of rocks and get himself home.

Jonas threw off the brake, slapped the reins, and the buckboard rolled forward with a clatter. Vince rode alongside Glynna, just feet from the back end of the wagon, until she noticed her children. Janet’s little brow was furrowed with worry as she looked between Glynna and Vince. Paul scowled.

“Think those young’uns can burn me to the ground with their eyes?” Vince asked quietly.

“They’re certainly trying.” Glynna gave Vince a worried glance. “I’m sorry. They’ve been through so much.”

“Haven’t we all, Mrs. Greer. Haven’t we all. Why don’t you lead this little parade? It’ll ease their minds. I’d do it, but I want to keep an eye on Dare.”

Glynna should probably stay and Vince go. The children would appreciate it. They didn’t like letting her out of their sight. But she knew Vince would never leave Dare. She gave her horse a kick and took the lead.



Dare shook awake when his head bounced off a rock.

His first thought was war. He remembered how he’d felt when there’d been cannon fire. Like the very ground was bouncing around.

Then he woke up a little more. No, not cannon balls, boulders. He worked his way through a barrage of pain and remembered the avalanche that had done a mighty good imitation of the Confederate Army overrunning Dare’s Union lines.

His back was on fire.

His head throbbed.

He felt like a mountain had come down on top of him. Which it had.

He needed a doctor, but too bad for him, for there wasn’t one within a hundred miles, or maybe two hundred. It might as well be the other side of the earth because none were anywhere close to hand when Dare needed one.

Doctors were rare in north Texas for a fact, especially in Indian Territory, which was where Broken Wheel was situated. That was why the townsfolk put up with Dare’s

uncertain treatment. It was him or nothing. Yet nothing might be a better choice.

Forcing his eyes open, he saw little Janet frowning down at him, worried, sweet. Looking sideways, he found that grouchy son of Glynna's. The boy acted like every man who came near his mother needed to die.

Or be buried in an avalanche.

"Where are we? Are we getting close to town?" He wished for his bed. His head wasn't resting on a rock; it was on a board, which wasn't much better. He preferred something softer than wood under his head.

Paul gave Dare only sullen silence.

Janet shrugged.

"We're almost there." Jonas's voice drew Dare's attention further forward and up. Just moving his eyeballs almost made his head fall off from the pain.

"Glynna took a needle to my back, right?" Dare was only talking to Jonas now, as he didn't think he was going to get much from the youngsters. "How did it look when she was done?"

"It was an improvement over an open wound. And face it, Dare, your back is already ugly. It didn't much matter if she made her stitches pretty or not."

"For a parson, you've got a mean streak."

Jonas looked over his shoulder and smiled, but the humor didn't reach his eyes. "I think we all oughta pick up and move to someplace that lies flat like the world oughta do. I think we oughta try Kansas. I bet there hasn't been an avalanche in that state since the first mosquito hatched."

“We got the bleeding stopped. You’ll be fine if you don’t get an infection.” Vince was riding right behind the wagon.

Raising his aching head to look at his friend, Dare said, “We need to—”

“Don’t turn your head to look at me.” Vince’s voice had that tone he could use, the one that could make General Robert E. Lee himself back down. The Regulators hadn’t been officers, though there had been a battlefield promotion a time or two that ended up being rescinded. But Vince would’ve made a fine officer if he had a lick of ambition. In fact, Vince had the raw material, the brains, and a willingness to work hard that went with a man who achieved a lot. And yet he’d become a lawyer by reading law books, then came to this far-removed corner of the world and proceeded to be mostly idle.

Dare too could give an order if he was in the mood, but he rarely was. He preferred to do things himself.

Since it hurt to move anyway, Dare laid his face back down on the board that kept whacking at him. “Why?”

“Because the left side of your face is scraped raw. If you look at me and rest that side of your face on the wagon box, you’ll be regretting it for a long time to come.”

“Kansas doesn’t sound so bad. It’s nice in Indiana too where I come from. No rockslides in Indiana. The summers don’t try to roast you like a chicken. Lots of thick grass and tall trees that make house building and wood for the fire easy to come by. You think Luke would mind if we left him and Texas far behind?”

Vince road up beside the wagon so he came into Dare’s

view. “Luke’s mighty attached to that ranch of his. I think we’re stuck together here in Texas.”

“Stay still, Dare.” Jonas could give an order now and then, too. “I know it goes against the grain, but could you do it just this once and give yourself a chance to heal?”

“Right now, staying still is about all I’m capable of. I’m gonna close my eyes for a bit. I’m not passing out.” Talking hurt. So did thinking. So did breathing. Since breathing was unstoppable, he cut everything else out.

“Here’s town, just ahead.” Jonas nodded forward. “You spent most of the trip unconscious. Aren’t you supposed to stay awake after a head injury?”

“I don’t know.” Dare didn’t bother to look. He’d seen Broken Wheel before.

“I thought you were a doctor,” Paul said. “Aren’t you supposed to know things like that?”

“I am indeed.” Dare wished everyone would just quit talking. He was finding out that listening hurt, too.

“We’ll get you settled, and I’ll stay with you awhile.” Vince was more than willing. He lived in a small upper room above his law office, while Dare had a house with a spare bedroom.

“I’ll take my turn,” Jonas said.

Hoofbeats almost made Dare look, but the pain stopped him. “I’ll come in and cook and clean for you, Dare.”

Glynn. Her pretty golden hair coated with dirt. Her golden eyes red-rimmed and gritty. The side of her face bleeding. The same side as he’d gotten scraped raw. He needed to doctor her.

“I’ve got carbolic acid in my office. We need to swab our wounds with it.”

“What’s that?” Glynna shook her head violently and wrinkled her nose. “Acid eats things away, doesn’t it?”

“This is something real new I read about and ordered. I had it shipped all the way from England. It’s supposed to stave off infection.” Dare lifted his head, and his stomach lurched so dramatically he lowered it again. “I want some on my back for sure. Stitches can get infected easily.” He wondered if his face looked as bad as hers.

She was sitting up, riding, while he was lying flat on his face. Even so, she needed a few days to heal. “You’re not going to be able to run your diner tomorrow. You’ll bleed into the food. Even starving cowpokes’ll balk at that.”

A tiny sigh caused his eyelids to open. He glanced at the children. They both looked strangely relieved. Dare wondered why they didn’t want their ma running a diner.