GONE WEST

Chapter One

Texas, 1873

The last thing on his mind was a train robbery. Although he knew about the $100,000 in gold rumored to be aboard, enough to make any outlaw eager, no one had ever robbed a moving train west of the Mississippi before. As long as the Rock Island Line's passenger train No. 2, bound from Council Bluffs to Des Moines, kept up its dizzying speed of forty-miles an hour, horsed bandits would have a hard time catching up with her.

But as the train neared Adair, Iowa, it slowed for a grade and a curve and the engineer hollered out that something was slung across the tracks. He slammed the engine into reverse and the train shuddered and groaned, then jumped the rails. The locomotive thundered down the muddy bank of Turkey Creek spewing smoke and cinders from the chimney and lolling to one side, twisting the couplers and throwing the passenger cars skyward. The ground shook with the impact as steam rose from the troubled creek bed. And waiting alongside the bridge to greet the terrified passengers as they struggled from the wreckage was a white-robed gang of train robbers brandishing pistols and rifles and shouting the Rebel yell…

"You gonna buy that paper, Mister, or just stand there readin' all day?" the newsboy on the Galveston Strand complained as John Henry lost himself in the details of the West's most daring train robbery. The engineer had been killed, thrown from the locomotive then crushed to death as it rolled over him. But the conductor had lived to testify against the James gang that had derailed the Rock Island Line and held up its passengers.

Until that summer, the gang had kept their outlawry to holding up banks in the Missouri back country. This enterprise with the railroads was a whole new kind of crime, and newspaper sales soared whenever there was a report on the search for the elusive Jesse James. Aside from the gruesome death of the train's engineer, it would have been a perfect robbery had the money actually been on board and not delayed until later, leaving the gang only six-thousand in cash and jewelry taken from the express messenger and the passengers. But it was a thrilling attempt, even so, and folks took to the story like a dime novel come to life. Not since the long-ago legends of Robin Hood had there been such a popular outlaw, and ladies openly hoped that Jesse might show up in their own quiet towns, bringing adventure and his handsome gang with him. But that was the tenor of the times in 1873: the War was over and the new West was wild, and the country was ready for some entertainment.

But to John Henry Holliday, late of Georgia by way of a fast ride across Florida and a sailing ship to Galveston, the story of Jesse James was more of a relief than anything else. For with the newspapers filled with tales of the dashing outlaw, there was little chance that a shooting on a river in South Georgia would be reported. Not that there was all that much to report about such a

commonplace crime: a young black man gunned down by a young white man. But it was John Henry's crime, and though he had run from Lowndes County before the law could catch him, then spent a long night in anguished prayer repenting of his sin and begging for God's forgiveness, he knew that repentance alone would not satisfy the State of Georgia. If the law decided to come after him, he could still hang for murder. So he anxiously read every newspaper he could get his hands on, searching for any mention of violence on the Withlacoochee River, and was relieved to see the name of Jesse James, not John Henry Holliday, spelled out across the front page. Let the James Gang get the fame; he'd be happy if his own name never made the headlines.

There was certainly nothing else about him that would draw attention. He was of average height and average build, although a little on the lean side on account of a bout of pneumonia he'd had while spending two cold winters in dental school in Philadelphia. His coloring was fair, his eyes china blue, or so said the girls back home who'd called him handsome, though mostly it was his cousin Mattie Holliday calling him handsome that had meant something to him. And though there were other, less pleasing, things that Mattie had called him, as well – stubborn, selfish, arrogant – if those had been his only sins, he wouldn't be in Texas now, reading the paper and watching for any mention of his name or what had happened on the Withlacoochee.

But the truth was, he was running from more than just the law. His father had thrown him out of the house and ordered him never to return, the result of a disagreement over his plan to marry his cousin Mattie, though Mattie had already wrecked those plans herself by telling him through her tears that her Catholic faith would not allow first cousins to marry. She loved him but she could not be with him, not ever. And the pain of those two denials, his sweetheart's love and his father's affections, had driven him into a drunken stupor and an unthinking shooting that sent him west fleeing for his life.

Yet other than a few bad dreams, a haunting worry over the long reach of the law, and a still-healing heart, he was in hopeful spirits, having stepped off the ship at Galveston Island sunburned and wind-blown from the sea voyage, and feeling amazingly well. While most of the other passengers had spent their time aboard the tall ship *Golden Dream* leaning over the rails and vomiting into the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the sailing had actually seemed to agree with him. The fresh sea air had cleared his lungs and the prospect of starting a new life in Texas enlivened his mind. And though he had only the vaguest of plans for his immediate future, his long-term goal was set: he would find his way to his Uncle Jonathan McKey's plantation on the Brazos River and beg the family favor of a place in his Uncle's household. For surely his mother's eldest brother, a wealthy cotton planter, would welcome a long-lost nephew from back home in Georgia and be happy to offer him a home in Texas. And once he was settled, he would open his trunk-full of dental equipment and set up a profitable practice in some nearby town, and prove to his father and Mattie both that he was still a fine professional man and not someone to be sent away.

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That was the plan anyhow, but first he had some obstacles to overcome. He had little money to pay
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for room and board in Galveston, having spent nearly all he had on the ocean voyage from Florida to Texas. He had no trunk-full of dental tools with which to practice his paying profession, having left Georgia in too much of a hurry to arrange for its shipment. And he had no idea of where his Uncle Jonathan McKey lived, other than the recollection that his property was somewhere in Washington County. Still he was glad to be in Texas at last, the place he had heard about and dreamed of since he was a child – though Galveston looked little like the rough and wild Texas of his childhood imaginings.

Galveston glittered at the edge of the ocean like some fancy-dressed lady decked out in jewels. This was no frontier town where cavalry soldiers fought wild Indians, but the richest city on the Gulf of Mexico and the second richest port in the whole United States. The streets were paved with crushed oyster shells that sparkled in the summer sun and gleamed at night under the glow of gaslights. The mansions of the leading men of Texas society lined Broadway Street, surrounded by gardens of flowering Oleander and fragrant groves of orange and lemon trees. The Strand, on the north side of the island where the wide harbor faced the mainland, was crowded with brick business houses and the traffic of port commerce, while the sand beach on the south of the island was filled with the carriages of pleasure-seekers enjoying the balm of the Gulf breezes. In fact, if it hadn't been for the lingering legend of the Karankawas, civilized Galveston wouldn't have seemed like wild Texas at all.

The Karankawa Indians were cannibals, so the story went, roaming the Gulf islands long before the shipping trade had turned Galveston into the leading port city of the West, and even before the legendary pirate Jean Lafitte had stopped by to bury his stolen booty. When the fishing wasn't good, the Karankawas turned to eating human flesh, and it was rumored that their campfires were heaped with the bones of their supper guests. The fact that they had stalked around the island stark naked, their bronzed bodies glistening in alligator grease to ward off mosquitoes, only added to the allure of their legend. Galveston was, after all, a beach and bathing resort where even very proper Victorians went nude into the waves.

John Henry learned about that surprising island custom on one of his first nights in Galveston when a drink in a Strand saloon led to an invitation to join an outing of men and ladies for a swim in the ocean.

"Though I don't have any bathing clothes with me," he remarked, and one of the other men answered with a laugh.

"Don't need 'em! City Ordinance says you can swim in the altogether between ten at night and four in the morning. They figure all the children are asleep by then."

"You mean you swim naked with ladies along?" John Henry asked in amazement. While he'd grown up going skinny-dipping in the green waters of the Withlacoochee, he'd never gone undressed in open public view – and certainly not with ladies.

"Well, I wouldn't call 'em ladies, exactly!" the gent replied. "It's usually only these saloon girls who are bold enough to accept the invitation. But once they've got their pantaloons off, the barmaids and the ladies all look pretty much alike, anyway. Care to come along?"

And that was how John Henry Holliday found himself in the company of several young sports

and a few of their female friends, riding out in a hired dray toward the sand beach on the south side of Galveston Island. They could have walked the two miles to the shore, as it was a warm and brightly moonlit night, but the dray would be a convenient place to stow their clothing while they did their bathing in the surf.

The other young men seemed accustomed to watching women disrobing at a hardly discreet distance, although with the moon shining down so bright no distance would have been quite discreet enough. But John Henry was not accustomed to such a sight and had a hard time averting his eyes, as a gentleman should. The spectacle of those laughing young women loosing their hair and shedding shoes and stockings, skirts and bodices, petticoats and corsets and shimmies and pantaloons until they were standing bare-skinned under the summer moon took away all his mannerly reserve – though it wasn't just the eroticism of the scene that compelled him to shed his own clothes and join them in the waves. It was the freedom of the night, the wild abandonment of the life he'd left behind and the thrill of the world that lay ahead, that made him dive naked into the warm waters of the Gulf. It was Texas that made him do it, not the girls, and he felt not the slightest bit of remorse because of it.

No remorse, but a little regret later on when morning neared and the party tired of the ocean frolic, and found that the dray had disappeared with all of their clothing in it. There was momentary laughter over the missing horse and buggy until they all realized that they would have to make their way back into town on foot – and wearing nothing but their sandy, salty nakedness. Next time, John Henry vowed, he'd leave his own clothing somewhere more reliable than in the back of a rented dray. But in spite of the embarrassing early morning walk back to the livery stable, where the horse had taken itself and the dray full of discarded attire, he wouldn't have traded away that night of emancipation for a lifetime of proper memories.

He was in Texas at last, and glad of it.

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The rest of his days in Galveston were less romantic as he turned his attention to the more mundane matter of finding employment, which turned out to be a harder task than he'd thought it would be. Although he had a fine education as a graduate of the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery and professional experience with one of the most respected dentists in Atlanta, he had no way of proving it. And at one Galveston dental practice after another, the conversation was always the same:

"I'd be happy to have some extra help, busy as things are these days. Could use another trained man in the office, if you did indeed have the credentials…"

"Too bad about the diploma, and all. I've been thinking of advertising for a qualified partner…"

"One can't be too careful in our line, of course. My patients would want to know the background of someone new to town. It's all about trust, in our profession…"

Then would come the polite apologies, adding that when the doctor received his diploma that had been mistakenly left behind in Georgia, along with a letter of recommendation from his former
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employer, he'd be welcome to come by and inquire after a position again…

But John Henry couldn't afford to wait on the arrival of his diploma or anything else, short on money as he was. So he took the first job that seemed at all suitable: working for a Market Street barber who advertised bloodletting, leeching, and tooth extractions "promptly attended to" on the side of a hairstyling business, and who had a room to rent in the back of his shop, as well. John Henry did the work, took the money, and consoled himself that he wasn't planning on staying in town long, anyhow. As soon as he made enough to outfit himself properly for the journey to come, dressing like a gentleman instead of a ragged refugee from the law, he would leave the barber business and travel on to the Brazos River plantation of his wealthy Uncle Jonathan McKey, where he could live a life more befitting his station.

Of course, along with the new clothes, he'd need to have a new scabbard made for his Uncle Tom McKey's big knife that had come to Texas with him. Since the Hell-Bitch had started out as a plowshare on the McKey plantation before being forged into a sidearm, his Uncle Jonathan might recognize it and wonder how John Henry had come to carry it unholstered – and begin to ask questions about why his nephew had left home in such a hurry. In spite of the family connection, his uncle would be under no obligation to take in a man on the run, and might even turn him away if he knew the circumstances of John Henry's hasty departure from Georgia.

His earnings from the barbershop were slow in adding up, however. What he needed was some seed money, just a little loan to get himself started – and he knew just the person to ask. His Uncle John Holliday, a doctor in Atlanta, was the most well-off man he knew and could certainly afford to share something with his favorite nephew, if John Henry could just find the right words to say in asking him.

It took all the skills of composition he had learned in his school days at the Valdosta Institute to craft a letter that said just enough without saying too much, asking for the loan without explaining why he couldn't ask his own father for the money. But he must have done well in writing it, for within two weeks he received a reply – the small loan he had requested, along with a letter of introduction to a dentist living in the north Texas town of Dallas.

The dentist was a Dr. John Seegar, a former Georgian and old friend of the family. Dr. Seegar had married a girl from Campbell County, just over the line from Fayette County, and had made his home for a while in the Holliday's hometown of Fayetteville. Uncle John was well acquainted with him and was pleased to offer a letter of introduction which John Henry might want to use, should he ever find himself in Dallas. But John Henry had no intention of using the recommendation, having heard enough about Dallas to know that he wasn't much interested in presenting himself there. Dallas was just another upstart farm town enjoying a little boom from the arrival of the railroads, but nothing much to brag about beyond that, and he had another kind of life in mind for himself – one of ease and comfort on his Uncle Jonathan's big cotton plantation on the Brazos River. So he put the letter away in his traveling bag and spent the loan money buying a new wardrobe for his trip: a vested wool suit and two white linen shirts, two stiff collars and two pairs of paper cuffs, a pair of soft leather ankle boots and a new felt hat, promising himself that he would repay the loan just as soon as he got settled again. And by the time he stepped aboard the Houston

& Texas Central Railroad headed northwest toward Washington County, he almost believed that he really was just a young gentleman traveler off to see the world.

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He was lucky to get out of Galveston when he did, on one of the last trains across the railroad bridge before a Yellow Fever quarantine went into effect. The city had reason to be wary: the epidemic of 1867, just six years before, had killed nearly a thousand people, and since no one knew what caused the Fever, no one knew how to stop it. The only certainty was that the Fever always followed a season of heat and rain, and that early summer had been particularly hot and rainy. The oyster shell streets filled and flooded, the open ditch sewers overflowed, and the city reeked of human waste and stagnating tide water. When the rains finally cleared and the island dried out in the summer sun, pools of fouled water remained in all the low-lying places breeding mosquitoes that hatched and swarmed and made life miserable for the citizens of Galveston. The city fathers tried every known remedy to remove the noxious fumes that rose up from those mosquito pools, even spreading lime powder on the streets as a disinfectant, but the Yellow Fever came anyway. By the time the quarantine was ordered, seven souls had already died and the newspapers were reporting a new death every day, and fear stalked the island.

So John Henry was glad to be gone, leaving the sand beach and the Oleander gardens behind as the steam engine rumbled across the Galveston Bay Bridge and over the swampy mainland into the piney woods and Post Oak belt of east central Texas. He didn't even bother getting off the train in the little village of Houston, quaint on the banks of Buffalo Bayou, for Washington County was only another sixty miles past that and he was eager to get there.

He knew something of the place already, as he knew of Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie, as he knew of the Texas fight for freedom and the war cry, *Remember the Alamo!* For Washington-on-the-Brazos was the birthplace of the Texas Declaration of Independence from Mexico following the massacre at the Battle of the Alamo, something every school boy knew about. The Declaration had been signed in a wooden shack on a muddy track that led up from the Brazos River, as primitive a beginning as there ever was for a new nation. But Washington County didn't stay the seat of the new government for long. The Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna was hot on the trail of the rebels, and five days after its birth the new government moved to the safer, more settled regions of east Texas.

When the Texans finally won their freedom at the Battle of San Jacinto, the Brazos River country started to fill up with settlers planting cotton and corn in the rich river bottoms. The Brazos was a natural passage through the unsettled countryside, and soon steamers and freighters were carrying thousands of bales of cotton from the new plantations along the river to the coast and Galveston. By the time the Republic of Texas voted to become part of the United States of America, Washington County was on its way to being the leading cotton growing region in the entire South. Although secession and Civil War put a temporary end to the cotton prosperity and the big slave-run plantations were broken up into smaller farms, cotton was still king along the Brazos, and
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there were still wealthy landowners sending barges downriver heavy-laden with raw white bales.

John Henry got off the train at the county seat of Brenham, asked around for directions to the McKey property, then hired a horse for the ride out to the Brazos River. He'd imagined his uncle's place in every detail: the tall white house facing the river, the acres of cotton fields stretching beyond, the horse lots farther out where long-tailed Texas mustangs waited impatiently for riding. But when he got to the end of the road where the McKey plantation ought to be, he saw nothing but a tangle of trees along the river's edge with a rough wooden farmhouse fronting furrowed fields. In the plot nearest the road, two young girls in worn cotton dresses were working at the crops, and they stopped to stare as he reined in the horse.

"'Afternoon, Ladies," he said, tipping his hat. "Can you tell me the whereabouts of the McKey plantation? I seem to have taken a wrong turn somewhere."

He waited for an answer, but the girls kept staring up at him in silence, so he asked the question again.

"I said, can you point out the way to the plantation of Mr. Jonathan McKey?"

The older girl answered then, looking up and shading her face with her hand. "What do you want to know for?"

"I have business there," he replied, uncomfortable at being interrogated by a child. With her thin body and old rag of a dress, it was hard to guess her age.

"What kind of business?" the girl asked.

"That is my own affair, Miss," he answered sharply. It was clear the girl came from poor circumstances to be so rudely inquisitive of an adult. "Now can you point out the way to the McKey place or not? It's gettin' late and I've been travelin' a long way."

"Maybe I can, maybe I can't," she replied. "If I knew what your business was, I might could say. How do I know you're not a Yankee revenue agent or somethin'? We don't like Yankees much in these parts."

"Do I sound like a Yankee?" John Henry drawled.

"Well, not exactly. But you don't sound like you're from these parts, neither."

He took a slow breath, trying to hold back his irritation. "I have come a long way to find Mr. McKey. Now, if you don't know where he is, maybe your folks do. Is your mother at home?"

"Ma's dead," the younger girl blurted out, then hung her head.

"Hush up, Eula!" the older girl chided. "How do we know he's not a Yankee, anyhow? Pa'd whip us sure if he thought we was talkin' to a Yankee."

"I am not a Yankee!" John Henry repeated, about ready to give up on his search for the afternoon and ride back to Brenham to try again in the morning. But as he pulled back on the reins, he saw a tall man come out of the treeline along the river, shotgun in hand.

"That's Pa," little Eula said. "He don't like Yankees."

"And he don't like us talkin' to strangers, neither," the older girl said. "You better git, Mister, unless you're a better shot than my Pa."

"I doubt he'd let loose with y'all standin' right here beside me," John Henry answered coolly, the sight of the shotgun not bothering him nearly as much as those two unmannerly children.

"Eula! Lottie!" the man called as he walked toward them through the cornfield. "You girls get inside right now!"

The younger girl turned quickly and ran toward the house, but the older girl – Lottie, John Henry reckoned – hesitated a moment, almost smiling.

"Better not be a Yankee, Mister. My Pa don't much like Yankees," she said again. Then she turned, as well, and ran through the fields toward the shelter of the farmhouse.

The girls' father was a tall man, thin like most farm workers but better dressed than most, and he wore a felt hat that looked like it had once been meant for better things than farm work. He stopped short of the edge of the road, the shotgun held loosely in the crook of his arm.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, as he closed the breech of the gun.

"I'm lookin' for Mr. Jonathan McKey. I understand he owns a big plantation down this way."

"He used to, 'till the damn Yankees stole it away."

"Then can you tell me where I might find him?" John Henry asked, afraid that his journey had all been for nothing, that he had come west only to find his uncle moved on or dead.

"That depends on who's askin'. I don't recall you introducin' yourself."

John Henry sighed. These Texas country people were a difficult lot, almost as suspicious as Georgia folk had been after the War.

"Jonathan McKey is my mother's older brother. I'm his nephew, John Henry Holliday. I've come all the way from Georgia to find him. Do you know where he is?"

The man pushed the hat back off his face, and for the first time John Henry could see the man's eyes clearly, sandy lashed and china blue like his own. "Why, you're lookin' at him, son. I'm Jon McKey. And I sure never expected to meet family out here in Texas."

John Henry was speechless. His uncle was nothing but a poor dirt farmer, no better off than any Georgia cracker! But more surprising than Jonathan McKey's poverty was the look of age about him. Though Jonathan was only a couple of years older than his sister Alice Jane, he somehow looked much older than John Henry had expected he would. His thick sandy blond hair was heavily streaked with gray, his face tanned to leather from long hours of working in the hot Texas sun, his blue eyes wreathed in wrinkles. He looked to be nearly sixty years old, though he must have been only in his late forties that year, and John Henry realized with a start that his own mother would be getting old now, too, if she had lived. He always liked to remember her the way she looked in photographs – her white brow smooth and unlined, her eyes clear and serene – before the illness that had overtaken her and drained her life away in that hard, bloody cough.

"So you're Alice Jane's son, are you?" Jonathan said. "Why, I haven't heard from her in years, seems like, not since she moved down to south Georgia during the War. I'm a poor correspondent, I'm afraid. How's she doin' these days?"

John Henry cleared his throat, holding back the cough that suddenly tried to come up from his lungs.

"She's passed on, Sir. She died in '66, after the War."

"Ah, poor Sis!" Jonathan McKey said, shaking his head. "I reckon the War years were hard for her. You favor her, though there's somethin' of your father in your face, as well. What brings you

all the way to Texas, John Henry?"

"I'm here to practice dentistry, Sir," he said, giving as much truth as he dared. "I graduated from the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery last year. Heard tell Texas is full of opportunity for a young man like myself. I'm aimin' to set up somewhere around these parts, so I thought to pay a visit on my kin along the way."

Jonathan looked at him carefully. "I'm surprised you could find us way out here."

"I almost didn't. Those girls didn't seem too happy to give me directions."

"They're just mindin' my orders. We've had our share of trouble with Yanks here, so I make them be careful."

"But there wasn't any fightin' all the way out here was there?"

"Not durin' the War, no. Our trouble came after, with the Reconstruction. The Yankees near to ruined Washington County, burned half of Brenham then took our land and gave it away to the Nigras." He nodded to the farm across the road where fields of cotton fought against the encroaching line of trees. "That used to be my land over there. Had two-thousand acres, mostly all in cotton, before the Yankees came through. They stole most of it away, gave it to the coloreds I had working on my place, like they had a right to it. What was left they sold to some German immigrants. Mighty hard to see my land run by Nigras and folks that can't even speak English – land my father's inheritance money paid for."

He stared off into the distance, then shifted the shotgun in the crook of his arm.

"I hate them Nigras," he said sullenly. "But I hate the Yankees worse, dirty land-stealin' bastards. I'll get my land back one day, or there'll be hell to pay. Well, come on in the house, then, John Henry. Can't leave my own kin standin' out in the road all day."

It was clear that Jonathan McKey was a bitter man, but he had good reason to be. He was the oldest son of the oldest son of a wealthy Southern family and had been raised to expect that life would treat him well, and for a while it had. When his father, John Henry's grandfather William Land McKey, had died, Jonathan took his inheritance money and went west to Texas, buying up those two-thousand acres of prime cotton land along the Brazos River. But then the War came, and Jonathan signed on as an officer with the Second Texas Cavalry, leaving his wife behind with two small children and another on the way. When the War ended, Jonathan came back to Washington County to find his plantation ruined, his wife Emma and their baby both dead of Yellow Fever, and his two small daughters being tended by neighbors.

Lotti and Eula, Jonathan's girls, must have taken after their mother, John Henry thought, since they didn't bear much resemblance to the McKeys, though they had enough McKey in them to give them that natural Southern pride he had taken as arrogance. Jonathan never let them forget that they were Southern ladies, though his circumstances were too poor even to send them into Brenham for schooling. Still, he had hopes that they might find good husbands and help to raise the family back up from poverty. Lotti was fifteen that year, close enough for marrying age, and shy little Eula was thirteen and would be old enough soon. But the possibility of them finding well-off husbands in that part of Washington County was pretty slim, and chances were they would both end up

married to sons of German immigrant families with almost as little as they had. Until they did marry, they kept house for their father and helped out in the fields, and looked less and less like Southern ladies every year.

But they did their best to entertain their new-found cousin in a genteel manner, even setting the supper table with the few remaining pieces of their mother's china dinnerware. And if it weren't all so pathetic, John Henry might have laughed at the irony of it. He had come all the way from Georgia looking for a hand-out from his wealthy uncle, and Jonathan's family was so destitute that they hardly had enough food to pass around the table. It was funny, all right, and too sad for words.

There were only two beds in the McKey house: Jonathan's downstairs in a little bedroom behind the kitchen, and the one the girls shared upstairs in the attic. John Henry would have been content to just ride on back to Brenham to spend the night in the hotel there and forget all about Washington County, but Jonathan insisted that he had to stay the night, at least, as he was family and all. So the girls made themselves a pallet out of blankets by the kitchen hearth, and John Henry took their bed upstairs.

But he found it hard to sleep on that lumpy old mattress, with the rope-strung bed creaking every time he rolled over and tried to get comfortable, and the air so close in the windowless attic that he could hardly breathe. It was no wonder that he started to coughing, with that stale air and the dust of the attic and the summer heat sweltering in.

He had a strange dream that night, as he tossed and turned in his troubled, fitful sleep. He dreamed he was back in Georgia again, a fair-haired boy sitting beside his mother at the piano in the parlor. She was young again too, and as beautiful as the Franz Liszt music she played.

"Here, honey," she said, laying his little hands on the keyboard. "You try it. You know how Mother loves to hear you play."

But before he could make a sound, he heard his father's voice calling to him from somewhere outside, and the music and his mother both disappeared.

"Leave that nonsense now, there's work to do," Henry Holliday said, and John Henry followed the sound of his father's voice. Henry was busy building a sapling box and he handed John Henry a hammer and nails. "See if you can make some use of yourself," his father said, as John Henry began to hammer at the wood. And as he worked, the sound of the hammering grew louder and louder until he wasn't a boy anymore, but a man, full grown, and standing at the end of a long drive of trees in front of a beautiful home.

It was his own home, he knew, though it looked like some Peachtree Street mansion, and he walked up the drive toward the wide front stairs. The door was open and he stepped into a house full of light, sunshine reflecting off oiled wood and polished brass, with every long window unshuttered and letting in the air. But the beautiful rooms were empty, still and silent as a tomb.

Then another sound came out of the silence, a sound sweet with memory and affection: Mattie's voice, speaking from behind him in the open doorway.

"You've come home, John Henry!" she said, but when he turned to face her, it was an auburn-haired child who looked up at him with Mattie's eyes and Mattie's smile. He reached out to touch

her, but she turned and ran away from him, back down the tree-lined drive and into the wild fields beyond, laughing and calling him to follow.

He ran after her, laughing too, but when he reached the end of the drive, he saw a railroad track stretching out between him and the field. The child Mattie stood in the tall grass beyond the track, smiling and waiting for him to cross over to her, but he was too winded to run any farther and stopped to catch his breath.

And then he heard the train coming, the sound of it growing louder and louder until it filled his ears with a roaring and rushing, and he tried to call out to the child to wait for him. But when he opened his mouth to speak, his words turned into a pain that tore at his lungs like a fire in his chest. He stumbled to the ground, coughing and gasping as the train roared on by.

When he could finally lift his head, the train was gone and so was the child. And all that was left before him was an open, empty field that stretched out forever, endless, alone.

He woke with a start. Someone was standing over him in a dim shadow of light and it took him a moment to realize where he was. The light came from the attic stair, and his little cousin Eula was by his bedside, a candlestick in her hand.

"You sick, John Henry?" she whispered. "You been coughin' all night long."

"No," he started to say, but he had to clear his throat just to get the word out.

"You sure sound sick to me," she said, leaning closer, and as she did the light of the candle fell over him.

"What's that all over your face, John Henry?" she asked, then she pulled back and gasped. "Why, you' got blood all over you!"

And in the flickering light of the candle, John Henry looked down and saw that his pillow was splattered with blood, dark red and drying where his head had been. Then he put his hand to his face, wiping his mouth. *Tell me if there's ever any blood*, his Uncle John Holliday had told him once, and the hand that touched his mouth was streaked blood-red, too.

"I think maybe you're real sick, John Henry," Eula said, slowly backing away from him. "You want me to get Pa?"

But John Henry didn't answer her. He was staring at the blood that stained his pillow and remembering how his mother had coughed up blood that stained her bed linens blood-red.

"No," he said, "I'm not sick. I am not sick."

"But you're bleedin'," Eula said. "I'll go get Pa."

"No!" he said, pulling himself up. "Get my horse, I'm leavin' here!"

"Right now? But it's hardly daybreak even."

"Get my horse!" he said, the words rasping out, and Eula took the candle and hurried down the attic stair.

He was not weak. He would not be ill. Illness was weakness, and he was not weak. But there was blood all over his pillow, blood on his hand.

It was the sea voyage that had made him sick, he told himself, or the Yellow Fever that had quarantined Galveston, or the choking black smoke of the steam engine on the ride to Washington

County. Anyone would get sick breathing in all that coal smoke. Or maybe it was the air in that stuffy little attic room, or vapors from the Brazos River. Vapors brought on the Yellow Fever, vapors could make a man cough up blood...

But when he tried to get up he found that he was drained of all energy, like he'd coughed up part of his life with that blood. He had no choice but to stay in bed in that airless little attic while Eula and Lotti brought him broth and tea and sponged his head with wet rags. And every time he closed his eyes to sleep, he had an awful fear that the train would come back again and take him with it, coughing and gasping his life away.

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It was days before he was well enough to travel again, and by then he'd convinced himself that it was indeed the Yellow Fever that had caused the bloody coughing fit and he was lucky to be away from Galveston before the Fever killed him. And blaming his troubles on Galveston and the Fever, he decided to follow his Uncle John Holliday's advice, after all, and take himself off to Dallas to ask for a position with Dr. Seegar. What other option did he have, anyhow? He couldn't go back to quarantined Galveston, nor could he stay with his Uncle Jonathan McKey on that miserable remains of a cotton plantation. So once again, he was on the run, buying another train ticket north and heading on to Dallas.
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