



DIVIDED
Heart

**SHERYL
MARCOUX**

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Sheryl Marcoux

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1

"You can have it. You can have it all."

"Ain't no question whether we can have it or not, Beaufort. Question is, do we want you to live after we got it?"

Nate Powell crouched behind a rock and watched. He'd just traveled two thousand miles, the last thirty on foot, with one purpose in mind, and getting involved in stopping a holdup wasn't it.

It was getting dark, he was tired, and the chill of a Texan spring night would soon set in. He'd seen a campfire from afar and hoped for nothing more than to share it, but he'd approached to find firelight flickering across the nervous face of one man holding up his hands and the back of another holding up a gun.

Tin clanged as two men, pretty as a pair of skunk pigs, scavenged through Beaufort's belongings. One of them threw down a sack. "Ain't nothing here worth stealing."

That was no surprise. Judging by Beaufort's scraggly beard and even scragglier clothes, Nate could have told them the man was too poor to rob and saved them the trouble.

"Help yourself to some food," Beaufort stammered. "Jackrabbit should be about done."

One of them tore off more than his share of meat. "I don't like the way Beaufort here's looking at me. I say we kill him."

Nice way to thank the man for his hospitality. Nate hoped they were only harassing Beaufort.

"You don't like the way anyone looks at you, Mel."

"I don't like the way you look at me neither, Bill. So how about I kill you right after I kill him."

Nate bit his lip. He'd seen those names before.

"Why don't we just introduce ourselves to him proper so we can be sure he knows who we all are?" The man who said those words was the one holding the gun on Beaufort. He turned into the light and confirmed Nate's suspicions.

Nate ducked and centered himself behind the rock. Those were the names and faces on the "Wanted Dead or Alive" posters he'd been following from Kansas City to Dodge City. He didn't know anything else about the Krugar Gang other than the members were worth one thousand dollars each.

Which meant they were killers.

Nate slid his gun out of its holster then slid it back in. *I can't get involved.* Although he should have slipped away, he peered around the rock, looking for a solution for Beaufort.

"What do you say?" the man holding the gun said to the shadows. As Nate recalled, his name was Tom Drown. "Do we kill him?"

A fourth figure came into view but stayed away from the light. It was a smaller figure, and although the poster listed the name of the gang's leader as Joe Krugar, it didn't show a picture. Krugar remained elusive even now by staying in the shadows.

The figure gave a nod.

A bang pierced the quiet.

"Let him go. He's not doing you any harm," Nate

called out from behind the rock. Seemed he'd gotten himself involved, since it was his gun that had gone off.

Thumps and rustling followed as the gang scurried for cover. Snorting and shuffling of horses told where that cover was.

"Come on out." Tom was the spokesman for the gang. "Let's talk about this."

"Sure." Nate snickered. "You come out first." He couldn't resist a stupid answer to a stupider statement. He listened for the snap of a twig of an outlaw trying to flank him. Not a sound. Being in the dark and having a rock to hide behind put him in a better spot than Beaufort, who should have taken the opportunity to dive for cover.

The man had the virtue of hospitality, but quick thinking wasn't his strong suit. He started to run.

"Don't move," Tom shouted, stopping him short.

Beaufort raised his hands again.

"Beaufort here a friend of yours?" Tom called out.

"Never seen him before," Nate answered.

"Then you should have left this one alone," Tom said.

He was likely right.

"Why don't we all just leave this one alone?" Nate said. "You continue on your way, Beaufort will continue on his, and I'll continue on mine like nothing happened."

"We got to shoot Beaufort," Mel said. "He seen us."

"Well so did the one out yonder," Bill replied.

"And so did hundreds of other people passing through Kansas." Nate called out to the squatting shapes the slender silhouettes of acacia tree trunks

couldn't hide.

"He knows who we are," Mel said.

"I do," Nate said. "But Beaufort here doesn't, do you, Beaufort?"

"He's right." Beaufort stood shabby and jittery, hands up, in the firelight. "I don't know who you be."

"How good a shot are you, mister?" Tom called to Nate.

"The truth?" Nate said. "Fair. But I'm good enough to get at least one of you before you figure out where I am. So who's going to make the sacrifice?"

"Bill," Tom said, "you go on over there."

A figure started to move in the wrong direction. They had no idea where Nate was hiding.

"Bill," Nate called, "sounds like you're the one they can do without."

"I ain't going out there."

Nate grinned.

"We'll wait you out until morning," Tom said. "We ain't in no hurry."

Nate leaned against the rock. He was no gunman. In the daylight he'd have no chance at all. He peered behind, into a darkness that once more beckoned him to escape. He'd come all this way to accomplish something long overdue, not wind up dead.

But the ragged man standing with hands raised looked like the loneliest man Nate had ever seen. Nate raked his hand through his hair. Since he couldn't outgun the gang, he'd have to outsmart them. "It's a good thing you're not in a hurry," Nate called, "because you'll have to get wherever you're going on foot."

Tom asked, "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to shoot your horses."

"Let's get out of here while we still got horses," Bill said.

Nate liked the sound of that. "I'd say we've got a standoff."

"We do," Tom said. Then he fired.

Beaufort dropped.

Nate shot a few rounds to scare the gang away from Beaufort. They fired back, but nowhere near him.

"Don't waste your bullets. We ain't going to find him tonight," Tom said. Then he called out to Nate, "Not tonight, mister, but we'll be back for you." The pounding of horse hooves followed, and they were gone.

Nate crept up to where Beaufort lay on his stomach, outside the light from the fire. He rolled him over.

Beaufort blinked.

Nate's heart almost came out of his chest. "I thought you were dead."

"I was watching his hand. When it moved toward me, I sort of fell. Bullet went through my arm." Blood had stained the ragged sleeve red.

"Well, even though they didn't kill you, that gang is nothing but a band of cold-blooded murderers." Nate heaved a sigh. "The Krugar Gang won't be looking for us tonight. We'd better forego that warm fire and a good night's rest and get you to a doctor."

Beaufort didn't argue as Nate bound up Beaufort's arm as best he could with the man's neckerchief.

Nate grabbed two sticks from the ground to use for walking. He gave one to Beaufort. Night was a treacherous time to walk, but fortunately, the moon was full and bright. Nate looked up at it as if he were seeing it for the first time. "It's been a long time since

I've been in these parts," he said as they started walking.

Beaufort plodded behind him, leaning heavily on his own stick. "Where we headed?"

Nate stared out toward Ramsden, Texas. "To the last place on earth I want to go."

"Then why would you want to go there?"

"A woman." Nate stepped wide around the shadowy shape of a cholla cactus. "Last I'd heard, she hadn't married. But even if that's still the case, it's a thousand to one shot she'd give me the time of day after what I'd done to her." But he'd come a long way from the unruly youth who'd left his hometown years ago. *A long way.*

"She must be one special gal."

The sign by the picket fence indicated that the doctor was still where he used to be. Nate handed Beaufort enough money to pay the doctor, get a few good meals, and stay in the hotel if he needed. After several knocks, a light lit up a window. Nate slipped away into the night, not wanting to be seen by anyone.

Then he quickened his pace toward the direction his heart drove him, but common sense rebuked was a waste of time.

~*~

Who's knocking at the door at this hour?

Hattie Brown leaped out of bed and snatched the shotgun. The moonlight poured through the window and lit her house well enough to see. *That knocking better be an emergency. If it isn't—she cocked back the hammer—it will be.* The knocking came from the front door, so she headed toward the window where she'd

be able to get a look.

Rap, rap, rap.

It was a quiet, patient knock. She'd have even described it as polite—had it not been for the impolite hour.

If this was an emergency, whoever it was should have said so. Which suggested the visitor was just seeing if anyone inside was awake, because he was fixing to rob the place.

Good luck finding something worth stealing. She had some crockery, four sacks of flour, and a cook stove about as easy to move as a mule with its hooves nailed to the floorboards. But what little she had was valuable to her, and she aimed to protect it.

With a fingertip, she separated the curtains just wide enough to peer outside. The moon was bright enough, but she couldn't see the intruder from this angle. She had to try another. Like the angle she'd get from sneaking up from behind.

She eased the window open. It gave a few inches and then wouldn't budge. "You sure you want to have a go of it with me?" she whispered to the window. If one way to trap a rabbit didn't work, sure as shooting there was another way. She looked around for that other way and found it involved the sledgehammer she kept in the kitchen. There was a reason folks called her hard-as-nails Hattie Brown. Nothing stood between her and what she'd set her mind to do.

She tapped the bottom of the window with the sledgehammer. Yesterday's rain had swelled the wood so that it still wouldn't budge. She gave it one good whack, which was more than it needed, and the window slammed against the top of its casing.

Had the intruder heard? Must have.

Shotgun in hand, she crawled out the window and slipped around the house. Then, she spotted a man at her door.

She looked at the henhouse and woodshed for evidence of anyone else. The hens weren't putting up a ruckus, and the rooster who watched over them wasn't in an uproar. So it was likely just the one man. She made her way wide to take him by surprise. But instead, he took her by surprise.

"Hello, Hattie."

She stumbled back. Either her ears were playing tricks on her or her heart was the culprit. *It can't be him.* She raised her shotgun. "Who're you?"

He stepped away from the shadows of the house, and moonlight lit up the once-familiar features of a man's face.

This has to be a dream. Just in case her eyes and ears were playing tricks, she demanded, "What do you want?"

A voice that had always made her weak for him answered. "You, Hattie. I came back for you."

2

The sight of Hattie in a long white nightdress, barefoot, and bathed in moonlight was worth every minute of Nate's journey, and then some. Every rumbling hour on the train. Every bumpy mile on the stagecoach. Every throbbing blister on his feet from walking the rest of the way so he wouldn't be seen. She was as beautiful as he remembered her, and that she'd come out alone and carrying a shotgun suggested she had no husband.

The moon's glow illuminated her olive skin and the ebony braid that poured over one shoulder and down toward her waist. But her exotic black eyes—a man could never forget a gaze from them once they'd connected with his own.

She cocked her head as if to say, "*Where've you been, Nate?*"

He answered. Partially. "I've established a comfortable life back East."

Still no response. Rightly so.

"You're one of a kind, Hattie, a special kind. I realize that now, and I'm ready to do right by you." How could he describe his long struggle to come back? If only he could take out his heart and put it into her chest so she could feel how much he ached for her. "I love you, Hattie."

~*~

I love you.

The words echoed in her head like a recurring dream. Those were the last words Nate Powell would have uttered to her, but the ones she'd always longed to hear him say. If he was a dream, why was she talking to an apparition, aiming her shotgun at it, and hoping...? Hoping that it was all real.

Could this really be his ever-so-serious face, even more handsome with manhood? Were these the unruly yellow curls of his youth calmed with maturity into short blond waves? And the voice—even, soft-spoken, intelligent—wasn't this the voice she'd yearned to hear again?

The emptiness awakened. It was a place where being half white had left her feeling different from everyone else and where working as a saloon girl left her shunned and lonely. Neither ever mattered to Nate, and being in his company was the closest thing she'd ever felt to being loved.

She thought she'd gotten over him long ago, but the tenderness she'd once had for him stampeded back over her heart.

That's how she knew he was real. The years hadn't diminished her love for him one bit, only buried them under a heap of hurt. Seeing him again caused those yearnings to dig their way out of the pain he'd left her in. Just when she'd started to get a foothold on things.

Her face heated. *How dare he come back and say those words to me now.* "You've been gone seven years. If you want me to even entertain the notion of allowing you to court me, you'd better have a good explanation for being gone *that* long."

~*~

Nate had a good explanation, just one he couldn't tell her, so he simply answered, "That's how long it took."

"How long *what* took? You only had one year left of schooling, and with a mind like yours..."

A mind like his. She didn't know the half of it. The half she did know was the obvious part. When they were schoolchildren, he was the top student who tutored the rest. So Hattie was correct in assuming he'd finished his last year of college in the customary time. He'd graduated *summa cum laude*, in fact. It was the other half of his mind which had kept him away so long. He read an accusation in her narrowing eyes. "No, I haven't been with another woman."

She leaned forward. "Then explain it to me, Nate. Explain to me why you've been away so long. Explain to me why you never even wrote me one single letter. Explain to me why you never so much as said good-bye. And explain to me why you come to my house in the middle of the night, sneaking around like a fox outside a henhouse."

He stared at her. Had he expected her to take all this in faith? What a heart-driven fool he was. "I didn't want anyone else to know I was here. Just you. As for my absence—" Should he explain it? No, because he'd never be able to face her again. "I was—establishing myself."

Fibers of wool bristled in her satin voice. "With whom?"

Her accusation wounded him. "I deserve that. But you're wrong."

"No, Nate, you deserve a whole lot worse. But if

I'm wrong, set me straight." Her eyes softened, pleaded.

His chest ached to tell her the truth. He owed it to her. But the truth came at too high a price. "You're all I want here. That's why I sneaked in."

"And you think that's all there is to it?"

"What do you mean 'that's all there is to it?' Isn't love reason enough? I thought you loved me. I thought your love was strong as steel. Did seven years rust it away? Because it only welded mine for you into place. I know now, Hattie. I *know* that I love you."

She stared at him with an unconvinced expression.

He tossed a hand toward her house. "Look around you, for Pete's sake. You deserve better than a lousy life in this old shack, and I can give it to you."

She cocked her head. "Give what to me?"

"I'll buy you a castle. I'll make you the queen you really are. There's a comfortable life waiting for us in Massachusetts, and I don't want to spend another day living it without you. Just tell me that you love me, Hattie," he pleaded. "It's that simple."

"That simple, huh? Everything comes easy for you, doesn't it? Good looks, intelligence, money. You got everything it takes." Her glare settled on his fine jacket. "And then some."

He somberly stared back at her. "If I have everything it takes, then why is it so difficult for you to say that you love me?"

~*~

Difficult? Hattie snorted when she wanted to cry. If only he knew how difficult it was not to run into his arms and say those words over again. Heartbreak.

That's all he'd ever given to her. "You have no idea what it took for me to establish my 'lousy life' in this 'old shack.' You can't imagine what it took me to make friends. Friends who've become family to me. Family I can *trust*. Which is a lot more than I can say about you."

The thrill of seeing him wore off, and the chill of the night air ruffling her nightdress set in.

The weight of the shotgun in her hands had become burdensome.

"You've had more than enough chances with me, Nate. There's no more making amends. Even if those amends involve placing a jewel-studded crown on my head, because loving you hurts too much. Besides—" if he cared for her half as much as she'd cared for him, then what she was about to say would strike him back one well-deserved blow and give him a good reason never to return. "I've got a beau." She raised the barrel of the shotgun to add persuasion to her words. "I've gone on with my life. Now get out and get on with yours."

~*~

Hattie's statement hit Nate harder than a spray of buckshot. It was by no means unbelievable. But it was devastating.

"What's the matter?" she said.

Maybe he'd hesitated too long.

"You think I lost what it takes to light a spark in a man's eye?"

From what he saw in front of him, he could attest that at twenty-nine years old, Hattie still had more than her fair share of what it took to set a man's heart

on fire. He couldn't help but ask. "Who is he?"

"The Reverend."

"The *Reverend*?"

She inaccurately read into his look of stupor. "You think it's so surprising that a preacher would be interested in me?"

"It's *you* being interested in a preacher that stumps me." Any man could be weakened by those black, temptress eyes.

"I've gotten religion, Nate."

He was speechless. That was the last thing he expected to hear, but at least it explained her interest in a preacher. "Does he know about your past?"

"You mean—the Reverend you hired on to marry you to Lillian?"

A blow for a blow. He shouldn't have said that. But he'd thought of this night for so long, and to lose her to...*religion*?

"You going to tell him about me?"

And ruin any chance of her being happy? "No, Hattie, I'm not."

"Then what *are* you going to do?"

Worse than facing the barrel of her shotgun was facing the anger flaring in her eyes. Anger with his name on it. She didn't want him anymore, and a woman like Hattie could have any man she wanted. Even a preacher.

He succumbed to what he so well deserved. "I wish you happiness."

He soaked in his last sight of her alluring eyes and the way the breeze brushed her nightdress against her slender form. Then he forced himself to turn away from her and accept the regret he'd have to live with for the rest of his life.

He would return to Massachusetts to an expensive house that was nothing more to him than a place where he slept and kept his belongings. It would never be a home without a wife, and Hattie was the only woman for him. The years spent without her had been the loneliest of his life. The darkness ahead filled the emptiness inside him, and he stared into it. He'd known from the start that his chances of her still loving him were a long shot. Like having a hundred coins on one side of a scale and only one on the other—and expecting that one coin could somehow tip the scale in his favor. Hope had made that one shiny coin seem a lot bigger than it was.

But the truth was that trust was as fragile as a porcelain vase. Once shattered, it could never be repaired.

3

“We could both get this over and done with if you’d lie still long enough so I can kill you.”

That would have made the task easier on both of them if the chicken was willing to comply with what Hattie had in mind. But instead the chicken put up a ruckus, squabbling and kicking at her with sharp claws as she held it down to the chopping block. It slashed her arm, and blood poured out.

This one’s a fighter.

They were all fighters. It was Hattie who dodged those claws better on some days than others. The proof was on her forearms. They were cut up, healed over, and then cut up again. Life was full of fresh and reopened wounds from making a living.

And from just plain living.

No, she wouldn’t think about Nate. And she wouldn’t think about finding an easier chicken to kill either, because Hattie was also a fighter.

And she had an axe.

The toughest chickens have the most tender meat, she’d convinced herself. Well, the philosophy sounded good, anyway.

The axe came down swiftly and mercifully. Too bad love wasn’t as kind on the heart.

She strung up the chicken and went inside to tend to her injury. It seemed Hattie had more of her own blood on her apron than the chicken’s. It reminded her

of how being in love with Nate had been. There was always a struggle, and she always ended with more wounds than he did.

The gash on her forearm was long and deep. It could use some stitching up, but she just tied a clean rag around it. She made chicken pies for a living and had to get a dozen of them to Kate's Eatery by nine each morning.

One chicken was all it took to fill the order. One fighting, squabbling, slashing chicken that she'd have to pluck, boil, and debone. The rest was just flour, water, shortening, vegetables, and a mess to clean up after. But it was nowhere as bad as the mess she had yet to clean up after seeing Nate.

Why did he have to come back, Lord? He always left me in a muddle of hurt and yearning for him, and he's done it again. Please get him out of my heart. I don't want to love him anymore. Even though she'd told Nate to go away, her feelings for him hadn't left with him. It seemed she'd fallen hopelessly in love with a man who was no good for her, and she couldn't climb out of that love.

Hattie headed into town to deliver the pies in a wagon drawn by an old, rickety mare that looked the way Hattie felt. She stopped at Doc's along the way and found him outside.

"How's that wife of yours doing?" Hattie called out.

"She's still under the weather," Doc said. "It seems I can treat everything but the common cold."

Or an aching heart. "I got just the cure." Hattie handed him a jar of chicken soup she'd made that morning.

"I appreciate it." Doc noticed the blood-stained rag. "Your arm looks like it could use some attention."