

PRAISE FOR THE GHOSTS OF WATT O'HUGH

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THE GHOSTS OF WATT
O'HUGH

Steven S. Drachman

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STEVEN S. DRACHMAN

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THE GHOSTS OF WATT O'HUGH

Being the First Part of the Strange and Astounding Memoirs of Watt
O'Hugh III

Chickadee Prince Books
New York

To Lan,
Liana and Julianne

PROLOGUE

I have my ghosts. In a way, I am a ghost myself.

My name is Watt O'Hugh III, this is my story, and I've tried to write it exactly the way it happened. Some conversations may be approximations. Scenes that occurred when I was not present are based on reconstruction, conjecture, and sometimes pure guesses. Maybe I don't remember every last detail properly, but I've never outright lied. I have also tried to be candid about my experiences roaming Time, even though I know that as a result of this revelation many readers will disbelieve my yarn.

I have tried to keep my story accurate by referring frequently to a journal in which I've written nearly every day of my life since the charity workers taught me to write, which is a very long time.

As I write these words, it's early 1936.

I know that I will die on my ranch in 1937 from old age and natural causes, alone, with no heirs or family by my bedside. It took me a long time to muster the courage to peek through Time at my ultimate fate, but now I know. Believe me, I'm writing as fast as I can.

My diary entry on July 10, 1863, began:

"I awoke in the arms of the beautiful Lucy Billings. May this day last forever."

That morning, more than 70 years ago, I awoke to Lucy's smile, a bright white smile on a beautiful ivory-white face. That July – July of 1863 – was the early culmination of my own Summer of Love, which occurred more than a hundred years before yours. I was twenty-one years old. Lucy and I had been together for one year and one month. I didn't mind that she was a subversive. I wouldn't have minded even if I'd known what the word meant.

"Happy anniversary," I whispered.

"What," she asked me, her mouth so close to my young ear, "shall we do today?"

And here is what we did: she took me to the horse races in Jerome Park, where, in my one good suit, I passed myself off as a gentleman, which I likewise attempted on Lucy's arm at the New York Academy of Music that evening, while her most powerful financial benefactor (and most prominent sexual beneficiary), a whiskered old man with millions to spare, sat miles above us in his prestigious box, surrounded by fawning business associates and a contemptuous, ageing wife. Lucy assumed the crinoline-garbed guise of a youthful heiress from the old country, a woman who spoke with a very light, unidentifiable accent and who would admit not to a name like "Lucy Billings", but instead to something more exotic and difficult to pronounce. I pretended to be her brother, Tomas, who didn't speak much. In reality, of course, just as I was not her brother, Lucy was not an heiress. She was born a poor girl someplace in America and invented both her pedigree and her accent. But everyone in New York City was a liar, back in those days.

I stared up at the old man in his box for a little too long, and so Lucy tugged my sleeve. "Don't think about him," she said, and then added, *very* quietly, "It is *you* I love." I asked her to marry me for the hundredth time, and she smiled and refused me for the hundredth time. "What *would* your parents make of me?" she asked, mocking me gently.

Later, in the still-darkening evening, Lucy and I sat side-by-side on a two-person cycle that looked like a horseless carriage. Laughing warily in this uneasy contraption, we pedaled up Riverside Drive to the tree-shrouded country roads that abutted the Boulevard above 100th Street. We lay in the grass by the River, and we watched the stars for an hour, our fingers entwined.

If only you could have seen New York City then, my 21st Century friends! Out West, once I'd left New York (sadly), I found myself sometimes nostalgic even for the walking races at Gilmore Garden, which Lucy and I attended regularly on Sunday afternoons. Don't laugh – all strata of New Yorkers used to pay to watch people walk very fast! It seemed exciting and novel at the time. So did renting a horse-drawn sleigh in Central Park on a snowy January day, at least when Lucy Billings was by my side: blond-haired, slim-waisted, wicked-minded, beguiling, and so temptingly innocent in appearance. Sometimes I would accompany Lucy to secret midnight

meetings with a small shadowy group that she boastfully deemed subversive, and which seemed to rely to no little extent on her financial contributions. At these meetings, held in dark buildings in hidden side streets, Lucy would read from a notebook that she often kept with her – demanding rights for women, the right to “free love”, rights for the Colored man. The overthrow, she suggested once, of the whole corrupt codfish aristocracy of the United States, to be replaced by something that she described in some detail and which (I thought) sounded nice.

Lucy was somewhere in the mid to late murk of her twenties, and she explained to me more than once that, as a twenty-one-year-old man who was “perhaps” (certainly) a bit younger than she, I was to “learn things” from her and to fall in love with her “madly, but only briefly.” She was right about the “madly” part.

As I wrote those words in my journal, at the beginning of that perfect day that I wished would last forever, I could hardly expect that on July 13, 1863, which was the following Monday, Lucy would slip silently from my life, without even a goodbye.

After the havoc of that terrible Monday (which was also the day of the infamous New York Draft Riots, in case you haven’t brushed up on your history), and after I’d stopped paying attention, she turned up in England, married to a man named Darryl Fawley. He was in his forties, with sagging, wan features, an unevenly balding pate, crooked, tea-stained teeth, tobacco-stained fingers, and a weak, lanky frame, an English aristocrat and mid-level embassy functionary who, even when he took the shocking step of turning outlaw, could not give up the comfortable trappings of his youth. Then, suddenly, the 1870s still dawning, Fawley and his wife disappeared thoroughly. His mysterious departure from England made the newspapers as far away as the States, though on my side of the Atlantic, pictures of his beautiful American wife dominated the coverage, based on interviews with American socialites who remembered her from years earlier when, at an apparently tender age, she had made her first appearance at society events. American readers were also treated to elegant illustrations of Lucy in her finery, depicted from her wedding portrait.

Her escape into infamy with her well-bred husband brought her notoriety, and the publication of those artists' renderings of Lucy – mostly wide-eyed, tenderly wrought, impossibly curvaceous, but, in my opinion, inappropriately gentle – made her, in the end, sort of a 19th century “sex symbol.” That's how you might describe her, if you remembered her now, a century-and-a-half after the furor she caused in the civilized world. In your era, she would find her image on “t-shirts”, and teenage boys would hang her poster on bedroom walls. Back then, in my century, she caused hysteria of a different sort. She sold newspapers, starred in dime novels and Sunday sermons, and inspired insipid theatrical presentations. Fawley, who had engineered the couple's disappearance from view, soon also disappeared from the newspaper, overshadowed by Lucy's “star appeal.” Any mention of the uncomely Mr. Fawley detracted from the glamour of the mystery.

When Fawley and Lucy vanished, I was a drag rider bringing up the rear of a cattle drive fifteen hundred miles north across the Western plains, and I heard nothing of it. I was dirty and bathed in sweat, my clothes and my lungs coated in the dust kicked up through the blazing heat by the stragglers at the back of the herd.

Each day, I galloped through bullshit, by which I mean two things. First, my horse skidded so often on the excrement of our cattle that I sometimes thought it would be the end of me. But I also mean the myth that the West would allow a man like me to make of himself an easy success. I owned nothing but my clothes and my saddle – even my horse belonged to the ranch bosses – and on every trail, we left more than one colleague in a shallow grave. By the hour, I cursed the swing riders and the flank riders I could see through the dust, and the invisible point men who rode way up in front, and who didn't know my name but could determine my destiny.

Now, re-reading my journal, I note that, on the very day the English government made public Fawley's disappearance, I was pushing across the Powder River in Wyoming, trying my best to keep my cattle and myself from drowning. Of course, the trail boss couldn't deliver us the morning papers, and even if he somehow could have, I would not have spared even a glance. All I longed for as the long days passed was to eat, and then to sleep. Being exhausted and hungry helped me to forget. Even though Fawley had taken with him the former Lucy Billings, I remained (perhaps willfully) ignorant of their story. Like Darryl Fawley's disappearance into the wilds of China, my banishment to the Magic of the most desolate parts of what you readers would call

“the Old West” (but which was at the time the New West) had cut me off decisively from the civilization I had once known.

Though Lucy married him to advance in the world, she could have loved Darryl Fawley the way he loved her. Really, she should have loved him. Perhaps the love of a beautiful and brilliant woman could have saved him. But Lucy could not quite manage to love Darryl Fawley, because throughout her entire life, Lucy would love only one man. And I was that man.

CHAPTER 1

My diary entry on July 17, 1874, begins:

“I was lost in a hail of bullets. Muttered, to myself, *Oh no – not again.*”

I don't pretend I'm the bravest man in the world. I'm afraid of plenty of things. I worry about my own capacity for greed and evil. I'm afraid of a woman's power to hurt me. I admit I'm frightened of waterfalls, and I don't imagine I could tell you where that phobia came from. But as the years have gone by, I've been surrounded by bullets so many times that they've slowly lost their power to terrify. Whether that's brave or just stupid, I'll let you decide.

After my behavior during the Draft Riots of 1863 (which I will continue to defend to my last breath), New York City, my hometown, cast down a big disapproving stare and spat me out. I joined the Union army, happy to spite my former friends back home. When the War ended, I had no place to go but West.

Later, after the widely scattered publication of my reputedly “heroic” actions in Little Mount, a small but flush mining town where I stopped to gamble away some of my cattle drive pay, I became a minor but noted Western icon to those Eastern readers who longed for rugged adventure and romance but couldn't brave the wilderness themselves. Like Lucy, I became the subject of dime novels and plays and breathless “eyewitness” newspaper accounts by city slicker reporters who'd hardly ever been as far as Brooklyn. Women fell in love with me – or, rather, with my fictional “adventures,” and with the rather exaggerated likeness that was soon known far better and to many more people than my real face and body. I'm tall – six foot three – and strong enough to put up a good fight against most men, but through the 19th century's money machine of hype, rumor and lies, I became known as some sort of perfect ideal. In these adventure stories – none of them true – I killed Indians, I rescued women tied to train-tracks, I foiled bank heists, I dangled from cliffs, I fought duels atop

speeding trains. I was America's brave new Western man, handsome and strong and invincible. I was Manifest Destiny, personified.

Well, the lie did the trick. New York, it appeared, was willing to forgive my past.

Theatrical producers called from Manhattan. A couple of plays, they said, had already hit the island starring New York actors impersonating me in my various adventures. A group of investors – including Drexel, Morgan & Company, a prestigious Wall Street firm I'd never heard of – was interested in bankrolling the real thing. Would I – *could* I – give up my Western life for a shot at the stage? they asked.

Could I ever! Of course, now I was a cowboy, and I was a shootist. I'd learned to fire a 45, and I knew to pay for my drinks in cow town honky tonks with bullets – “cowboy change,” we called it. Though I hadn't chosen my new life, I was suitably proud of what I'd accomplished and the new skills I'd acquired. The legend that now followed me made me laugh, but it also turned my head, and I didn't mind being thought a hero, even though I wasn't. I had a new life. I *was* a new man.

But I also liked a long hot bath. I liked to shave every day.

I missed New York. I missed the things that Lucy and I used to do in New York, the fancy places we used to go.

I admit that I could also remember a saloon I frequented down on Pearl Street when money was tight, and images of the Randall's Island poorhouse were still fresh in my mind – and I could not ever quite forget an early childhood spent just barely surviving in the dark swamp south of City Hall that we called the Five Points – but my most prominent memories of New York, I realize now, were little more than dreams and fantasies, a tableau of what life might have become were Lucy and I the fashionable couple of leisure that we each had longed to be, back then. Back in my young adulthood, in the burgeoning 'sixties, when the Age really did seem Gilded.

When New York beckoned, I almost believed that I was returning not to a place, but to a moment in the past. I saw the brilliance of Lucy's wicked smile, and I felt her white-gloved hand in mine.

After a few letters and wires, my approval over a sketchy, plot-light script and a hefty initial payment to my bank in the little town where I

was staying in Missouri, I got in touch with a woman named Emelina, a barmaid and prize-winning sharpshooter I'd met back in Blue Rock, Wyoming, and she agreed to come to New York and be in the show. I stocked my supporting cast with Sioux and Pawnee, cowboys and vaqueros who could ride and rope better than me, a staff of musicians to punctuate the excitement on stage, and a full contingent of horses, buffalo, Texas steers, and assorted donkeys and deer.

Emelina and I reunited in New Mexico, and we hopped on a lopsided coach, which keeled over twice, though there were no broken bones, and, indeed, no injuries worse than a couple of dusty bonnets and some cracked china plates. We took the coach as far as Promontory Point, Utah, where the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads met, from which we set out East by train, staring out the window at hundreds of miles of track that stretched ahead and behind as though it went on forever.

"I always knew it was a good day, the day I met you," she said to me on the train. We sat face to face in a spacious compartment in a Pullman car. The train shook and rattled as it thundered down the track at less than thirty miles an hour, and black smoke belched from the open window into our room. "I knew you were different, the minute I met you," she insisted.

I asked her how she thought she could have known something like that, and for a moment she hesitated, deep in thought, as though a real answer were coming, but then she laughed and tried to change her mind.

"That's not true," she insisted. "I thought there was nothing special about you, but I liked you."

That I even set foot in Emelina's saloon must have meant to her that there was nothing even slightly remarkable about me, because no one special ever walked into her saloon. Failed prospectors, failed gambling men, gunmen, and the occasional sweaty cowboy looking to drink away the memory of his dusty life. On most nights, these were men Emelina had to warn off with her derringer – or that's what she insisted to me. When I stopped in her dive for a whiskey, I was no "hero." Little Mount was yet to come. I didn't know Magic back then, I couldn't roam through Time, couldn't see the future. I was no different from anyone else.

Emelina had blazing red hair, skin brown from the Western sun, and strong prominent cheekbones. Also strong arms and legs that felt good wrapped around a man. She radiated strength. I chose her for my

show because I considered her the new Western g'hal, something the boys back East had never seen. I could invent a heroic myth for her, a whole new life – as a girl growing up in Kansas, I'd say, little Emelina saved her small town from bandits, fed her family by hunting for wild game and protected her widowed mother from wolves – and audiences would be able to look in her willful blue eyes and believe all the lies. Another reason I wired her with an offer of employment was that our few weeks together in her little room in the back of a Blue Rock boarding house had been much too brief, and I was lonely, and I missed her. I didn't think I loved her, but I wanted her by my side. Such a motive will be verboten for an employer of the 1980s, but back in the 1870s, lucky for me, it was almost charming.

As the train slogged and clanked along the track, the walls shook, and so did the floor beneath our feet, as though the entire contraption might any minute collapse and spill us all like a burst dam out into the merciless desert. I once rode a train that derailed. You can add train derailment to my list of fears.

Emelina had not always been such a strong woman. She'd gone West at the age of seventeen to marry a man whose letters seemed tender and warm, traveling with some other desperate young girls who'd sold themselves through the mail. At first she liked living in her new and snug sod house, its green grass-covered roof all that kept it from fading into the Kansas horizon. She said she preferred a hard life on the prairies to the hopeless life of poverty she'd known back East. She didn't mind taking orders from her husband to make such a challenging life work, and she could even abide the solitude. She bore her husband a couple of children. But then she left. Left her kids behind, too. I'd never understood that. Her husband swore to find her and bring her home, or kill her trying. She made it a long way, all the way to Blue Rock. As the train rattled and clattered down the track, I thought back on Emelina's story. There was something missing, some hole in there someplace. But I didn't know what it was. And I wasn't ready to ask her.

"Look at me," Emelina said. "Traveling in a Pullman car, on the Transcontinental Railroad." She took my hand and smiled at me, such a wide and hopeful smile, and I wished I loved her.

Three hours and a hundred miles outside of Promontory Point, the boiler blew.

* * *

After a few out-of-town shows and some complimentary local notices, our handlers booked us for an open-ended run into New York city's Great Roman Hippodrome, a gaudy and turrlicated castle of a structure that filled up a few big blocks around Madison and 26th Street. Perfect for our show, the Hippodrome consisted of a wide open and prairie-like arena flanked by an elevated stage and encircled by rising tiers that could accommodate an audience of ten thousand. The building was new since my last visit to New York, and it would later go through a few quick name changes before its demolition and quick historical obscurity. But even if you don't remember its name, I'll never forget it.

I admit that I'm proud, even to this day, of the Western show I conceived, though it's recorded in no history books of the old West, has inspired no Broadway shows, no films, no TV programs. That's not because the spectacle wasn't exciting. The audience thrilled to scenes of Watt O'Hugh III battling an entire band of outlaws, single-handedly shooting them all dead, saving a stagecoach from ferocious bandits, riding on horseback across a lonely prairie town street and sweeping a little orphan girl (actually, a midget in drag) into my arms moments before a stampede thundered around the bend, and rescuing hysterical passengers from an exploding locomotive. In my show, buffalo pounded across the open plains; cowboys rode wild broncos and lassoed bulls; and natives roamed the land as though the white man had never set anchor off the coast.

Emelina was central to the show, of course, and she invariably made a striking impression right from her first appearance, riding out into the arena standing on a stallion, and though chastely garbed in an ankle length calfskin dress and topped by a cowboy hat, she was no less voluptuous and sexually captivating. The wind rippling through her long hair, she'd draw a sixteen-gauge, double barrel, breech-loading hammer-mode shotgun and blast a series of airborne glass balls as they plummeted to earth, shoot an apple off my head, and then, at the end of her act, and after a few more examples of impossible dexterity, she'd chase her stallion around the arena, leap onto its back, and gallop away waving her hat in the air, leaving the crowd coughing in a thick smelly cloud of gunpowder smoke.

The audiences during our brief run seemed ecstatic, and grew each day, but we courted controversy, mostly by accident. For example, one of the newspapers questioned my judgment in hiring Colored cowboys. And we also received quite a few letters puzzled by

our treatment of the Indians, whom we portrayed in battle against each other or helping me save settlers from stage-coach bandits, but whom we did not depict going down in defeat by the white man's hand.

It would be easy enough to claim for myself an "enlightened" view of America's journey West, and of the chasm between the races, in the 19th century. I have the documentation; just take a look at the New York *World* from July 14, 1874, which called me an "apologist for Godless savages!" Therefore, if I so wished, I could today insist that back in the 19th century, I was far ahead of my time.

But, regarding Manifest Destiny, in the interests of full truth, I'll admit that I didn't really have anything against conquest. No one did back then – none of the conquerors, that is. At Randall's Island, the teachers made me read the Bible, after all. Though I was a man who liked and respected the Indians I'd met (as I've just explained, in spite of a particularly repellent "heroic" myth that dogged me all over the country, I've never been an Indian-killer) – and though, as you'll learn, I was a man who could not stand by and watch a mob hang an innocent child, whatever the child's race – I was also, in 1874, a man of my time in certain respects, and I'm not proud of it, but it's the truth, and there you have it.

In conclusion, to explain the "radical" message behind my production: First, some Colored cowboys knew how to rope and shoot, and I wanted them on my stage. It seemed natural to me. On a cattle run, no one had the luxury of even noticing the color of a man's skin. The public wanted the West, and that was the West. Second, I thought that white men with bullets defeating Indians with arrows wasn't particularly exciting or stirring. So I left that out of my Wild West Show.

On July 17, just a half hour into the show, and as I stood in the center of the arena preparing to battle a crooked prairie town packed with outlaws, I heard the sound of gunfire, felt bullets whoosh by my head like meteors shooting from the sky. I jumped off my horse, ran through the dust to the foot of the stage and scanned the theater's enormous and unfinished arch ceiling. A thin scaffold ran around the uppermost periphery of the theater, vanishing behind the tall curtain that ascended from the foot of the stage to the building's pinnacle, and a vast network of temporary wooden beams crisscrossed under the dome to

serve as unsteady bridges for the army of artisans that might eventually complete the rococo ceiling. Somewhere up there, a killer waited in the shadows.

It may be self-glorifying bombast created by the distance of a half century, but I truly believe that I wasn't afraid for myself. As I've said, I'd been engulfed in bullets before, many times during the War, and also in Little Mount. Anyway, I'm only one man. But this time, I had my audience to think about, thousands of soft and laughing ruddy-pink faces attached to bodies that should have been ducking down and cowering under their chairs, and who, in spite of my most desperate entreaties, would not give up the delusion that all this was part of the show. Indeed, the more insistently I screamed at them to run for their lives, the louder grew their excitement, laughter and applause. Fat and content, their very arteries and veins lined with silver, gold and heavy cream sauce, my audience had forgotten the Revolution and what it meant to be either afraid or brave. Many of them needed to be struck down by a passing bullet just to remember what it felt like to be alive; but I would save them anyway.

I climbed onto the stage, and leapt to a thin column that ran up the side of the building. I scaled the wall, and men and women slapped me on the back from the first tier, then the second and the third, and finally from the box balconies, their laughter ringing loudly in my ears. At the zenith of the column, the muscles in my arms aching from my climb, I pulled myself above the cornice, crouched and then leapt again and, almost drunk with my fearlessness, grabbed hold of a beam and scurried across it like a rat, the wood bouncing and creaking under my weight. The applause was now a distant hum. Again, descending bullets ruffled my hair and lodged in a balustrade a few yards below me, jarring an upper balcony and tickling its delighted occupants.

I looked in the direction of the bullets. The gunfire halted. He was reloading. Wobbling in the dark on shaky knees, I could see nothing. Then another shot cracked through the air, rising up from below like a rocket. That was Emelina, saving my life. I heard a sharp thud, and then I saw my assassin, a lone figure balanced precariously at the very edge of the domed ceiling just a few yards from me, camouflaged by a big ruffle of curtain. He wore a sack suit, a long coat with loosely fitting pantaloons and a red waistcoat, all dark, muddy colors that blended in with the shadows at the top of the theater. Blood drained from the killer's hairy face, his skin turned pale white, and sight left his eyes, his pupils growing

large and dark like two black pools hovering in the air before me. He tried to raise his gun, as though killing me could somehow restore his life, but his muscles seemed to strain under its weight. The piece fell from his weakened fingers, spinning in the air on its long fall to the center of the arena. At last the killer also fell, backward, flipping up and over the curtain and dropping face-down into a tangled mess of ropes and pulleys which cushioned his fall and tied him up in a secure package, like a bug in a spider's web. As he twisted about lifelessly in mid-air, I stared at him, at the back of his greasy head, and I wished that I could see his face, to look into his lifeless eyes. I wondered why he'd wanted to kill me.

The audience roared its approval, ladies and gentlemen peering through their opera glasses, exhilarated by this realistic death. I stood, leaned against the wall, scanning the horizon. In spite of the cheers of the crowd, something was wrong, too calm. I questioned whether this were a lone gunman, or if someone else up here planned to carry on. I touched my gun, my fingers trembling.

Like a slow motion sequence in one of your motion pictures, something from the 1960s or 70s, some thirty or forty years after my death, something violent and directed by Sam Peckinpah or Sergio Leone – *especially* Sergio Leone, an Italian who really understood us! – I saw a puff of smoke and then heard a shot ring out. A bullet headed at me so slowly I thought I could dodge it. The bullet hovered before my eyes. Time seemed to have stopped entirely, my feet anchored to the spot as the bullet rose into the air and spun harmlessly up over my left shoulder and into the ceiling, cracking through wood and stone that fluttered in shards down onto my head. Another shot buffeted me on my left, and then one knocked me to the right, and I fell sideways, twisted about and reached for support, but my fingers swam uselessly in the empty air. I waited to fall, wondered what it would be like, how long it would take, how the wind would feel against my skin, and what I might see – might I see anything? – after my body crashed to the Hippodrome floor and lay crumpled and broken before the cheering and enchanted crowd. Somewhere in some dark part of my mind I saw my body flipping over and over like a rag doll helpless in a gale, cleansed in the dying sunlight that filtered in from the tiny western window.

This is the tough part. I've reviewed my journal, and searched my mind and my soul. Today, more than fifty years later, I don't know

that I can explain to you what happened next, not really, and I don't know that I ever could have.

My journal reads, simply: "Didn't fall. Little fingers. Life saved."

I stared death in the face, waited for it. Though the laws of physics – Newton's theory of gravity, to be precise – might mandate that I then die, I did not die.

I fell perpendicular to the Hippodrome wall, only so far before my downward momentum slowed and then stopped, and from out of the darkness, as I hovered above the crowd, an invisible hand reached out to me, a little hand with tiny little fingers.

My face alight with the warmth of a smile, I recognized the touch like an old friend, there in the small of my back, holding me aloft. Breathing more easily now, my heartbeat relaxing, I stared straight up into the vast domed ceiling, painted reddish-orange by the sunset. I gently rose to my feet, my balance restored by the little hand, one that was so weak in life, but so strong and powerful in death.

Thank you, I whispered.

I longed for a reply. But nothing. Silence. And then the touch left me.

I bounded behind the curtain into the fly loft, where the scenery hung for our drama, backdrops of rustic pioneer scenes, rickety Western towns, sweeping vistas and dusty plains. My right hand lifted as though it belonged to a different man, my fingers wrapped tightly around my 45. I turned to the left, and a black-suited figure rose above the gridiron, a dark shadow against a brightly painted silver boulder in an Arizona desert backdrop. My peacemaker discharged, and a gun flew out of his hand. Then I lurched to the right, and again, I aimed without thinking at a darkly dressed figure almost invisible against the elaborate, half-completed wood carvings that circled the edges of the theater, and I again shot blindly. Another gunman demobilized, his right arm jerking sharply behind him. I looked forward at another expanse of dangling scenery, and I shot at a man leveling a shotgun from the steps of a frontier post office, and I spun around, and I shot again – I didn't even know what I was shooting at – and then I shot just above me. Firearms flew out over the audience.

In less than a minute, six gunmen gunless. Events moved dreamlike around me and through me, as I hovered in the painted clouds, miles above solid ground; gaping; helpless.

Recovering from the shock of their defeat, the gunmen scrambled over beams and scampered under planks; one swung from a pipe batten and slid down a rope that dangled at the edge of the curtain,

escaping across the arena and up through the aisle; another vanished into the dark shadows at the very top and furthest edge of the theater. To my left, I saw a flutter of movement, and as I turned, my gaze followed one figure who darted lithely along the length of the cornice. In an instant, I was on his tail and gaining ground, and a minute later had cornered him against a gigantic stone column that rose from the floor all the way to the ceiling. I shouted a couple of bombastic threats, my heart pounding up into my throat, and the gunman turned around, and he stretched out both hands behind him. His skin taut over a thin and bony face, which was white and young and almost pretty, like that of a girl, but his hair was streaked with gray. The killer's eyes were small and round, lips full and red as blood. The wind whistled through the eastern window, and the gunman's black robes fluttered around a long, wire-skinny frame.

"Who are you?" I said in a whisper that came out of my lungs as a scream, and then, with a tiny grunt, the figure dived with exceptional grace from the column, drifted in the air for a moment as his robes rose around him like wings, and then, plunging, seemed to evaporate on the long fall to the ground.

A beam above me creaked loudly. Then the cheers of the crowd drowned out every other sound.

The show must go on. It was time for Emelina's sharpshooter routine.

I hoped I hadn't upstaged her.

"How do you do that?" Emelina asked in her backstage dressing room, her eyes bright and cheeks rosy with excitement.

"I'm a good shot," I said, putting my 45 gently on her makeup table. "Thanks for saving my life up there, by the way." I pulled up a chair and sat, and Emelina leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor, tired and excited, tiny beads of gem-like sweat glowing prettily on her forehead.

"That was nothing," she said. "Listen, *I'm* a good shot. You do things that are impossible. In Little Mount, and today."

"Not impossible," I said.

She thought for a second.

"Are you a mathematician?" she asked. "I've heard of a mathematician named Leopold Kronecker who's calculated a way to shoot a dozen men dead with a single bullet."

I shook my head. I was no mathematician. If I were alive today, in your century, you would say of me, *He can't even balance a checkbook*.*

"Explain this talent to me," Emelina insisted. "I could use some of that in my act!"

Emelina had a right to understand what had happened in the Hippodrome rafters, but I couldn't explain it to her the way she wanted me to, because I didn't truly understand it myself. I knew that it couldn't be taught, that it wasn't science, or mathematics, or $E=mc^2$. It wasn't something I could replicate in the show to make money; it wasn't about money, it was about life and death. I tried to tell Emelina all this, at least to explain my feelings about these matters, but the words and clauses and sentences all came out crooked or not at all, and poor Emelina just sat and stared at me. I wasn't making sense, and I knew it, and I also knew that Emelina would keep asking me and asking me until I started to make sense.

I pulled my chair closer to her and stared into her eyes.

"Emelina," I said, and her face turned serious.

"What's the matter?"

"Look, there's something I should tell you, now."

I took her hands.

"Tell me," she said. "If there's something I should know."

I tried to tell her about the Draft Riots, and what I'd seen, and how those terrible days had changed me, but then I stopped.

I asked Emelina if she believed in ghosts.

No, she said. She didn't believe in ghosts.

I asked her if she believed in angels. Again, she said she did not. Didn't she believe in Heaven? I wondered aloud. She said that she used to believe in Heaven, that any teenage girl living in a sod house in Kansas has to believe in Heaven. But now, she told me, she didn't know. If angels and ghosts and God and Heaven and Hell existed, it had nothing to do with her. The people in that audience out there existed,

* As for Leopold Kronecker, I've checked him out, and I even met him once, as you will learn. To quote a late 20th century idiom, he's not the hot shit he thinks he is. His mid-19th century theorems pertaining to gunplay simply don't work and have since been mercifully forgotten. His theory of algebraic magnitudes -- which, when Emelina was breathlessly citing his accomplishments, was yet to come -- is, in my opinion, not triumph enough to justify an entire life of tedious dots and squiggles. I hope I don't sound bitter, but I don't like the man, his alleged achievements don't impress me, and the less said about the son-of-a-bitch the better.

and their dollars existed, and she always had to hope that her next meal existed. "And *you* exist, Darling," she said. "And I exist ... and so *we* exist." That's all she knew, she explained, and all that mattered to her.

"Then I don't even know where to begin," I said, staring down sadly at her. "Begin at the beginning," she said. "Begin with the riots. You mutter about the riots almost daily, but you've never told me about them, and I've been afraid to ask."

I just shook my head. She asked me what I was worried about. Now I wished I'd kept my mouth shut, or told her I got lucky sometimes where guns were concerned. I had no choice but to explain everything. I said I feared that she'd think me crazy, and I sighed, and I know I sounded inconsolable.

But when I said that, about being crazy, all worry left Emelina's eyes, and she smiled easily. Leaning forward, she kissed me quickly and reassuringly on the mouth.

Then she nibbled my lower lip with her teeth.

I liked it when she did that. That thing with her teeth. Emelina was a good nibbler. She always knew just where to nibble, and exactly when. Not too hard, not too gentle. Back in the 19th century, to find a saloon girl who still *had* her teeth was epiphany enough – many cowboys and vaqueros were forced to tolerate, and some even came to enjoy, gummy women – but only that most rare saloon girl could use her teeth to work such miracles.

I found myself distracted. An image popped into my head. Emelina naked beneath me, in our Pullman car compartment, the train rumbling and clacking along the Transatlantic Railroad track. The engine blowing out with a tremendous, violent shudder.

I liked that a whole lot, the engine blowing out violently with Emelina naked beneath me.

In Emelina's dressing room, I remembered that moment, when the engine blew.

I forgot what I was going to say. I almost forgot where I was.

Emelina smiled into my eyes.

"I don't care if you're crazy," she whispered. "Darling. Be as crazy as you want."

She kissed me again. And all was lost. We tumbled together to the floor, fumbled our way out of our ridiculous cowboy outfits, and my dark, very dark story about ghosts and the Draft Riots was happily and thankfully forgotten in an ocean of kisses and passion.

Outside her dressing room, up in the Hippodrome rafters, a dead man's body twisted in the ropes. A drop of blood dripped from his chest, hovered in the air, and drifted away on the wind, breaking apart into nothing before hitting the ground.

IF YOU'VE ENJOYED THESE SAMPLE CHAPTERS, PLEASE CONSIDER PURCHASING THE BOOK AND READING THE REST OF THE ADVENTURE. AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK, KINDLE AND NOOK FROM AMAZON, BN.COM OR YOUR LOCAL BOOKSELLER.

