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WICHITA

by ARNELL LARSEN

To the swaying motion of the railroad train Allan Dale penned the final lines of the letter . . . and so, Nancy, in fairness I must break off our engagement. I can't keep you waiting for me when I have no knowledge when I shall return east. Nancy, I love you. I shall always love you. But I won't have you waste your life waiting for me. Think of all those beaus so openly jealous, who will jump at the opportunity to court you, soon as you announce our engagement is off. My new teaching job at the Wichita school quite challenges me. Grown-ups and children alike are generally illiterate here. The train is slowing down. When it stops, I will mail this letter. Goodbye, Nancy. I wish you the best life possible. Love, Allan. . . .

As soon as he had sealed and addressed the letter the young teacher caught a glimpse of the conductor. «Oh conductor, how long will this stop be?»

«Just long enough to pick up a few passengers.»

«Would I have time to post this letter?»

«Why guess so if you hurry.»

«Good. Can you tell me where I go?»

The conductor began to express impatience. «Look here,» he said, bending forward and pointing through the car window. «You see that there ticket office, well, they'll mail your letter for you. Now be quick about it.»

«Thank you sir!» Allan jumped off and hurried into the small depot. A few minutes later when he came out, he was clutching a newspaper. The engine evoked three shrill blasts as Allan climbed aboard again and opened the door to his car. The train gave a reckless lurch that propelled Allan right into one of the just-taken-aboard passengers, a cowboy with his feet propped up on the opposite seat. His head rested back on the cushioned seat and a white Stetson covered his eyes.

«I beg your pardon . . . the train . . . I lost my balance . . .» The brim of the Stetson slowly raised up on the cowboy's forehead. Allan found himself staring into the loveliest pair of brown eyes he had ever seen. Allan swallowed. «I'm . . . I'm . . . sorry,» he whispered.

Without speaking the cowboy nodded slightly, but turning, he grinned broadly at the much older cowboy beside him, old enough to be definitely the brown-eyed one's father, so much alike were they in features.

Allan Dale again swallowed nervously and looked about for his seat, finding it was indeed right here across the aisle from the two westerners. He investigated his baggage in the rack above the seat. Satisfied, he sat down near the window and opened his newspaper and glanced at the date, August 21, 1869. A week old. Oh well, he explained to himself.

At first, as he skimmed over the important news features, he failed to note the stares and glances thrown his way by the two cowboys. Finally a raucous outburst from them prompted a quick glance from Allan. Unquestionably they were talking about him, and why should he be such an interesting topic. Folding the newspaper, he placed it on the seat, his eyes once more reading the large print on the front page: *Sheriff*

Wyatt Earp enforces new law forbidding wearing of firearms within city limits of Wichita... Immediately it occurred to Allan to notice if the cowboys were wearing holsters.

His glance traveled down the length of the brown-eyed man's legs where his trouser cuffs folded into the top of worn brown boots. One booted foot rested heel to toe on the other, and both very nonchalantly on the seat. Allan's glance traveled back up the legs, past the silver and leather wide belt that cinched in the blue denim shirt, which in turn was covered by an unlaced, open brown-leather jacket. Allan Dale found himself again staring at the young man's face, a face that appeared only slightly older than his own 26 years. Abruptly the cowboy yawned, then grinned at him. Allan involuntarily smiled back at him, then quickly wished he hadn't. Why, one might say the guy was actually—flirting?—with him, how uncouth! The teacher quickly averted his gaze and stared out the window.

He discovered a sky bathed in brilliant red-orange of sunset. The color even penetrated the soiled train window and stained, passengers and seats alike, with hues. The fire color had turned Allan's straight blond hair into burnished gold, he quite unaware of this transformation. Every passenger seemed self-absorbed, sleeping, reading, knitting. But the two cowboys, father and son, they alone noted the glorified highlights the sunset made in the young man's hair.

It was Allan's first noteworthy western sunset since he had commenced the trip. Occasionally as the rolling plains and hillsides flowed past, a sign post popped into view, then retreating as quickly, as the train sped along the miles of tracks.

Wichita—60 Miles, the teacher read one sign. Later another said: *Anything GOES in Wichita*. A shiver of anticipation seemed to shimmer across his flesh. At the same moment he glanced across the aisle—the cowboys still watched him. Another tremor titillated his body as his glance halted on the polished patent leather high-top shoes. Why am I trembling, he wondered. Then he was conscious of the younger cowboy getting up from his seat and moving toward Allan. Quickly he looked away out the window, but he saw the reflection of the cowboy grow larger and larger in the dirty glass.

A hand gently tapped him on the shoulder. Allan expected that, but nevertheless felt startled. «Hi, pardner. My dad, over there, he says... he says you remind him of a young filly who hasn't had a stud horse yet. Aint that funny?» grinned the young cowhand and broke out into a noisy chuckle.

The very proper teacher could not believe his ears. To hear such a thing not only on this train ride, but in the presence of other people. Allan stared at the grinning man: «I don't think that is funny. Your dad has a vile sense of humor.» He looked down at the cheap plush cushions.

«Well, don't get mad, hey, don't get mad!» exclaimed the cowboy, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. «I think my dad's funny at times with what he says.»

«Go tell your dad I don't think much of his opinions.» Suddenly

Allan broke into a fit of coughing, and instantly brought a handkerchief to his mouth.

The cocky cowboy looked concerned. «Whatsa matter, you taking cold or something?» Looking about he did not observe a coat. Quickly he wriggled out of his own brown leather jacket.

Allan had stopped coughing, wiped his mouth and replaced the handkerchief, «Go away, cowboy,» he said in a hoarse whisper.

«Here's my jacket.» He held it out to show Allan. «It's warm and nice.»

«Look, I don't need it. I have a coat in my luggage up there if I want one. Will you please stop pestering me.» Allan Dale hoped the rebuff was not too strong as he wanted very much to like, and to know the young cowboy who had such an engaging personality. However, he probably had his father's dirty sense of humor.

«Now, listen here, you put this on so you don't take cold.»

Allan's own searching eyes met those of the curious friendly cowboy. «Alright.» He smiled shyly and threw the leather jacket about his shoulders. Its warm odor of doeskin was clean. Apparently the cowhand had some knowledge of hygiene. He regarded the boy's father grinning broadly, so again Allan was forced to rivet his attention on the prairies speeding by.

Without invitation the cowboy dropped heavily into the passenger seat across from Allan and put his boots right up on the seat beside the teacher. «You're one of them eastern fellas, aint you, 'cause you're wearing store-boughten clothes? How come ya goin' to Wichita, huh?» He nudged Allan's hand with the toe of his boot. «Hey...how come...?»

Allan Dale withdrew his gaze from the window which now reflected the light purple cloak of the sky dressed in twilight and deepening into darker shades of night. «Yes, I'm from the east, Washington D.C. to be precise. You know, the nation's capital...?»

The cowboy nodded. «I know—I know. I've got some learnin',» he chuckled.

«Well,» Allan responded. «I didn't think you were too ignorant.»

«Wait a minute now. Don't ignorant mean stupid?» The cowboy stared with keen interest.»

«Yes, to a certain extent.»

«I thought so. Well, I'm not ignorant,» he announced with finality.

Allan felt like grinning. «I didn't think you were. You're such a handsome young man, I never met anybody like you before.» Allan was nonplussed at what he had permitted himself to blurt out.

«Thanks,» the cowboy accepted serenely. «You're good to look at yourself. What's your title...?»

«My what...?»

«Your handle, your name, whatcha called by, you know?»

«My name is Allan Dale,» he said stiffly, «and I'm a school teacher.»

«I go by my initials which are J. D. Ever'body I know calls me Jadee—puts 'em together. Hey! No kiddin' you a school teacher. I mean, a real, honest-ta-God one?» Jadee seemed to have suddenly caught the full meaning. «Hey Dad,» he started to yell across the aisle this piece of news, but decided the older man was sleeping.

Allan's hand touched the boy's knee. «Please don't wake him. Why does knowing about my vocation upset you so much.»

«You mean your teachin'? It's just we aint never had a teacher in Wichita. The banker and his wife and the mayor, they been tryin' but they aint no damn good, teachin', that is. Sheriff Wyatt Earp will be especially glad you arrived.»

«The SHERIFF...?» Allan was wide-eyed.

«Sure, whatsa matter? You aint afraid of him are you?»

«Why no, I haven't done anything wrong.» He saw Jadee glance at the hand he still placed on the cowboy's knee. Quickly he withdrew it and staring out the window he discovered stars sprinkling the heavens.

«That's fine with me, Allan. You can put your hand on my leg if you like.»

The teacher turned, his blue eyes sparking. «You always so outspoken, Jadee, and embarrass everyone?»

«Sure. If I got a mind to say somethin', I say it. I don't like to make it easy for people to like me...unless I want them to.»

«So? Does that mean, I hope, I measure up to your standards.»

«I still got a little measurin' ta do,» he chuckled, «but you're catchin' on quick. Say, you got any cash?»

«Why? Thinking of robbing me already?»

Allan didn't halt his words any too quickly. The conductor suddenly appeared and commenced to light the oil lamps. When he left the coach, Jadee leaned forward and spoke to Allan softly, almost intimately. «I'm not gonna rob you, Allan. Damn, you sure are perky quick to jump to conclusions.»

«Well, I haven't too much money. Why?»

«I just thought you might live at the ranch with us, if you don't, until you get your first wages from teachin', and you know, get a horse and some decent clothes and...»

«Horse!» Allan's voice was strident. «You out of your mind? I'll walk if I have to go somewhere. I'm not going to smell of horse.»

«Jeez, Allan, it's quite a piece if ya walk from Wichita out to our ranch.»

«And what made you think I was moving to your ranch? You cow-puncher, you surely take a lot for granted. And, what's wrong with my clothes?» He rose to his feet.

«Where you goin'?»

«To find another seat.»

«Aw, set down. You needn't leave. I'll git.» Suddenly the train lurched mischievously around a curve and the teacher fell right into the cowboy. A small suitcase also plummeted to the aisle. Slowly, Allan raised himself up, not aware he still sat on the cowboy's legs. Jadee grabbed the teacher's arms and pulled him close. «Will you take my offer?» he whispered.

«Yes, I'll go to your ranch,» replied Allan breathlessly.

Jadee's father had one eye open. He was smiling. «My boy Jadee don't waste no time when he finds somethin' he likes...takes after his old man, I guess.»

*

Life on the Circle D Ranch was pretty nice, after all, decided Allan Dale as he dressed for the birthday party this evening for Jadee's father. After a lot of teasing and persuasion, he had stored away the eastern clothes and adopted the fashions of the westerners. Besides, he looked like he belonged now, and under Jadee's tutelage he had learned to ride a horse. So swiftly time had passed. Now he had this nice big room next to Jadee's. He had met Sheriff Wyatt Earp and discovered him to be very mysterious and appealing. School teaching had become fun. The students ranged in age from seven to nineteen. At first they had been untenable. With Jadee's help he had changed in dress, even in behaviour, and Jadee had attended school, too, to see that Allan's authority was respected.

The only problem now was with Jadee's father, Byron. Allan liked him, out of due respect to Jadee, in gratitude for board at the ranch. Allan wanted to be friends, and nothing more. The old man found Allan attractive, and showed it in a very unconventional way. Allan had to contrive numerous ways to fend off the advances of this spry old man. Allan considered leaving, but resisted this alternative because the relationship between Jadee and himself had deepened to such an extent, it must at times have been obvious to the other cowhands and cooks. Allan wondered if he should tell Jadee that Byron was trying to poach on Jadee's preserves . . . ?

Old Byron's birthday was a rip-roaring success. Everyone got damn drunk, and most of the cowpunchers and the neighbors were gone by two a.m.—back to their ranches and to their bunkhouses. In the big house Byron, Jadee and Allan were still singing and drinking. Being late September, a fire was still leaping in the fireplace. One of the guests had chucked a Circle D branding iron in the fire. It still lay poked white hot in among the logs.

«Ahhh, I don't believe you ever was or can be a man,» boasted old Byron as he raised a new bottle to his lips.»

«I am too!» retaliated Allan Dale, slamming down an empty beer mug.

«You're just a schemin' woman dressed like a man, tryin' ta entice my son Jadee inta hell.»

«Dad, Dad you gone crazy,» Jadee roared, and his laughter rolled him over and over on the couch. He sat up and gulped down some more beer from a jug.

«You aint no woman.»

«I know I'm not,» answered Allan.

«I mean, dammnit, you are a woman,» shouted Byron as he stumbled over by the fireplace and again raised a bottle to his seeking mouth.

«I am so a man and I can prove it,» protested Allan.

«Wal, I came from Missouriee—and you gotta prove it,» taunted Byron as he turned his back on the teacher.

Jadee was enjoying this repartee tremendously, all the while clinging to the couch as he staggered back and forth, grinning.

Allan quite drunk now, quite contrary to his innate breeding, his shy reserved behavior under sober circumstances—unloosened his big belt and let his pants fall to the floor, mounding over his boots. When he

looked up and faced the two cowboys, he cried triumphantly, swaying a little, «There, you see, I am a man...I'm *all*...man!»

Jadee whistled in exclamation. «You sure aint no filly like Dad said. I never saw one hung like that!»

»Eeeeeee-aaaaah,» roared old Byron as Allan Dale bent to draw on his pants, swaying perilously and half turning so that his trim, strong, sweetly-curved buttocks with the palest-gold down gleamed in the fire-light, tantalized the old man. The old cowboy accustomed to branding anything he wished to claim as his own in building his cattle empire, seized the white hot iron and thrust it forward and planted it squarely on the mound of white flesh.

Allan never finished pulling up his pants. The sizzling iron burned its mark deep into the small of his back where the cleft of flesh began. With a scream almost inhuman Allan Dale pitched forward onto the floor, yelling and clawing at the burn.

Byron petrified by what he had done, dropped the branding iron to the hardwood floor where it began to smoke.

Jadee leaped from the couch and grabbed up the smouldering iron and threw it into the fireplace. In horror he gazed at the bowed form of Byron, then shifted his gaze to the squirming man in pain.

By using the table leg as leverage, Allan pulled himself upward, and raising to his feet, he pulled up his pants over the screaming flesh and tightened the belt. Jadee touched his shoulder. «Allan, let me help you, for God's sake. I had no notion Dad would do such a thing!»

«Help me! You're just like him, you laugh at everything he says and does. He nearly killed me. You don't want me here, and I just don't fit in. I'm getting out of here, *Right now!*» shouted Allan and he pushed with insane anger against Jadee, hurling him right into the lap of the old man. Rushing out of the room, he slammed the ranch house door.

Scrambling to his drunken feet, Jadee yelled, «Allan! Allan!» When he reached the door, he heard the hoof beats retreating into the distance toward the main entrance to the Circle D ranch. Jadee cursed himself for teaching Allan to ride, for drinking so much, for never telling Allan how important he was. A deep loneliness harassed his heart and soul as he decided what he must do.

*

A door to the room in the Hotel Wichita opened slowly and then quickly slammed again. Allan Dale lay across the foot of a large bed, clutching the brass rungs. Turning slowly he gazed at the man by the door. «Jadee,» he said once, sharp and clear.

The brown eyes leaped with feeling and the cowboy strode swiftly across the room, the spurs on his boots jingling. «Allan, thank God I found ya. I asked at two other hotels. I was so scared you'd left.»

«Well, I am going, Jadee, just as soon as I can sit down again.»

«No you're not. I aint gonna let ya.»

«*Get out of here!*» shouted Allan.

Jadee stood beside the bed, his booted feet apart, his fists resting on his hips. He stared at the cremated area of Allan's buttocks. «Allan, I tried to get Dad to explain to me how he could do such a thing. I guess

he was scared someday you might leave us. I guess he must like you a lot. Anyway, you're branded now, our mark is set on ya. You belong to us, Allan, 'cause you're our property now, you're Circle D, and that brand aint ever gonna come off, Allan.»

The young teacher let his head fall forward, limply, his forehead banging against the brass post. «Jadee, let me go . . .» he whimpered.

«No sir, I aint. I'm gonna stay right here till you come to your senses and realize you're goin' back with me. Allan, I'll kill you before I'll give you up.»

Jadee turned his back, looking for a place to hang up his white Stetson. The teacher turned and grabbed a silver-plated candlestick from the bedside table and lashed out with it as Jadee lowered himself into a chair.

Too late the cowboy tried to ward off the blow to his skull. He groaned and crumpled forward out of the chair to the floor. Quite coldly, Allan stepped over him and commenced to gather up his belongings. Even if he had to *stand* every mile of the way, he intended to board the next train out of town. Important thing was to go by the doctor's on the way. Something ought to be put on that ugly burn to keep it from infecting . . .

Allan sluiced his face with water, then while his face was buried in the handtowel, a hand seized him tightly by the shoulder and spun him about. A hard fist bashed him in the mouth, sending him reeling «Jadee, no—» he cried.

Jadee seized him by the shirt and yanked him forward, fingers digging into the material. Again he slapped Allan a stinging blow across the face. «Cuss you, you was always stubborn, right from the beginnin'. I'm gonna take it right outa you so's when I tell you to do somethin' you will.» Jadee's handsome features were distorted, his lips stretched back across his teeth. Jadee kept slapping the teacher first one cheek, then the other.

Suddenly blinding anger surged through the teacher and his fist shot upward connecting with the cowboy's chin.

«Now I call that a lucky punch,» grinned Jadee. «You sure got spunk. Now, try this one on for size,» he said as he punched Allan good in the pit of the stomach. Allan reeled away and fell across the bed. Jadee hopped astraddle him, his fist raised menacingly. «Damn you, Allan, you ever gonna make me run after you again?»

«Jadee,» he whimpered. «I'm hurting where I'm burned. Don't hold me down on the bed.»

«You ever gonna run away from me?»

«No . . .» he choked.

«Ever . . .»

«Never!» Allan sounded convicted.

«Yo gon to come with me, gentle-like?»

The teacher nodded. «Yes . . . to the end of the earth if you want.»

The cowboy rolled off him, and picked up his hat from the floor.

Suddenly Allan Dale was behind him. «I'm not going.»

Jadee spun around and saw the uprised, threatening hand, again holding the silver candlestick. «Damn you, the hell aint outta you yet, is it?»

This time the hammer blow totally stunned Allan Dale. The force of Jadee's fist ploughed his head right into the brass post.

Jadee sighed, pulled his Stetson down over his eyes, very tenderly gathered up the teacher and folded him over a brawny shoulder. Turning, Jadee walked out of the hotel room, the spurs on his boots clinking as he went down the hall stairs.

«Allan Dale, you don't know how much I love ya. That's what saved me from killin' ya, you stubborn stubborn beautiful stud of a man, you!»

Early dawn streaked the sky above the city of Wichita, Kansas as Jadee deposited the unconscious body down into the buckboard. The young, stalwart brown-eyed cowboy climbed into the buckboard seat, slapped the reins across the horses rumps, and the team and buckboard slowly moved through the town. They passed the sheriff's office and the cowboy saw his familiar figure about to enter the office. «Mornin', Wyatt.»

«Good mornin', Jadee. How come you're out so early this time a day?»

«I was out hunting one of our stray dogies that wandered off.»

«Yeah? Did ya find him?»

«I sure did and he aint gonna stray no more.»

«Yep. I guess you have to keep an eye on them critters when they get loose and stray off.»

«Specially when they're wearin' your brand.»

«Yep. Well, see you around Jadee.»

«So long, Wyatt.» The cowpuncher drove off, thinking, «I just know he aint ever gonna leave me, 'cause when he wakes up, I'm gonna love him like he's never been loved before.» He slapped the reins on the horses flanks. «Git along.»

Jadee drove through the outskirts of Wichita as the dawn turned from purple to light blue to rose pink. And Jadee's voice, filled with happiness, lifted its rich baritone. «Whoopie-Ti-Yi-Yo, Git Along Dogie.»

And the wagon wheels squeaked out their echos as Allan Dale regained consciousness, and smiled. «Where you taking me?» he called.

Jadee turned, pushed up the brim of his Stetson, and grinned. «Home.»

Allan grinned wanly. «Still mad at me?»

«Nope. But I can't see no difference between tamin' you and a bob-cat.»

«Now I'm tamed, how you going to treat me...?»

«Special,» he said with a provocative glance. Then pulling down his Stetson, he sang, «Git along... git along... git along...»