



## EPILOGUE

BY SHERRY SHINDELAR

Texas, May 1866

Blind-folded, Sky clutched Garret's hand. Pebbles crunched beneath her moccasins as they walked, his step steady with the aid of his extra thick sole.

“Almost there.” Garret’s firm grip guided her past a patch of prickly bushes that snagged at her hem.

The dream had been more than five years in the making. Their wedding at Camp Cooper. Then, the war that seemed like it’d never end. Blessed months in Washington City and the birth of their son had been followed by Garret’s return to the field and too many battles. Brandy Station, Gettysburg, Cedar Creek and others in between. Each one had left her on edge as she prayed and waited for word he had made it through unscathed. The winters had brought a break in the fighting and stability enough for her and the children to be at his side. But it wasn’t until the Yankees had conquered the Shenandoah Valley in the Fall of ’64, that Garret had the opportunity for a permanent posting where they could be together without months of separation.

“I want to see, too.” Three-year-old Travis pattered up behind them and grabbed a handful of Sky’s skirt.

“Over here, Cowboy.” Garret paused. “But don’t tell Mommy anything. She’s got to see for herself.”

“All right, Papa.” The boy seemed to have picked up pace on other side of his father. “Shhhh.”

The tight neckerchief scratched against Sky’s lashes.

An incline. A crow cawing. The sharp, woody scent of juniper.

Garret squeezed her hand and halted. “Here.”

She sucked in a breath.

“I see it, Papa. I see it.” Travis jumped up and down beside them as Garret stepped behind her and untied the neckerchief. “But where’s the house? And the cows?”

Sky blinked in the bright May sun as the blindfold slipped into her hands.

Garret moved alongside, his grin wide. “What do think?” Excitement filled his voice like a boy showing his new found treasure.

From height of the bluff, the Brazos River Valley spread out in a sea of scrub oak, Texas blue belles, Indian Blanket blossoms, and white Blackfoot daisies. Limestone canyon walls bordered the landscape to the west. Good ranch land. Their land.

“Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.” The words quivered on her lips as moisture dampened her eyes.

Garret draped his arm around her. “For my girl.”

A warm breeze ruffled her hair. A few strands escaped the loose braid and fluttered across her face. “So much more than I dared imagine.”

Travis bent his fingers in a circular shape and pressed them around his eyes like field glasses. “I see a deer but no cows.”

“Over yonder.” Garret tipped his wide-brimmed hat tipped off his brow as he pointed to a stand of cottonwoods on a small rise above a creek. “That’s where we’ll build our home. The bunkhouse, corral, and barn will be down from there. Just like I showed on the sketches.” His voice directed to her, not the boy.

“It looks perfect.” She slipped her arm beneath the tails of his sack coat and around his waist.

“Shade, water, and a view you wouldn’t believe at sunset. Only a four day ride from Dallas.”

She pivoted and slipped into his arms. “You picked out a winner of spot, Major Ramsey. But next time you go on a scouting trip, I want to go, too.”

He cocked his eyes brows. A nick from his morning shave dotted his jawline. “And who would take care of our little band of vagabonds?” He nodded to the path between them and their prairie schooner wagon.

Little Star wobbled toward them with her six-month old sister in tow, her arms locked around the baby’s chest.

“You ever heard of a cradle board?” Sky rested her hands on his shoulders.

“Someone’s got to manage the ranch when I’m away on a cattle drive.” He tugged her closer. His gun-belt buckle pressed lightly against her stomach.

Her skirt lapped against his trouser legs. “We’ll see about that Major Ramsey.” She nudged his boot with her moccasin.

“Not quite a major anymore.”

“Still very much a major.” She rubbed her palms over the soft cotton of his shirt, his chest muscles taut beneath her touch. “Taking off the uniform doesn’t change what you accomplished.”

“Except now I’ll be leading a regiment of cattle. And sharing a bed with my second in command.” His voice warmed. “Maybe tonight you and I will take a stroll after the children fall asleep.”

Grass swished behind them.

“Papa, Travis doesn’t believe we’re going to have a house. He thinks we’re going to live in a tent.” Little Star trudged over, with her sister’s heels swinging against her knee-length calico skirt and leggings.

“I never said that.” Travis stuck out his lip.

Garret ruffled the boy’s sandy-colored hair. “We’ll start with a tent. But a few weeks from now you two will have your own room. Wooden floor and all.”

A home of their own. Not a cottage outback on someone else’s estate, nor rented rooms, nor a confiscated Rebel house. In the next few days, two wagon loads of lumber would arrive along with half a three men from Garret’s old regiment. Men ready to set aside soldiering and try their hand at ranching. In the wild country of west Texas, the more help the better, especially when one is a Yankee in the midst of previously held Confederate territory.

“I’m going to help build it.” Travis stuck out his chest.

“No more adventures?” The brown-eyed girl plopped Katie down at their feet and gazed up at her Papa.

“Closer to home adventures. No more army.”

Katie, with dark curls encircling her light-complexion, held her rag doll up to Sky. “Momma.”

Sky slipped from Garret’s arms and lifted the baby to her hip, then whispered close to Garret’s ear. “You all right with no more army?”

“I’m plenty fine having my family with me every evening beneath our own roof. In a place where the horizons are our boundaries, and the stars are a blanket of a million sparkles. A real home. A life of our own.”

Travis tugged on his papa’s trouser leg. “Do we get to play in the creek?”

“Tomorrow. And I’ll even let you sit on the wagon seat with me as we head down.”

“Yea.” The boy grinned, a dimple in his cheek and a scrap on his chin. “And I’m going to be a cowboy.”

“No, you can’t.” Little Star tipped her chin. “Cause that’s what I’m going to be. Except I’ll be a cowgirl. Or maybe an Indian.”

Travis threw his shoulders back. “Long as you’re not a Johnny Reb.”

A high-pitched trill sounded overhead. From the top of an overhanging juniper, an eagle took flight, expanding its wings as it rose to ride the wind currents beneath white puffs of clouds.

“Kwihnai” Garret said. “Eagle.”

Travis tipped his head back against Sky’s leg and stared skyward.

Little Star pressed her lips together for a moment and touched Garret’s sleeve. “My first father was a warrior?”

The bird must have stirred the thought within the girl. Garret cleared his throat. “Yes, he was. Very brave.” He took his daughter’s hand in his.

“He died in battle?” A child’s simple questions. Ones that had been asked before and would be asked again. Like a favorite story repeated. “Then, you found me and Mommy and made us a family.”

He scrubbed his hand over his jaw and let out a haggard breath.

Sky rubbed his shoulder. “Your papa loved us and gave us a home. Married me. Then, I fell in love with him, and I knew he was the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.”

The tightness in Garret’s muscles eased. “I started falling in love with your momma the first time she flashed those fiery blue eyes at me.” He pivoted toward her, his gaze filled with welcome and admiration. “I was a goner.”

Little Star made a face and grabbed Travis by the suspenders. “Better move. Papa’s going to kiss Mommy.”

With Katie still on her hip, Sky gazed into Garret’s brown eyes. A fleeting shadow that she hadn’t seen for years tinged their depths, like a small cloud drifting across the sun. Had the return to the frontier stirred up the old guilt?

Resolve plunged through her. She mouthed to him the truth that had rooted itself in the depths of her heart. “You were forgiven long ago. You are God’s blessing to my life.”

His whole countenance brightened. He took Katie from her hold, pressed his lips to the child’s cheek, and sat her down at their feet.

Sky swayed against him. “So, are you going to kiss Mommy?”

“You bet. You’re the love of my life.” He wrapped her in his arms. His eyelids dropped to half-mast as he lowered his mouth to hers.

And Mommy liked it very much.

*The End*

Coming March 25, 2025: *Texas Divided*

