

Hannah Grace
— A NOVEL BY SHARLENE
MACLAREN



WHITAKER
HOUSE



Chapter One

Sandy Shores, Michigan • August 1903

The minute hand on the nickel-cased Waterbury clock ticked away the seconds as Hannah Grace Kane primped in the mirror. She leaned back and squinted with displeasure when her unruly, rusty-colored curls refused to cooperate, poking out all over like a bunch of broken bedsprings. “Aargh!” she muttered, throwing down her comb and watching it bounce off the wood floor with a ping before landing on the braided wool rug.

“Supper’s almost ready!” wailed the youngest of the Kane sisters, Abbie Ann, from the foot of the stairs.

“Abbie Ann, you’ll damage my hearing,” Jacob Kane muttered.

Even from the upstairs bedroom, Hannah heard her father’s newspaper rattle and sensed that his tone bordered on brusqueness. She pictured him sitting in his plush blue velvet chair, as he always did at six o’clock, the *Sandy Shores Tribune* spread in his lap, his reading spectacles perched low on his longish nose. “Why is it that at seventeen, you’re still screaming like a banshee?”

“Seventeen, Papa? Have you forgotten that I turned eighteen in May?”

There was a lengthy pause. “Eighteen? Are you sure?”

Her high-pitched giggle drifted upward. “Of course I’m sure, silly. A lady never forgets her age.”

“Well, then, all the more reason to cease with your howling.”

“Sorry, Papa.”

“Besides, Hannah Grace isn’t even eating at home this evening.”

“Oh, how could I forget? That ol’ Stuffy Huffy’s coming to call. I suppose they’ll take a long stroll in the moonlight. Blechh.” Her voice danced with unrestrained sarcasm, and Hannah could only imagine the look of disapproval on her father’s bearded face. “I don’t know what she sees in him, do you, Papa? If you ask me, he’s boring and unfriendly.”

The newspaper crackled. “Abbie.” He heaved a breath, which echoed up through the register. “*Doctor Van Huff* seems like a nice enough gentleman. There is no call for judging him. And besides, your sister seems to like him.”

“I’m not judging. I’m merely expressing my view on things, which I happen to think is more fact than opinion. Personally, I suspect she just likes him ‘cause he’s just about the only eligible bachelor around.”

Hannah bent down to retrieve her comb and sighed in the process. Everyone knew sounds carried faster than a windstorm in this two-story, foursquare structure. Was there no respect? Why, had she wanted, she could have walked to the twelve-inch heat vent in the floor and peered through its narrow slats to give her sister a snarling glower, but she

wouldn't, for that was exactly what Abbie wanted her to do. All three Kane sisters had played the "spying game" through that heat register as children, but Abbie seemed bent on continuing it till kingdom come.

"Abbie Ann, you mind your manners. Hannah will hear you."

Well, it's about time someone thought of that, Hannah mused, thankful for her grandmother's scolding tone. Helena Kane, Jacob's mother, had tirelessly tended to the entire family since shortly after the girls' own mother had succumbed to pneumonia and died just days short of Abbie's second birthday. "Ralston Van Huff is a fine, upstanding citizen, and you had best show your respect." Even after all these years in Michigan, her British accent still lingered like a fresh aroma.

"I do, I do," Abbie insisted. "But he's always talking about himself and that stupendous medical practice he runs. After a while, one grows downright weary of it."

Jacob snapped his paper and exhaled noisily. "The man is doing his best to make a success of himself. I would think taking on the task of town physician would require a bit of ambition...speaking of which, shouldn't you be out in the kitchen helping your grandmother and sister?"

"I'll second that," said Grandmother. "Take the napkins out of the bureau, Abbie."

"Do you suppose he's a true Christian, Papa?" Abbie asked, ignoring his inquiry.

"Well, I would hope so. Hannah Grace wouldn't settle for anyone who didn't claim to have a faith of his own. May I please read today's news now, Abigail?"

Keeping one ear to the conversation downstairs, Hannah picked up her comb and resumed her hair-styling task.

"I, for one, think Dr. Van Huff is charming." Maggie Rose spoke up for the first time that evening. From the kitchen wafted her habitually melodious voice—melodious in that she spoke in pleasant tones rather than melodious from a musical standpoint, that is. Sadly, Maggie thought she could carry a tune quite well, but after years of sitting beside her in church, Hannah knew otherwise. "He picked two roses from our garden last week and gave one to Hannah and one to me. I'd call that rather sweet."

"Oh, poke me with a stick!" Abbie whined. "He should rather have picked flowers from his own garden—or bought some at Clara's Flower Shop."

"Abbie Ann Kane, stop being so persnickety," Grandmother said. "My goodness, what side of the bed did—?"

A deafening scream sounded through the house when something metallic made clanging contact with the linoleum floor.

"My giddy aunt, what a gobblin' mess we have here! Don't burn yourself, Maggie!" Grandmother screeched. "Abbie, come in here this minute and lend a hand. Noodles are everywhere."

"What's happened?" Jacob asked.

"It looks like a pig's breakfast just landed on our kitchen floor. Oh, forevermore and a day! Supper will be delayed, I'm afraid."

Abbie's uncontrollable giggles lent to the clamor of rushing feet, running water, Grandmother's stern orders to stop laughing and fetch some rags, and Maggie's pathetic verbal attempts to vindicate her clumsiness.

From her cushioned bench in front of the vanity, Hannah stifled a smile, glad to be upstairs and away from

the commotion. She leaned forward to study herself in the mirror. After this close scrutiny, her slightly upturned mouth curled into a pout. Grayish eyes, neither true blue nor clear green, stared back at her as she viewed her thin, longish neck and narrow shoulders, pointy chin, square jaw, and plumpish lips. To top matters off, she had a skinny frame with very little up front to prove her womanhood. As a matter of fact, she'd thought more than once that if she wanted to pass as a boy, she could pile all her hair under a cap, if ever there was one big enough, don a pair of men's coveralls, work boots, and a jacket, and no one would be the wiser.

She thought about her sisters' attractive looks—Maggie's fair-haired beauty and Abbie's dark eyes, olive complexion, and flowing, charcoal hair. Assuredly, they both outshone her pasty features by a country mile, Abbie's assets originating from their mother's Italian heritage, Maggie's coming from their Grandmother Kane's long line of elegant features. To be sure, Helena was an aging woman in her sixties, but anyone with an eye for beauty could see that with her high cheekbones, perfectly set blue eyes, well-chiseled nose and chin, and remarkably smooth skin, she must have been the picture of youthful elegance and charm.

But where did she, Hannah Grace, fit into the picture? Certainly, she'd inherited her grandmother's curly hair, but where Helena's lay in perfect, gentle waves, gathered into a tidy silver bun at the back, Hannah's crimped and frizzed atop her head like a thousand corkscrews. And nothing she did to tame it seemed to work. She'd even lain her head on an ironing board some years ago, like a sacrificial hen, and allowed her sisters to straighten it with a hot iron—until they came too close to the skin and singed her scalp. The silly recollection made her brow crinkle into four straight lines.

She pulled her shoulders back, dipped her chin, and tried to look dignified in her ivory silk afternoon gown with the button-down front and leg-o-mutton sleeves.

“Hannah Grace Van Huff,” she whispered, testing the name aloud and wondering how it would feel to say it for the rest of her days.

Tonight, they would dine at the Culver House in downtown Sandy Shores, and, afterward, perhaps walk down to the harbor to watch the boats come and go. Along the way, they would pass the closed shops on Water Street and probably do some window gazing. Ralston would speak about his practice and tell her about the patients he’d seen that day—the broken bones he’d set, the wounds he’d wrapped. He would tell her about his dreams of constructing a new building—one that would allow him to relocate his practice away from his residence. Not for the first time, he would mention his hopes for a partner with whom to launch this undertaking, someone who shared his passion for medicine, of course, and had the financial wherewithal to pitch in his fair share. There would be a placard above the door and maybe a more prominent sign in the front yard. They would hire a nurse, of course, and, down the road, a bookkeeper to keep the multiplying records straight.

He would ask Hannah about her day at Kane’s Whatnot, her father’s general store, and inquire as to how sales had gone. She would be vague in her answer, knowing that the details would bore him to tears. Nevertheless, he’d smile and nod, appearing deeply interested, but then quickly resume speaking about his medical practice.

Perhaps Abbie was right in calling Ralston stuffy and boring, if not a trifle selfish, but he had ambition on his

side, and Hannah admired that. Even Papa recognized it. Besides, she'd reached the ripe age of twenty-one, and hadn't Grandmother once said that when a woman reached her twenties, her chances of finding a genteel fellow slimmed considerably? It was best not to listen to Abbie's foolish musings. What did she know about the subject? Dr. Ralston Van Huff would make a fine catch for any woman.

"Hannah wouldn't settle for a man who didn't claim to have a faith of his own."

Her father's words circled in her head, almost like a band of pesky mosquitoes out for blood. Well, of course, Ralston had an active faith. She'd met him at a church gathering, after all. *True, he rarely speaks about the Lord, but these things come with time and practice, she told herself. One doesn't grow strong in faith overnight.*

As the racket continued downstairs, Hannah proceeded to pile her mass of red curls on top of her head, using every available pin to hold them in place.

"Thank heaven for hats," she muttered to herself.



Gabriel Devlin tipped his dusty hat at the woman he passed on the narrow sidewalk, then scolded himself for stealing a glance backward after she passed. What was he doing? He was done with women! And he had Carolina Woods to thank for that. *No, I can thank the Lord for bringing our impending marriage to a halt,* he rephrased in his head.

A horse whinnied and kicked up a swirl of dirt as it galloped by, carrying its rider through the street, a barking dog on its heels. Since stores closed at precisely five o'clock in this

small but thriving community of Dutch settlers known as Holland, Michigan, the dog and horse were about the only sounds he heard as he made his way toward an open restaurant, stepping down from the rickety-planked sidewalk and crossing the heavily trodden, dirt-packed street in the middle of town. He removed his hat and slapped it across his leather-clad thigh, letting loose a cloud of dust he estimated was almost as big as the horse's. Setting it back on his head of sandy-colored hair, he stepped up onto a slab of newly laid concrete and saw that one entire block of sidewalk looked freshly poured. Evidently the town council had started a beautification project, at least on this side of the street. He surmised the other side would follow, perhaps before the first blast of winter weather.

He passed several storefronts, glanced in a few windows, and then saw something out the corner of his eye that brought his steps to a halt as his gaze fell on the object of interest. Across the street and another block over, a young lad was crawling out from under a tarp that was stretched over the back of a wagon. He put his hands on his hips and twisted his body from side to side, stretching as if he had just awakened from a long nap. Then, he rubbed his neck and looked at the trees swaying overhead. The horse that was hitched to the front of the wagon turned and granted the boy a disinterested glance, then swished its mangy tail.

Wondering what the boy was up to, Gabe feigned interest in a window display, embarrassed to discover that it was laden with feminine wares and frilly garments. Still, he kept up the façade so as not to miss the boy's next move. With deft hands, he was plundering through the items under the canvas, stuffing things into every pocket, front and back.

Instinct told him to yell at the lad, for surely he was stealing from some unsuspecting citizen, but something held him back—the tattered clothing hanging off his skinny shoulders, the uncombed mop of black hair, the spattering of dirt and grime on his face and arms, and those shoddy-looking boots.

When the little vagabond had filled his pockets with who knew what, he took off on a run down an alley between two buildings, disappearing within seconds like a fox daunted by daylight. Gabe shook his head, vexed at himself for not caring more but feeling too exhausted after his long day's ride to muster up much indignation. Maybe once he crammed his stomach with beef stew and bread and gave his horse and mule a period of rest at the livery, he'd go looking for him to see if he could figure out his story.

Pfff! Who was he kidding? After a quick bite and a bit of respite, he planned to finish his trip, following the path along the railroad tracks to Sandy Shores, his final destination. There'd be no time to look for a tattered boy who couldn't have been a day over nine years old.

A few restaurant patrons cast him curious looks when he found a window seat in the smoke-filled room, but most kept to themselves, faces buried in newspapers or hovering over their suppers. They were likely accustomed to summer tourists, although, by all appearances, he probably resembled a bum more than anything else.

Certainly not Sandy Shores' newly appointed sheriff.

"What can I do for y', mister?"

He gazed into the colorless eyes of an elderly woman whose hard-lined face, slumped shoulders, and pursed mouth denoted some unnamed trial of the past. Gray hair fell around

her stern countenance, straight and straw-like, reminding him of a scarecrow—the kind whose expression would chase off the meanest bull.

“I’ll have a bowl of beef stew and a slice of—”

“Plumb out.”

“No beef stew?”

“You hard o’ hearin’?”

“Chicken noodle?”

“No soup at all.” With hooked thumb, she pointed behind her. “Menu’s back there.”

His eyes scanned the chalkboard behind the counter where someone had scrawled several words with creative spellings: “Chikin liver and onyuns – 50¢; potatos and gravy on beef – 75¢; cheese sanwich – 25¢; pork sanwich on toasted Bred – 35¢; Ted’s specielty – 50¢”

“What’s Ted’s specialty?” He had to ask.

“Fish. You want it?”

“Is it cooked?”

She gave him a scornful look. “What kind o’ lame-brained question is that? ‘Course it’s cooked.”

“I don’t know. Some people eat raw fish.”

“Not ‘round these parts they don’t. Where you from?”

“Ohio. Columbus area.”

She sniffed. “Long ways from home, ain’t ya?”

He grinned. “It’s taken me a few days’ ride.”

Lifting one brow as if to size him up, but keeping her thoughts to herself, she asked, “You want the fish? It’s fresh out o’ the big lake, pan-fried.”

His stomach had been growling ever since he walked through the doors, and, in spite of the grit and grime beneath his feet, the dark and dingy walls, and the fetid odors of burnt onions and cigarette smoke, he had a feeling this Ted fellow could cook.

"I'll try the fish." He smiled at the killjoy, but, as expected, she just nodded and turned on her heel. "Can I have some coffee, too?"

Another slight nod indicated she'd heard him.

"Ohio, huh?"

From the table next to him, a man sporting a business jacket, string bow tie, and white ruffled shirt, lowered his newspaper. A half-smoked cigar hung out the side of his mouth directly under his pencil thin moustache. He removed the cigar and laid it on an ashtray. "What brings you to these parts?"

Always wary of shysters, Gabe examined the fellow on the sly. Experience had taught him not to trust anyone until he'd earned that right. "Work," he replied.

"Yeah?" The man massaged his chin, and Gabe knew he was getting equal treatment, a careful scrutiny. Suddenly, the stranger reached across the four-foot span that separated their tables and offered his hand. "Vanderslute's the name. George."

Gabe stuck out his arm and they shook hands. "Gabriel Devlin. Good Dutch name you've got there."

Vanderslute chuckled. "You're definitely in Dutch territory. Pretty near half the town, I'd say. Maybe more." He looked out over the small, dimly lit eatery. "Not Ted, though. He's English, through and through. That there was Eva, his

aunt. She owns this place, has for thirty years.” He leaned forward. “She comes across as an old crank,” he murmured in hushed tones, “but on the inside, she’s nothing but mush. Known the two of them since I was this high.” He stretched a palm out level with the tabletop. “Used to stop by here on my way home from school. Depending on her mood, Aunt Eva—that’s what everyone calls her—would pass out free cookies. On good days, that is.”

Vanderslute took a sip of coffee, then took a giant drag off his cigar and placed it back on the tray. Gabe felt the tension roll off his shoulders. He glanced out the window and spotted the little ragamuffin again, his lean frame bent over a barrel as he rifled through the garbage within. “Who’s that little waif over there?” he asked.

“Huh? Where?” Vanderslute pitched forward to peer out the smudged glass.

“Oh, him. He’s been hanging around for a few days. He’ll move on. ‘Spect he jumped the back of a train coming from Chicago area. Vagabonds do that from time to time.”

“Vagabonds? He’s just a little kid. Hasn’t anyone tried to help him?”

“He runs off every time. Like some wild pup. Some of the ladies leave bowls of food on their doorsteps, and he’ll run and get them whilst no one’s watching, providing some mongrel mutt doesn’t beat him to it.” He laughed, as if what he’d just said was unusually funny.

Just then, Eva brought a steaming cup of coffee to the table and George slid back in place. When Gabe looked out again, the boy had vanished—like some kind of apparition. He blinked twice and shook his head.

Silence overtook the two for the next several moments as George dug into the plate of roast beef and potatoes Eva had dropped off at his table when she'd deposited a mug of coffee under Gabe's nose. Gabe's mouth watered, his stomach grumbled. He sipped on his coffee and ruminated about the boy.

"What's your trade, anyway?" George asked between chews.

Gabe took another slow swig before setting the tin mug on the table. "You ever hear of Judge Bowers?"

"Ed Bowers, the county judge? 'Course I have. I work the newspaper. I'm a line editor, not a reporter, but I read the headlines before anybody else does. I hear he just appointed a new interim sheriff up in Sandy Shores—someone from..." A light seemed to dawn in his eyes. "Ohio." Gabe grinned. "You wouldn't be...?"

"You should be a reporter," Gabe said. "You've got the nose for it."

"You learn, you know. Well, I'll be. Too bad about Sheriff Tate, though. He was a good man, honest and fair. Heard his heart just gave out." George shook his head. "The law business is hard on the body. Good thing you're young. What are you—twenty-four? Twenty-five?"

"Twenty-eight."

George nodded, as if assessing the situation. "You can handle it. Most of what happens in these parts is petty crimes, but there's the occasional showdown. Not often, though," he added hastily. "You watch yourself, young man. You'll do fine."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

Not a minute too soon, Eva returned, this time plopping a plate of pan-fried fish in front of Gabe. On the side were cooked carrots drizzled with some sort of glaze and a large helping of applesauce. The most wonderful aromas floated heavenward, and his stomach growled in response. “Eva, you are an angel.” He smiled at her and felt a certain pleasure to see one side of her mouth quirk up a fraction and the tiniest light spark in her eyes.

“Pfff,” she tittered. “Go on with you.” She swiveled her tiny frame and hobbled off toward the kitchen, still looking like a scarecrow, but with a little less severity.

As he always did before delving into a meal, Gabe bowed his head and offered up a prayer of thanks to God. Then, he draped a napkin over his lap, knowing George Vanderslute’s eyes had taken to drilling holes in his side.

“You’re a praying man, I see.”

Gabe took his first bite. “I am. I pray about everything, actually.”

“Huh. That’s somethin’.” Seeming stumped, George forked down the rest of his meal in silence, the smoke from his cigar making a straight path to the ceiling.

As much as he would have liked taking his sweet time, Gabe wolfed down his plate of food, thinking about the miles of road that still stretched out before him. If he didn’t arrive before nightfall, he’d have to camp alongside the tracks again, and the thought of one more night under the stars didn’t set well with him.

The image of the mysterious little imp who’d stolen from the back of a wagon, rummaged through a waste barrel, and disappeared down an alley materialized at the back of his

mind. Would he be shivering in some dark corner tonight, half starved? Gabe swallowed down the last of his coffee, determined to chase him out of his thoughts.

Protect him, Lord, he prayed on a whim, suppressing the pang of guilt he felt for not taking the time to search for him.

Sandy Shores came into view at exactly a quarter till ten, three hours after he left Holland. It had been the slowest, steepest, and most precarious leg of the entire trip, requiring him to navigate gravelly slopes in the light of the moon. Not for the first time, he thanked the Lord for his sure-footed mule, Zeke the Streak, who could not run if his life depended on it but still had strength enough to pull a redwood from its roots; and for Slate, his dapple-gray gelding, calmly bringing up the rear but possessing the speed of a bullet if the situation called for it.

A cool breeze was coming off the lake, bringing welcome relief from an otherwise long, hot day on the trail. Gabe cast a glance out over the placid lake, amazed once more by its vastness. At first glimpse, one would never suppose its distance across to be a mere one hundred miles; it seemed more like an ocean. Gentle waves licked the shoreline, making a whooshing sound before ebbing back into the chilly depths. The Sandy Shores lighthouse, sitting like a proud mother at the end of the pier, flashed her beacon for incoming fishing boats and steamers.

Electric streetlights lit the way as Gabe turned east off the railroad path onto Water Street, which led to the center of town. On the corner to his right stood the three-story Sherman House, the hotel he would call home until he found

permanent housing suitable for his budget, if not for his taste. According to Ed Bowers, who had made all his room arrangements, he had a view of the Grand River Harbor and the big lake from his third-floor window. *Nice for the interim*, he thought, *but not a necessity for my simple lifestyle*. He'd grown up in affluence and decided he was ready for humbler circumstances. His father's money had been well-earned, and it had reaped him warranted respect in the community and surrounding areas. Even so, Gabe couldn't live off his father's wealth and still respect himself. Besides, he'd had enough of women pursuing him for his family money—Carolina Woods, for one—and it was high time he moved away from Ohio, where the Devlin name didn't make such an impact every time folks heard it mentioned. Furthermore, a smaller town meant smaller crimes, he hoped—the kind that didn't require gunfire to resolve them.

Boisterous piano music and uproarious laughter coming from a place called Charley's Saloon assaulted his senses after two hours spent with nary a sound, save for Zeke's occasional braying, some sleepy crickets' chirps, and a gaggle of geese honking from the lake. Gabe wondered if he should expect a run-in or two with a few of Charley's patrons.

His eyes soaked up the names of storefronts—Jellema Newsstand, Moretti's Candy Company, Hansen's Shoe Repair, DeBoer's Hardware, Kane's Whatnot—and he wondered about the proprietors who ran each place. Would they accept him as their new lawman, particularly since the late Sheriff Watson Tate had held the office for well over twenty years?

When he spotted Enoch Sprock's Livery on the second block, he pulled Zeke's reins taut. Slate snorted, his way of exhaling a sigh of relief for having reached their destination.

"I know what you mean, buddy," Gabe muttered, feeling stiff and sore himself. He threw the reins over the brake handle and jumped down, landing on the hard earth.

"You needin' some help there, mister?"

A white-bearded fellow with a slight limp emerged from the big double door.

"You must be Enoch."

"In the flesh." The man extended a hand. "And who might you be?"

"Gabriel Devlin."

"Ah, the new sheriff. We been expectin' ya. Hear your room's waitin' over at the Sherman." They shook hands. "Nice place you're stayin' at."

Gabe grinned. "News gets around, I take it."

Enoch snorted and tossed back his head. "This ain't what you call a big metropolis." He took a step back and massaged his beard even while he studied Gabe from top to bottom. "Awful young, ain't ya?"

Is this how folks would view him? Young, inexperienced, still wet behind the ears? He supposed few knew he'd been responsible for bringing down Joseph Hamilton, aka "Smiley Joe"—a murderous bank robber who wielded his gun for goods throughout Indiana, Ohio, and parts of Kentucky. His last spree was on February 4, 1901, when Gabe received word in his office via telegraph that undercover sources determined Smiley Joe had plans to rob the Delaware County State Bank at noon that very day.

It hadn't made national headlines, but every Ohioan had the best night's sleep of his life after reading the next day's

headlines: GABRIEL DEVLIN, DELAWARE COUNTY SHERIFF, TAKES DOWN NOTORIOUS MIDDLE-WEST BANK ROBBER!

Having watched the entire robbery out of the corner of his eye while pretending to fill out a bank slip, Gabe, who had placed two plainclothes deputies at the door in case the villain tried to escape, confronted him while the deputies aimed their guns. "Smiley! It's the end of the line for you, buddy," he said coolly. "Drop the bags and turn around slowly, hands in the air."

At first, it appeared Smiley would comply. His shoulders dropped and he started to turn. "Drop the bags!" Gabe yelled. "Hands to the sky!"

Other deputies, all placed strategically around the bank, surrounded him. The bank stilled to funeral parlor silence as customers scattered and backed against all four walls, terror pasted on every face.

But Smiley Joe wasn't one to surrender, and, in a rattled state, he went for the eleventh-hour approach: he drew his gun. *Wrong move.* Shots were fired, and, when it was over, one wounded customer lay sprawled on the floor, groaning and bleeding from the shoulder, while Smiley Joe Hamilton lay dead, Gabe's gun still hot from the bullet he shot through his head.

"That's all right by me, you bein' young," Enoch was saying. "Time for some new blood 'round here. 'Sides, any friend o' Judge Bowers is a friend o' mine." A slight accent from the British Isles colored his tone.

"I appreciate that."

"Want I should take your rig inside and tend to your animals?"

“That’d be mighty nice of you.”

Gabe made a move to retrieve his money pouch, but Enoch stopped him. “You just get what you need out o’ your rig, and we’ll settle up in the mornin’.”

“You have no idea how good that sounds.” Gabe reminded himself to retrieve his carpetbag from the back of the wagon. All he needed was a change of clothes for tomorrow, his shaving gear, a bar of soap, and some tooth powder. Right now, nothing sounded better than a soft bed. *Shoot, I might even sleep through breakfast*, he mused. Ed Bowers didn’t expect him in his office until mid-afternoon.

Slate sidestepped the two as they went to the back to remove the tarp. When they did, they got the surprise of their lives.

“Wull, I’ll be jig-swiggered. What is that?”

Gabe stared open-mouthed at the bundle of a body curled into a tight ball.

“Looks to be a sleeping boy,” he murmured.