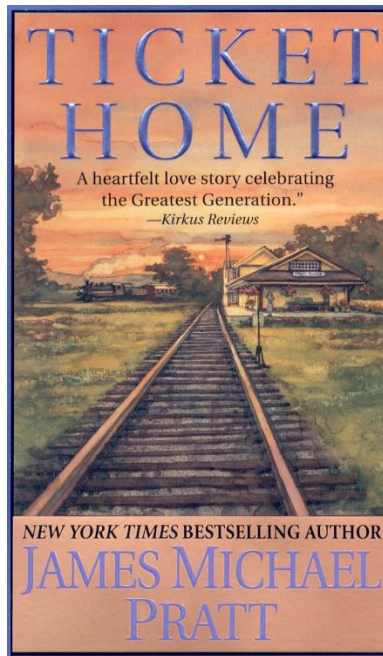


SNEAK PEEK

TICKET HOME

25th Anniversary Collector's Edition



4th Installment Download -- Chapters 16-20

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25th Anniversary Collector's Edition

Ticket Home

James Michael Pratt

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Chapter 16

Truth and Consequences

Lucian didn't know what to do. Al finally quit chasing him, gave up, and he caught his breath. He had faked being fun loving, raucous, playful, just to get away from his brother and the emotions welling inside of him.

He wouldn't hurt Norman for the world. But that couldn't stop him from seeing Mary Jane. And he couldn't tell Norman about him and Mary Jane.

That night on the beach, after the three girls had picked him and Al up, was a night for the books. He thought he had felt something for her before, but walking through the surf, hand in hand, talking more serious about life...it was a feeling he hadn't ever tried on before. He was acting more like Norman than himself. He even kept his chew in his pocket so as not to embarrass himself with spitting all over the place.

He pondered what to do, as he found the comfort of an oak tree on the lawn where the small red school house sat. He had Al chase him that far, darn near a mile and needed at least that much space from his brother; that much time away to sort this thing out. He knew Norm was doubling for him, so the boss wouldn't be upset seeing Norm work in his place.

Mary Jane had kissed him that night, and he never knew it could be so good, so honest. He was sure he was going to have to marry that girl.

He knew he was betraying Norman while it was happening, but he couldn't

stop the feeling, the emotion, and that girl... She melted him! He forgot everything when she was within eye sight. He couldn't muster one level-headed thought within touching range. And kissing and hugging... *Well, I was just plumb lost. A goner,* he reasoned silently.

He was caught up in that night. It was that night two months ago now that fate handed her to him causing all this mess, wasn't it?

"Lucian," she turned to him. "I wondered what it would be like. You know, being here in California, the ocean. It's so, so, vast, and mighty. It just goes forever," she said kicking happily at the surf with her bare feet.

"Pretty big. Never imagined anything so big. A lot bigger than that bathing hole back home," he smiled.

She pushed at his arm. "You better not start now."

"I was just thinkin,' that's all."

"Keep it there," she reminded him feigning seriousness.

"Yes em, ma'am." They walked on in silence. The sun already set had spent her light upon the water like the last hot glimmers of coal burning; coal so red hot in the steamer that the locomotive engine stayed revved up an extra mile. His engine was churning terrible and he couldn't run, just fake control. It had his heart ablaze now.

“Thought the Oklahoma sky went on forever,” he finally said trying to keep up in conversation, act smart, take his mind off the manliness overcoming him. *Norman was better at this trying to sound interesting*, he thought to himself. A momentary twinge of guilt swept through him upon thinking about his brother.

“I was mad at you, you know,” she laughed, interrupting his private ponderings.

“You mean about the first time we met?” he smiled. “Something like that,” she responded playfully. “I wasn’t really mad exactly, just embarrassed I guess. I thought you and Norman were the same, and I tried playing angry ‘cause you startled me so.”

“Oh, well, I would have done the same I guess.”

“No you wouldn’t. You’re a man. Men don’t care. They’d probably like girls catching a peak.” She laughed at her own remark.

“Well, I, uh, I’m not too sure. That all depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You know Norm, he’s a shy one. I am too, I suppose.”

“You?” she laughed.

“Well yeah. Maybe less. Well, less formal and less a gentleman sometimes, but I can be shy too,” he argued. He knew she had appreciated Norman’s quiet dignity.

She stopped him and looked up into his eyes. “You’re different. But you look exactly alike. Sad eyebrows that look so thoughtful, dimples that smile before your lips do, strong jaw line,” she softened her voice as she went on. “Exactly the same, but you’re different,” she continued.

“Guess so,” he answered nervously, feigning indifference.

“You know how different you are?” she ventured closer.

“Oh, I suppose.” He gazed into blue eyes locked into his. He connected to those eyes like a habit that couldn’t be broken; a bad habit he didn’t want to break.

She leaned up and reached her slender, tanned arms around his neck. She offered herself while gently, pressing against him for his arms to reach around her.

He didn’t resist.

She started the kiss. His cheeks first, moving slowly, carefully toward his lips.

They fell to the sand and hungrily kissed until there wasn’t anything left.

He was at a loss. He sat up stunned as she nestled against him. Both wanting more, both constrained by proprieties they had been taught about intimacy, but barely able to think straight. It had to be right; married-right. He knew it, so did she.

He’d never done this and as much as he’d imagined it, and wanted to, he couldn’t have known. No words were good enough to tell a man how it would be. And if kissing and holding her were this good... His mind wandered through the fire.

The other girls, with Al and a sailor friend of the pretty brunette were making their way back out of the surf from their swim.

A fire was made there in the sand, and she sat with his arms surrounding her as they sang, laughed, shared the food, and drinks. He was forced to rehearse how Mary Jane and he had first met, to the approving laughs of the nearly drunk Al and more sober girlfriends Mary Jane was spending this weekend away from L.A. with.

Now he sat under the oak tree pondering on this peculiar challenge, how to love her and yet warn Norman who was headed up to Los Angeles to see Mary Jane. It had his mind all messed up like too many drinks did. It was foggy—not clear on what he should do. A fire built up so hot that night on the beach he didn't think he could live without it. His Pa used to say, "Truth telling has consequences, but lies have more." To tell Norman the truth would kill him.

Chapter 17

Stolen Kiss

Norman sat on the flat car, listening to the clanking of iron wheels on the Union Pacific rails. He was somewhere near Los Angeles now headed to some rocky mountains and a long dark tunnel. The sign posted read *Santa Susana Depot*. He liked this place. Not at all like Oklahoma, but so pleasing. Fertile land, stoney peaks jutting up into the sky like sentinels—guardians surrounding the tiny valley. Mountains, hills, valleys, and the wide-open Pacific; that was what California was.

Now he was just a few miles north of the Los Angeles County line and then on up to Los Angeles Union Station where he'd stay the night and look for Mary Jane. The train entered a tunnel leading on into the L.A. side. It was dark but relaxing after the heat of the sun had baked a reddish brown to his face, and exposed arms too. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine this meeting with Mary Jane. *Would she be surprised?*

His mind wandered on her exquisite lines, curves, the slenderness, the tenderness of an ivory skin that played his mind like the melodies of a soft piano strain would. She seemed to have a music, to her walk, the way her eyes glanced at him—they smiled and danced at the same time. He knew he was welcome when her eyes smiled like that.

He wondered if Lucian knew what seeing Mary Jane meant to him now. He tried being coy about it, not offering too much information. He loved his brother, but

didn't exactly trust him. He'd played tricks with a girl he was in love with once before and it had hurt. She fell for him, his twin. *Dog gone it!* They looked exactly alike, but the girls always fell for Lucian. *Not this time*, he assured himself.

The tunnel opened suddenly to noon day brightness that caught him off guard. The tracks descended into the San Fernando Valley heading southwest to Los Angeles. *Another hour would just about do it*, he thought.

Union Station was a new station. He was friends with one of the warehouse managers there. The man had offered to let him stay in on one of the sleepers sitting off the tracks; a real luxury car at that, now being worked on. It had plumbing, bed, the works. He'd smell good, get a shave, stow his gear, get to a phone, then find this West Los Angeles café where Mary Jane was said to work.

Lucian had seen his brother off without warning him about the relationship he had with Mary Jane. He wondered how to reach her since he didn't have the phone number where she was working. A new place, somewhere on Santa Monica Boulevard called Jerry's. He expected a letter any day from her giving him the exact information.

He wasn't a praying man like Norm, but wished he was now. Not so much for the hurt he'd feel, but for Norman. He wished he knew a prayer. Norman was good. A lot better man and more sensitive in his ways.

He pulled his wallet out of the baggy trousers he wore and took the photo of

him with Mary Jane taken just the week before down at the Santa Monica pier. “*Ah hell!*” he whispered in frustration. Being a twin stunk sometimes. *It just plain stunk*, he thought silently, kicking at a stone as he walked back to the bunk house at the citrus packing warehouse in Santa Paula.

Putting the photo away, he thought the best he could do now was hope. *Hopes are like prayers* he guessed. He walked the dirt road from the loading dock down to a grey barracks style bungalow he shared with other men working the rail lines.

He’d better hit the rails on up to L.A. and see if he could salvage this mess. Tell the truth. Break the news. Take the consequences. Be a man. Help Mary Jane out of this sticky mess and see if Norman would understand somehow.

Norman pulled the crumpled note with the scribbled address from his shirt pocket. He got it by calling back home, and getting Harry to the phone at the depot. The diner was on the 100 block of Santa Monica Boulevard near the ocean. Red flashing neon lights accented the name on the sign. *Jerry’s Diner*.

He entered nervously, heart pounding one hundred beats faster than regular when he thought about her—and regular was twice as fast as a resting heartbeat. He sought to hide himself in the crowded doorway while setting one eye to the task of finding her.

Every table was taken. *Maybe this is a mistake*, he thought. *No, I can’t back*

out now. I won't get up the nerve again. I won't have a chance again.

Debating himself, pros-and-cons of seeing her like this, was a useless pursuit. She appeared suddenly, plates in hand, through the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen. There behind the counter she stopped, called back into the kitchen, swung her blond hair back, blew some puffs to remove golden strands from her eyes, and had him mesmerized. He couldn't move now if he wanted.

He noticed there were stools vacant at the counter. Maybe if he could get a seat, act casual, like he didn't know she worked here. Explain he was just visiting town, wanted to see the ocean, got hungry. That would work.

"Uh hum," he cleared his throat. "Miss?" he directed himself to a busy waitress. "The counter over there. Is it okay to take a seat?"

"Go ahead," she nodded.

He walked, head bowed slightly, not wishing to expose his identity or act too interested. He took the last seat at the far end from the kitchen doors, and quickly grabbed a folding menu to occupy himself. His eyes met the top of the meal list and he gazed over it toward her. She was serving the other end of the counter now and looked his way.

He buried himself in the list once again and wondered how he was going to respond. He couldn't seem to keep a clear thought. His heart managed his mind, and seemed stuck in his throat.

He sipped at the ice water placed there by another waitress, glad that maybe she wouldn't be his. She passed by him, apparently headed for the soda fountain

further down the wall across from the counter.

She looks good! So mighty fine! He found himself absorbed in Mary Jane's graceful movements. He gazed at her easy walk, the way she handled pressure, the effortlessness at her handling the tasks. This distracted him, but his heart sent spurts of blood even faster into every artery and then some. Maybe she'd be first to say something.

She turned and stopped. Her mouth unhinged, then smiled. "Hi!" she squealed.

She recognizes me, he thought. "I was just in town and thought..."

"Sure!" she teased. "Don't order anything. I'll be off in one minute. We can go down to the pier." She winked, grinned, and acted as if to see him was as natural and right as serving dinner.

Man this is easy, he smiled satisfied with the way things were going. He finished his drink, watched her talking to another waitress and noticed Mary Jane explaining something while pointing at him. The waitress smiled and waved. Norman waved in return. Mary Jane gave her a hug and took off her apron, disappearing into the back of the packed restaurant. He waited.

"Hey you!" she poked at him from behind. "Come on. I have something special for you," she grinned as she placed her arm in his and pulled him through the crowded diner to the street.

"I knew you would be coming, but thought it would be next week."

He didn't ask how she knew, just went along with it.

Mary Jane stopped, leaned up against the wall in the alley where deliveries

were made, and teasingly pulled him to her. “Well?” she asked, then went ahead without waiting.

Norman was frozen stiff but willing as lips met. He forgot anything he would say, think or feel, and hungrily added his passion to hers. She allowed him to find her ears, neck, and shoulder before he pulled back suddenly to her voice.

“What?” he asked stunned. “What did you say?”

“What do you mean? I just said your name. I just said your name, and said you’ve never kissed me like this before.” She studied his shock, then his face carefully, and felt the heat from his embarrassment as he pulled away completely.

“Mary Jane. I thought... You think I’m...” he said with a strained voice as his words which trailed off. “You thought...” he stopped without saying his brother’s name then nodded with the sudden realization. “I’d better be going,” he added, turning from her.

“Norman? Oh my gosh, Norman! Come here. Please?” she pled. “I am so, so sorry. Norman, I didn’t know. I was so excited to see you, I mean... Didn’t Lucian say anything to you? How we met?” she stumbled as her face flushed crimson with discomfort.

He shook his head in silence examining the sidewalk, looking for a better response. Angers that lay hidden just beneath the surface—those going all the way back to childhood surfaced when Lucian interfered. They haunted him now.

“Norman. I was so excited to see you. You and Lucian look so handsome. Both of you are, exactly alike, and I just wanted to... Ohhh, this is a mess. I’m so

embarrassed. You must believe me, I would never intentionally hurt you.”

“It’s okay, Mary Jane. I will just be on my way. I’m embarrassed too. It was good to see you. I best go. Got Guard duty to report to in New Mexico.” His face showed the red of anger, the crimson of embarrassment, and the hurt of someone who had been treated meanly, unfairly. “I’ll be seeing your Grandad soon. I’ll tell him how mighty fine you looked,” he offered in an attempt to mask his emotions, recover ground he had suddenly lost. He turned and began down the sidewalk away from her.

Mary Jane witnessed the pain Norman was suffering and realized that she was helpless, but for words, to fix the damage. “Norman,” she pled running to him, tugging at his shirt sleeve. “I love you Norman.” She was as shocked at saying them as he was at hearing them. But they were true.

He had never heard those words spoken by a girl to him. His eyes burned and he didn’t want her to see his torment, his bruised ego, his pain.

“I love you both. You in a different way from Lucian.”

He turned again to face her. His eyes gleamed wet like a hurt child, his countenance was hard, rigid, stern like a man. “I’ve never said this to another woman and might never say it again Mary Jane,” eyes glistening. “I love you. I love you like a crazy man without any common sense at all. It was from the first time. I love you like a hot fire burning up all the fuel it can find. I guess I always will. If I didn’t say that I think I’d burst. But I can’t...”

She reached up to him and kissed him gently on the lips, a parting kiss, the way a woman only can. “If I had it to do all over again Norman, I would never have

hurt your feelings,” she offered softly, tears now coming freely. She reached her soft hand up to his face and stroked it gently. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He produced a weak smile, a silent thank you, and began to walk away, then stopping he turned around to face her. “Did I kiss good?”

Tears welled in her eyes and she nodded adding with a voice strained to almost inaudible. “Too good.”

Chapter 18

Broken Hearts

“You sure got here in a hurry. What’s that all about?” Norman sneered from the door of the sleeper car as Lucian approached.

“Oh knock it off, Norm. It ain’t worth it.” He climbed up to the car to face him.

“Seems it was worth you catching the next train up here to L.A. to try to stop me from embarrassing myself. Not to mention...” He didn’t finish.

“Did your mind ever burn so hot it felt like a fever...like it would melt?” Lucian asked apologetically.

No response. He continued packing.

“So hot you couldn’t douse the fire? A fire so big that ten horse drawn fire engines couldn’t put it out?”

Norman kept his back turned and shoved the last shirt into the duffle bag.

“Good gosh, Norman. Aspirin won’t help, getting stone cold drunk won’t help. My mind is burning up trying to figure out how to fix this. I didn’t mean for none of this to happen. She...Mary Jane...it wasn’t supposed to be...I wasn’t lookin.’ It wasn’t as if I came out here to California ahead of you lookin.’ I was in San Diego workin.’ It was all an accidental meeting. She was with some friends down there for the weekend and...”

“Shut up Lucian. Just! Shut! Up!” Norman grabbed his duffle bag and tossed it out of the sleeper. “Stay the night. It’s all arranged. I’m headed back to training for

the Guard, then home.”

His twin didn’t try to stop him.

Norman brushed by him, hopping the distance from the car down to the rails. Picking up his bag, he started in the direction of the next train headed southeast—Arizona, then El Paso, and finally Fort Bliss, Texas.

“Norman!” Lucian called beating his fist against the wall of the sleeper car. “Norman!” Lucian leaped the distance to the ground and ran after him.

“What!” Norman turned on him.

“It ain’t worth it Norm.”

“Oh that’s really easy for you to say! You always did this to me Lucian. You always had a way of getting what you wanted. Right?” He was angry and letting it show as he stared his brother down, nose to nose.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, to hurt nobody!” he yelled back. “Ah horse-collar, Norm. What we arguing about anyway,” he said backing away.

“About lying! About telling the truth Lucian! About other people’s feelings!”

“I got feelings! You don’t think it hurt thinking about how I was gonna break this to you? You don’t think I knew it would hurt you? I’m no good at lying, and it appears at telling the truth neither, but you gotta know, I didn’t want any of this to happen!” His eyes pled for understanding as they reddened.

“What’s the difference. You didn’t want it to happen, it did. I got to go.”

“Don’t leave mad like this. Stay. I’ll tell Mary Jane...”

“What? Why? You can’t enjoy yourself so much if I do? You can’t feel free from

guilt when you're *making out* with Mary Jane? I got news for you. I'm not giving up. I won't just roll over for you. If there's a chance...well may the best man win brother."

"Okay. You want it that way? Okay then. Alright. May the best man win!"

"See ya, Lucian," Norman waved as he faced away from his brother and walked down the tracks.

"I'll be here. Don't you worry about that. I'll be right here!" he yelled back. "Tell Pa... Tell him, I'll be here!"

Lucian turned slowly, and remorseful, and for the first time since his mama died he knew the sting of a broken heart.

Norman gave a quick angry wave of the hand without looking back, moving forward on the tracks to another destiny he never could have imagined.

Chapter 19

Box Car Philosopher

“My name is Skully. What’s yours, boy?”

“Parker. Norman Parker,” he scowled.

“You hurtin’ pretty bad boy,” the grimy old-timer stated matter-of-fact like from across the boxcar they both bummed a ride on.

Norman whittled on a piece of willow as the tracks turned into miles east of Los Angeles.

“Good thing it’s night. This desert gets a hundred and twenty in the day time,” the old man added.

A grunt, wood shavings flying, implied Norman’s response.

“Where ya headed boy?”

“No where special,” he mumbled.

“A man of the rails? No where special. That’s my usual destination.”

The clack of wheels turning against a tired iron rail line underscored the noise going on in his brain. It was a dialogue with Lucian that wouldn’t quit. He argued, Lucian countered. Nothing was coming from it except it was driving him crazy.

“Got some food in that bag of yours?” the grizzled veteran of the railroad tracks asked pointing a gnarled finger to Norman’s duffle bag. “Got cut off. Trying to hop my first train. Works just fine,” he said bending it. “A little shorter than it was, that’s all.”

Norman shuffled through his bag and picked out a couple of oranges and tossed them to the old man.

“I just love California oranges. I first went to California to pick ‘em. From Oklahoma,” he added.

Norman raised an eyebrow and nodded continuing with his pocket knife against the twig.

“Don’t know how a man lives without one of these,” the traveler said pulling his own knife from well-worn trousers and slicing the first orange evenly. “Sweet,” he slurped as he sucked the juice out and ate the pulp. “Yes sir,” he continued noisily sucking at the orange meat.

Norman glanced at the man seemingly contented to make his presence known with each bite.

“Must be a woman. That or death. Nothin’ hurts more than bein’ a man in love or losin’ someone you can’t live without. That’s why I travel.”

Norman threw the stick off into the passing night. “Shut up please.”

“You must be educated. Shut up *please*,” he mimicked with a laugh.

“Look, next stop, I’ll just get off and find my own car. Until then, just shut up! Suck the darned orange and shut up!”

“Well, a man can get lonely sometimes. Hope someone treats you better when you got somethin’ to say,” the old traveler said diffidently.

He had cut Norman to the bone with the remark. He was angry with his brother and the circumstances and didn’t mean to take it out on the old rail rider.

“Still. I forgive ya. You’re hurtin’ and I can see that plain enough. Had plenty hurt in my life. Yes sir.”

Silence rode between them like a deaf and mute companion would for the next hour. The veteran rail bum slumbered against his pack and the side of the boxcar he sat up against. He was sorry he had bit the old codger’s head off. He just didn’t want to talk, that was all there was to it.

He looked through his pack and found a can of Spam and a half loaf of bread he still had from the day before. Scooting over quietly, he set it next to the man and went back to his place on the car and engaged in gazing out at the crescent moon from the open boxcar door.

“I was about thirty-two at the time,” the old man started suddenly, as if nothing had happened between them. “I was fixed pretty well for a young man from the sticks in Oklahoma. Had me a mechanics shop, a small plot of ground too. Wife, three youngins.

“Had been to the big war and all. Did my part, came home, and won the hand of the prettiest girl in Seminole County. I thought if she ever could love me I would be the happiest man on God’s green earth,” he sighed.

Norman winced, knowing all too well the feeling. The old bum was starting to look human to him as he rambled on, eyes meditatively closed as he related his history.

“It must have been the uniform when I got back from the war. That and her beau was killed. The war got him, and I was happy. Not that he was dead, but that I

had a chance. He was my friend, but that didn't matter. I was glad I was alive, and he had been in my way."

Norman looked at the man with surprise. This tattered old fool was talking love, life, jealousy...things bums don't usually spout off about.

"Felt mighty guilty though. Here's my buddy, all shot up was dying in my arms. No doubt I loved him too. You get like that in war. Like brothers see?"

"Yeah. I see."

"Well he was ramblin' on about his women, the girl I secretly loved, and how I was to look out for her if he didn't make it back, and well, I sat there with his head in my lap knowing that was exactly what I was gonna do...made me feel awful guilty at the time.

"The thing I had for that woman was so pleasin' it hurt. I got so bad over her I thought my mind would burn up if she didn't have me. My mind was on fire over it."

Norman was unintentionally interested. Had dropped his guard, and was now immersed in the old man's story.

"Once she knew I was there to stay I finally got the nerve to ask her out. Kept wearing my uniform, just to impress her, ya know. She went out with me, and by and by she kissed me. It was all lost for me then. I was a lost soul without her from then on. Yes sir, a damned fool puppy dog lost soul.

"But..." he coughed. "I had my sights set on winnin' her heart. I knew she married me 'cause I was kind to her and bein' no other offer made in our town, well I knew in my heart that I didn't have her love like she had mine. It kind of hurt. All

the time, this pangin' ache that just wouldn't go away. So knows what I do?"

"Nope," Norman obliged, finally acknowledging the old timer.

"Well, I said to myself, 'Skully you got two hands and one brain. Get to work day and night and build somethin' for this woman that would make her glad she married me you. Make her a fool to leave you too.'"

"So what did you do?"

"I fixed everything that people needed to have fixed. Everything in sight. Farmed too. Got me a small spread of land with my war earnings, built a one room house at first. Then two. And so it went. Built a work shed off the barn and turned people's problems back to them fixed. If it were broke, I found a way to fix it. I was good with these," he sighed holding up twisted fingers. "Real good."

"So how'd you end up here?" Norman sincerely posed.

"People lost their farms and such with the damnable 'Great Depression.' Moved away. Business fell off. I left town to find some work to keep our—my—dream alive, and when I came back she was gone."

Norman nodded and winced at the old man's pain. He understood. "You just found your house empty?" he probed.

"Yep. Gone off with the first man who offered her some excitement from the dreary life with old Skully, I suppose. Serves me right for being glad the first man she loved was dead. Serves me right, I suppose. Oh, but she was a looker...a real dame, a real good-lookin' woman. Better than I suppose should have me for a husband. So here I am. A wanderin' fool."

Norman perceived the man differently now. He had a life. Gone bad, but a life.

He loved Mary Jane but he'd never let a woman own his heart that it hurt so bad he'd go off and give up on everything. No sir. He was in pain, but no fool. And he'd never be glad the man she loved was dead just to have her. No way. He wasn't judging the man, just saw no fight in him.

"Got my kids though. She lets me see them two times a year. That's where I'm headed now. Amarillo, Texas. Got me some new cloths, some razors, cologne. I aim on looking good for them and makin' sure they know their Daddy loves them."

Norman felt for the poor man's luck.

"You were right kind to give me this. I thought there was somethin' better in you than you first showed," he offered holding up Normans gift. "I like Spam. Lasts forever it seems. Somebody ought to get a medal for figuring out how to can this stuff. Want a sandwich?"

Norman shook his head. "No thanks. Sorry Mr. Skully for your bad luck. And sorry how I behaved. I had no right."

"So it's a woman, eh?" he spit back as he twisted the rectangular lid back with the tiny key made for it.

"Yeah."

"Well it don't get no better, sorry to say. Not unless you find someone to fill up the hole in yer heart. Hope ya can."

Norman smiled politely—grimacing as he turned away.

"Needles Town comin' up, then we cross the Colorado River. Guess we'll make

good time this trip. Where'd you punch yer ticket for?"

He answered slow. Deliberate. "Home."

"Mr. Skully?" Norman called, above the clickity clack of hundreds of freight car wheels turning in unison against the iron rails. "Mr. Skully?"

The slumbering man, slumped against the side of the car, finally stirred. "What is it? We there?" he stammered as he jolted the sleep away with side-to-side shakes of his head. "You still here?"

"Still here."

"What you wake me for? I was dreamin' real nice."

"Sorry."

"Well, get on with it. You woke me, now make somethin' of it."

"I thought you'd like a drink. Got some bottled Cokes in my bag."

"No booze?" the old rail rider snorted eagerly.

"Sorry. I don't drink."

"Well, best you don't get started. Give me one of them," he directed. He caught it in his lap as Norman tossed it gently.

Skully opened the bottle by wedging the cap against the edge of a metal brace on the boxcar wall and popping at the top quickly with the palm of his hand. "Ahh," he slurped, adding a satisfied belch when he had drained the glass bottle. "I like

Pepsi-Cola better,” he said. “But this will do.”

Norman smiled and nodded. He didn’t know how to begin, but he wanted someone else’s thoughts on what was troubling him, even a railroad riding bum’s thoughts would be better than the solitary confinement he found his mind locked into.

With nowhere to go with his pain, and no one to tell it to, Skully at least offered someone to voice it out loud to. “So is Skully your last name?”

The old traveler took the cap off his head revealing baldness. He leaned down to show the top. “Got this hairdo compliments of the US Army in World War One. A gas attack in the trenches in France was all it took. Lost my hair. Never grew back. The other men said I looked like a ‘skull’ with skin and eyeballs. Not too flattering. They all began calling me ‘Skully’ and it stuck.”

“So what is your Christian name?”

“James Benson Scally, at your service.”

“So you never grew your hair back?”

“Nope. Kind of convenient really, if you stop to think about it. Not like that thick mop of yours,” he pointed. “No lice problems, no needs to wash it with soaps and such. Real convenient.”

“So you were saying about your wife leaving you. You want to talk about it?” Norman probed.

“Do you?” he returned.

“Well, I was wondering why you just didn’t go after the guy who stole your woman and all. How you live with the anger and such.”

“It’s a fool who gives anger and a fool who gets anger. Anger is good for killing—like war. But that’s about it.”

“You mean losing her didn’t make you boil?”

“Sure it did.”

“Did you ever get over it?”

“Nope. Just dealt with it. I guess love’s written so deeply in the heart that a man would have to have surgery to dig it out. It aches...oh it aches, yes sir. But I got to be the one right with God. I didn’t cheat nobody; didn’t run off on her. I just keep rememberin’ that if I lived in a perfect world, she wouldn’t have hurt me so. Then I leave it be.”

“Humm.” *This man possesses a simple elegance of thought*, Norman mused. *God knows I needed someone to talk it out with.*

“You’re hurtin’ bad aren’t ya boy.”

“Appears so. I can’t get over caring; wanting her. I never told anyone about it.” Norman tossed his Coke bottle off into the night. “She loved me first, then my goldarned brother. A woman like that ain’t worth it, but I can’t seem to get her off my mind.”

“She burnt it into ya. I know that feelin’,” Skully said.

“So what did you do?”

“I drank booze first. I’m no drunk, but I’ve been known to forget my problems too many days in a row. I can stop. Most folks can’t. But I found it still hurt when I come to my senses.”

“Then?” Norman prodded.

“Worked any job I could, as far away as I could from my former life. I didn’t care if I lived or died. There was nothin’ to go home to. Nothin’ mattered anymore.”

“So that’s where you’re at?”

“Yep. Except, my kids. I was forgettin’ that I had them precious gems and it seems to make it better. Oh, she’s a changed woman and I don’t feel nothin’ for the woman she is today, but that gal I first loved...no sir, I don’t think no man can get over the gal he first loved. Romantic fools is what we are.”

“Yep. Fools. Darned fools.”

“Just remember. A fool stays angry, except you want to kill someone. Killin’ is for war, boy. You go after that girl or back away and leave it be. Nothin’ in between will make ya feel better. One or the other. That’s about all I got to say. Got another Coke?”

Norman threw him his last bottle. He’d resupply himself next train depot stop. Come morning they’d be near Phoenix. He might as well sleep on the advice from the migrant-philosopher Skully.

Anger would eat him alive. He hated how it got between him and Lucian. He wondered if he could just let go. Just leave it be as the old man suggested. *One or the other*, Skully said.

If Mary Jane now loved Lucian, but that love had originated with her first meeting him, Norman, at the old Post Office in Warm Springs, maybe she held something there still. Maybe he could give Lucian the chance to trade with him, be

angry for a while. Maybe he could win her somehow, get even. Let Lucian taste some of his own medicine for a change.

That kiss was something else, he thought. She felt it. He was sure of it. *Like fire*, he thought sullenly. It was as electric as surges through a high voltage power line. *No way she could deny that*.

Mary Jane had to see another side of him, that was all. Lucian was having his chance for now. Next leave, he'd find his way back to L.A. in uniform. This time he'd be direct. Lay out all his plans, everything that would make a girl happy. Skully 'box-car philosophy.' He'd ask for one more kiss. She'd have to make up her mind. Then he'd leave it be. But not until then.

Chapter 20

U.S. Cavalry

It had been three months since the two brothers had separated. Fort Bliss, Texas had been home to Norman long enough now. He was eager to get back to working the Santa Fe Line in Albuquerque, close enough to visit Warm Springs, and work out the details for the small plot of land; the abandoned Dearborn place. He'd then head on out to Los Angeles and give Mary Jane an offer Lucian couldn't touch.

He'd always wanted to be a cowboy, and when he joined the New Mexico National Guard outfit it was U.S. Cavalry, one of the last in the country. Playing cavalry with the New Mexico 111th was the most fun Norman had ever had in his life.

Like Cowboys and Indians, the weekend soldiers played their part in the southwest Army Post. Chasing around the New Mexican and Texas desert on horse, imagining the glory days of the US Cavalry, the troop was made up of one third Native American and Mexican-Americans. A mix of work-day occupations, the guardsmen were ranch hands, college boys looking for adventure, business owners, high school students, and anyone looking for some extra money each month.

Now the 111th was being disengaged from their role as horseback riding infantry and being converted, by order of the Regular Army, to "coastal battery" anti-aircraft units. National Guard units across the country were being federalized to meet the growing menace of the German and Japanese military machines in Europe and Asia.

“Craziest thing I ever heard, Norm. There ain’t no ‘coast’ in New Mexico. The whole Mexican Air Force ain’t got three planes. What’s the Nazis gonna do? Maybe send their Luftwaffe over here to the Mexico side and bomb what? A bunch of sagebrush, jack rabbits, haciendas maybe?”

“Well, Private First-Class Johnny Mead, dear cousin, it falls upon me, as your Corporal, to inform you that ‘coastal’ means we’d be shipped to the ‘coast.’ I’ve been there. Hope to shout it’s L.A. Got a girl there,” Norman boasted.

“A girl, huh? How’s come you never told me?” Mead grinned. “Got a picture?”

“Nope. Lost it,” he lied. “But got one up here,” he added, thumping his index finger on his temple.

“So, you getting married to her? Asked her or something?”

Norman changed the subject. “Got inspection, and then after that I’m headin’ out west to ask her.”

“Man, that’s swell, Norman!” Mead congratulated with a punch. “So, you think they’d move the whole New Mexico Guard to California?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the Gulf Coast, maybe the East Coast. But being out west, with the Japs acting up in the Pacific, I’d guess the West Coast. Hey, maybe even Hawaii,” he brightened. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

The two soldiers polished their boots, and readied for inspection. “So what are

you doing Johnny? Goin' home? Back to the job?" Norman spoke up as he brushed at his boots.

"I dunno, Norm. Pop wants me back at the ranch. I got an itch to travel. With this Guard money I figure I'd last a month, maybe go see California like you did. Ride the rails for free, hang out at the beach, see San Francisco. I hear the girls there are really somethin'."

"Yeah. Well, we got to be back here in a month. Maybe that would be about right, a trip for a month. I hear rumors of a long bivouac after we get back. Some training before being called up permanently."

"Called up? They wouldn't call us up unless there was a war or somethin' right?" Johnny Mead posed.

"They can do anything they want," answered Norman. "Since we got the highest scores in the whole darned Army at anti-aircraft battery tests, and the Regulars, those career-lifer Army pals of ours aren't too happy about it, maybe the Army would send us out somewheres, just to make sure we are ready."

"You think the Germans would attack us?"

"From what I'm hearin,' the Army is up to its eyeballs in trying to figure out how to protect all the islands we got out in the Pacific. There's Hawaii, Guam, someplace called Wake, and the Philippines. The Philippines are the most threatened now with the Japanese attacking all its neighbors."

"Where's the Philippines?" Johnny asked.

"A thousand islands or so with a bunch of Army, Navy, and Air Corp bases out

by Australia somewhere. Guess we have been protecting them people since we won the islands from Spain in 1898. Manila, they call the main city.”

“Hey Norm. Lookie there,” Mead grinned pointing toward the barracks door. “If it ain’t dear old cousin...”

“Lucian!” Norman grunted.

“What the blazes you doin’ here?” Johnny ginned, coming up to him to offer a hearty handshake.

“Couldn’t let you have all the fun,” he shot back, not certain how his brother would take him now.

“Thought you was at USC. Last I heard from Pa, anyways,” Norman, offered, looking up from shining his boots.

“How ya doin’ too, brother?” he drawled, a wad of tobacco wedged in his cheek. “The Army treating you boys good?” he asked as he set his duffel bag on the barracks floor.

“You aren’t...?” Norman questioned, letting go of his boots along with temporarily ditching the angry memories.

“Yep. Just got my new assignment. Headquarters Battery. Did my Basic Training at Ft. Sill. Guess they don’t ride horses here no more,” he said opening his arms for Norman.

Norman couldn’t let his twin get the better of this typical Lucian spontaneity. They embraced and laughed loudly.

“Lucian the cowboy? So that’s why we got changed from cavalry. They heard

you was comin'! Ha, Ha!" he bellowed, still not believing who stood before him. "Well, what does Pa think?" Norman asked, now genuinely happy to see his brother. "You hear from him?"

"Sure did. Pa likes the idea of us bein' together considerin' the way things are. When I told him I was joinin' up, it made him proud; real happy. He's gettin' along fine. Guess he wore old Harry out. But he's got a couple of young boys helpin' him out some," he said.

"Just came from there," he continued. "Decided to take my earnings and put them in the bank. Gave Pa the right to withdraw 'em if he needed. Figured the National Guard pay would be workin' out good for now, with the way things are," Lucian finished.

Norman backed away and allowed Lucian to follow him to his bunk as memory began to play its game with him. Thoughts of Mary Jane. Wondering how to broach the subject. It swept over him, uninvited, unwanted. "Why didn't you say something, write me about you joining up?" he asked.

"I wanted to surprise you," he smiled. "Well, look at them stripes," Lucian added. "How ya doin' Johnny with this Army business, Johnny?"

"Doin' just fine, Lucian. Just swell. Cuts to the heart that they traded our horses for anti-aircraft guns, though."

"So I heard. Where's cousin Tom?"

"He broke his leg. Got a discharge. Just as well. He was a lousy soldier," Johnny Mead laughed good natured. "Sure is good to see you Lucian."

“You think I’ll be a good soldier?” Lucian asked looking for a place to spit.

“You won’t make it to payday,” Norman laughed. “And you better not let your platoon sergeant see you chewin’ that stuff in the barracks or you’ll be up ‘till dawn the next day scrubbing floors with a toothbrush and lye soap.”

“I’ll make it to payday, brother. I’ll make it just fine. Where...?” he looked for someplace to get rid of the chew.

“Over there,” Norman pointed as he stowed the rest of his gear and slipped his boots back on.

“The latrine?”

“Yeah. And show some class. Flush, real good, will ya Lucian?” he grinned. “We don’t want to pay for your foul up.”

Lucian followed the instructions, came back, and said, “Norm, I best be goin’ over to the training barracks. Guess we’ll be learnin’ how to shoot down airplanes,” he grinned with his arms extended like wings diving toward Norman. “Just thought I’d say howdy. Let you know...” He stopped and searched for the right words to complete his thoughts.

“Johnny, could you excuse us. We need to say something. In private.” Norman asked.

“Sure thing Norm. Lucian,” he nodded. “See you real soon. Hope you like pushups,” he laughed slapping Lucian on the shoulder as he passed by and out of the barracks.

“Go ahead. Say what you’re gonna say, Lucian.”

"I'm real sorry Norm, you know, about how things turned out."

"Well, I've cooled off some," he returned.

"I'm glad. Real glad. Part of this, me bein' here and all, is because of all this war talk, and part of it is to be near home. I guessed you were right about home," he said.

"Okay, Lucian. But what about Mary Jane?" Norman asked directly as he stowed his duffle bag at the foot of his bunk.

"She's fine," he replied truthfully. "Nothing much happening between us," he added nervously.

"Nothing?" Norman quizzed, trying to hide his interest.

"Not married or nothin'," Lucian responded, knowing he couldn't tell Norman how he'd asked her to marry him before leaving California. Knowing that she would be traveling home to Warm Springs to take care of her ailing grandad, and knowing she'd probably say yes by the time he got there.

"So how is she?"

"Fine. Goin' home next month. Finishin' up her schooling, and then gonna take care of old-man Harrison for the summer."

Norman's heart pulsated to a new beat. Sadness fled as soon as he had seen Lucian. He knew that something had to be behind it. Maybe Mary Jane had seen through Lucian; had realized the substance of who he, Norman, really was.

THIS IS THE END OF INSTALLMENT #4.

Two More Sneak Peaks Coming. Book For Sale This Fall.