

## Excerpt No. 3

### from AFOOT

#### “GRATITUDE”

THE WEATHER GREW GLOOMY and cold during the next four days. The solitary mountain to the northwest, called Bear Butte, rose as we got closer. Mr. Mendez said that it was a sacred place to the Cheyenne Indians, like Mount Sinai in the Bible.

I kept waiting for the missing snake to turn up in Rufus's bedroll, but it didn't. Meanwhile, Mr. Mendez put a big spoonful of salt in the boss's bean soup one night. Rufus got even by hiding the joker's boots so he had to ride in stocking feet all the next day. Playing tricks on each other was something they enjoyed without really getting mad when victimized. But the missing snake bothered me. Maybe it had escaped and crawled back into the ground before the cold weather arrived. But that wasn't very likely.

An occasional flake of snow wafted down the morning we started out just south of Bear Butte. By mid-morning, it was snowing so hard we couldn't see a quarter of a mile. The birds' feet were cold and they sometimes stopped to lift one foot up into their feathers to warm it before moving on. Traveling in such bad weather seemed cruel to the turkeys and hard on us drovers, too.

But Rufus insisted on pressing on. At midmorning, there was no foraging for the bulls or the turkeys because three inches of heavy, wet snow covered the ground. By noon—when we usually set off for another two or three hours of driving—the snowstorm had worsened so we could see only a hundred feet or so. Rufus told us to put up the wire pen and get the turkeys inside. He kept hoping out loud that the storm would stop soon so we could move on, but snow continued to fall heavily in a stiff wind. Sometime before dawn, it quit and the sky cleared.

In some places, the snow had drifted three feet deep. In other spots, there was practically none, having blown away. The cold

and snowdrifts in some places made it hard to roll out in the morning. I got out my heavy mittens and wished I had oiled boots to keep my feet dry walking in the snow.

By late afternoon, we got to Crook City—named for the Army’s General George C. Crook, not bandits—which Rufus said was the last settlement before Deadwood. There were a few shanties thrown up with crudely sawed wooden slabs and a couple of log cabins, but most of the village consisted of tents. The U.S. Cavalry had a detachment camped there to protect the gold miners from hostile Indians. There was an air of excitement about the place, lots of talk about the latest gold strikes and new places to dig. The idea of looking for gold in the snow and ice didn’t excite me.

And, as always, the gawkers were coming out to see us like flies attracted to fresh meat. By now we were all weary of jokes about turkeys, turkey feathers, people trying to mimic a gobbler, and asking if we’d “talk turkey” about selling them a bird.

In full daylight, a man with a heavy gray beard climbed into the pen, caught a bird and tried to carry it off. When Rufus saw the thief trying to get out of the pen, he gave him a blistering blast of verbal fire and warned him that he would be shot if he came back.

Now many spectators were coming from Deadwood, only a few miles up in the mountains. Time and again, I asked if they knew my sister, Lucinda Greene. No one had ever heard of her. By that night, my stomach ached from fear that I wouldn’t find her.

With so much snow on the ground and likely trouble driving the turkeys through the forest, Rufus said he would haul a load or two in his tandem wagon and hire other wagoneers to take the rest of the birds to the mining camp. So, he paid off the Bostonians, Messrs. Brady and Forbes, and thanked them for their help. He also paid off the teamsters from Mr. Volin’s wagon train, Messrs. Mendez and Olson. They took their money gratefully, but said they’d stay with the flock until sold so they’d get their money back. Rufus wasn’t pleased about this, but he really didn’t have any choice.

I expected the boss to pay me off next and send me on my way, too. Instead, he started waddling off toward the big wagon.

“*What about me?*” I yelled desperately.

“What about you?” Rufus grumbled.

“You won’t be needing my any longer. I mean, we’re practically in Deadwood, and—”

“*Hold on, a minute! It’s gonna take us two more days at least to get them birds to Deadwood.* Someone has to look after them. Someone has to keep our camp going. Someone has to cook.”

“But Mr. Mendez can cook.”

“Harrumph! He’d poison me if he got a chance!”

“So when will I be through?”

“When we’re done.” With that, he stomped off to his wagon.

So now I was Rufus Peach’s slave, being held against my wishes, prevented from finding my sister. It felt worse than being stuck on the hog farm back in Illinois.

**End of Excerpt No. 3 of AFOOT.**

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