

EXCERPT NO. 2 OF
COTTONWOODS, A NOVEL



TEN:
THE MAIL ORDER BRIDE

THE FOURTH OF JULY came and went, hot and dry. Torval gave the hired men the day off and Rolf and Torval celebrated the occasion themselves by working only in the morning. After harnessing a team, Rolf walked them to the cornfield where he had left the cultivator the day before. He hitched up and started the horses plodding down the rows.

This was the field where the axe-wielding August Lucertola had caught Rolf napping. Like a clutch of botts, worry about the wild-eyed man gnawed at Rolf's stomach. At night, the frightening experience came back in nightmares. And during the day, it haunted him. Often now, he caught himself looking in the direction of the Lucertola farm, as if he expected to see August coming for them, axe at the ready. Rolf was no coward. But, as he had said before, he has been cautious since childhood. *A danger like Lucertola was one you could hardly ignore*, he told himself.

Whenever Rolf tried to talk to Torval about it, the older brother lost his temper.

Just the mention of the neighbor's name made him snarl at everyone for hours afterwards. Earlier that morning, he had spoken to Torval.

"You owe us that much, at least," Rolf said.

"Bullshit!"

“Suppose he takes you by surprise. Like he did me.”

“I don’t go to sleep on the job.”

You don’t go to work in the middle of the night, either, Rolf retorted in the privacy of his own mind. “Besides, Frank already knows about your fight with August. What would it hurt to tell Will about it? Will knows about Lucertola’s taking a whip to our horses, doesn’t he?”

Torval scowled at the ground for a moment. Shaking his head slowly, he admitted, “I don’t think so.”

“You never told him?”

“No. What’s the point? I tell Will about that and he’ll think I’m doing a poor job running things. What could he do about it, anyway?”

“Maybe not very much. But he’s our friend and partner, not our boss,” Rolf insisted. “We’re in this all together, not just a bunch of people going off in different directions.”

“Don’t you say anything to Will Malcolm about August Lucertola, either before we came into the JM or after.” Torval was giving Rolf a blunt order and he didn’t like the sound of it. *No point in arguing any more,* Rolf told himself.

Anyway, if Lucertola did anything crazy around me again, I certainly wouldn’t keep it to myself.

AS THOUGH HE forgot it was in his hands, Torval dropped the newspaper and, staring straight ahead, walked out of the kitchen.

Mildred Greenleaf was frying a skillet full of chicken and was just about to call the men to supper when Torval left. They had washed up and were sitting on the porch, talking, when Rolf’s brother went by them,

his jaw set and his eyes fixed somewhere ahead of him. He said nothing.

“What do you suppose got into the mister?” Mildred asked Rolf. Picking up the paper, he saw one of the top headlines said, “A Woman Suicides; Swallows an Ounce of Carboic Acid Wednesday Morning”.

Following was a dreary account of a cathouse woman who could bear life no longer. Rolf read only a part of it and decided he'd better go see if Torval was all right. When Rolf walked up to the corral, Torval was just closing the gate behind him. Somberly, he swung up onto his stallion and rode past Rolf at a lope. He called out and waved, but Torval didn't reply. Rolf was puzzled. But then he was hungry, too, so he went back inside and joined the men who were waiting for the meal to start.

No one said anything about Torval's leaving. The men talked about the hot, dry weather, the crops and taking care of some of the workhorses. Privately, Rolf wondered who the dead trollop was and what she had to do with his brother. But down deep, he really didn't want to know. After supper, he picked up the newspaper again and read the entire story. While he had no concern for women of that stripe, he could see how someone might feel sorry for her.

Torval came home late that night, reeking of whiskey. Rolf greeted him, but he only grunted, fell onto his bed and went to sleep. Rolf thought about trying to pull off Torval's cowboy boots, but knew he would never manage it without Torval's help.

Better to let him sleep it off. After a while, Rolf dropped off to sleep. When the alarm rattled at two o'clock, Rolf was glad to get up and get some fresh air. When he got back from the field, he stretched out on the porch and went back to sleep where there was no

whiskey smell and only the faint sound of snores.

“You come with me today,” Torval said soberly. His eyes were red and he looked sick.

“Where?”

“To the funeral.”

“Who died?”

“A friend of mine.”

“That woman who killed herself?”

He nodded and then stared off in the direction of the Haystack Buttes. “She had no luck in life.” His voice was hardly there.

“I don’t know. Going to something like that... What will people think?”

The whole idea made Rolf uncomfortable. Then he remembered Rancher Finch’s earnest look, trying to advise him to steer clear of Rose Bloom. Tongues were wagging in Beulah, the rancher said. He didn’t think Rolf would want to be a part of that. That didn’t matter to Rolf then. And now, not six months later, most of the folks around Beulah had probably forgotten Rolf Hauge had ever been there. Here was Rolf’s brother, looking fully as earnest as Charles Finch, urging him to take part of the last of some loose woman’s shame on earth. *No, don’t do it*, Rolf’s first feeling told him. *People will think I was one of her customers*. Torval awaited Rolf’s answer. He wouldn’t move without it.

Damn him. Why must he make me a part of this? Such a sorry, stupid thing.

“What are the plans?” Rolf sighed.

“Eleven o’clock at the undertaker’s. Just a short service.”

ROASTING IN WOOL suits in July is a mighty high price to pay for looking dressed up. Torval knew Rolf didn’t want to be there.

Riding into town in the buggy, they hardly said a word to each other. When they climbed down in front of the funeral parlor, they slipped on their suit coats and began sweating full-bore.

The starved-looking undertaker led them into a dimly-lit room. As he limped along in front of the brothers, Rolf noticed the bones standing out on the mortician's wrists and his skinny hands. Apparently undertaking wasn't very prosperous. Or, more likely, most of the time it left him with little appetite.

He left Rolf and Torval in a barren storeroom with no place to sit. In front of them, a long pine box rested across a pair of sawhorses. The rude coffin was lined with flimsy black cloth. In the shadowy light, the remains were almost colorless. A gray face with dark blue lips, ringed with curls that might have been gray or straw colored or light brown. Rolf couldn't tell.

Her hands were folded across her chest. A medicine smell hung in the air, probably the carbolic acid she used to end it all, as the newspaper had mentioned.

Unlike most corpses powdered and painted to look asleep, this one just looked dead. Even her dress was thin and worn out.

A large, hairy man in a white shirt came in with two women. The older woman bulged and sagged in the wrong places in testimony of her being past her prime.

The other one was younger, had black hair, dark skin and a Gypsy look about her.

With them, they brought a cloud of perfume, too strong to enjoy. These must have been the body's friends in life.

By now sweat was trickling down Rolf's brow. Under his heavy suit, he was getting wet with perspiration. Torval stood beside

him, motionless. Rolf could almost hear him sweat.

A short, tubby man in a black suit and cleric's collar moved silently across the room and took his place at a speaker's stand behind the coffin. He began with a long-winded prayer that ended with the Twenty-Third Psalm. With hardly a pause, he launched into a long-winded sermon that made Rolf's mind wander. The sight of the dead woman made him wonder about Kari's remains, in the ground three years now, far away in the Old Country.

Shuddering, he closed the door to guessing what her lifeless body had become. *And where was she? Her soul? Sailing on the wind in some cold, northern clime or dancing on a sunbeam in another world?*

Now, a fly buzzed around Rolf's face and finally landed on his cheek. He was crawling toward his nose when he twitched his face enough to make him leave. By now, Rolf was getting tired of standing.

The preacher droned on, finishing his eulogy and then reading the newspaper account of her dying. At age five, the girl had lost her mother, left in the care of a drunker father. Leaving home at a young age, she married one of Uncle Sam's tin soldiers from Fort Meade, who gave her a sickly child and then abandoned her. In time, the child died and the mother's life became more and more degraded.

The preacher stopped to mop his wet forehead with a white handkerchief. Now Rolf noticed the two women mourners were muffling sobs with their hankies.

Tears flowed from Torval's eyes and he sniffed back his runny nose every now and then. The sadness there put big lump in Rolf's throat, too.

Finally done reading, the minister again mopped his face and asked everyone to join in saying the Lord's Prayer. After that, he looked at the corpse and declared, "And so we say farewell to you, Daisy Smith, nee Lottie Gilpatrick. *May God have mercy on your soul . . .*" Turning a cold eye to the two women in the room, he added harshly, "*and all of your kind.*"

As silently as he entered, the cleric walked swiftly out of the room.

Then, with no respect at all, two workmen in overalls came in, noisily nailed the lid on the cheap coffin and lugged it out to the horse-drawn hearse waiting outside.

Torval rubbed his eyes, blew his nose and squared his shoulders. *Well, it's over, anyway*, Rolf told himself. *It wasn't so bad. No one of any account except the undertaker had seen them, so it really didn't matter.*

They watered the horse and headed out of town at an easy trot.

"What was Daisy Smith to you?" Rolf wasn't sure he should ask, but he wanted to know.

Torval took a deep breath and let it out with a loud sigh. "She was a friend," he said dismally. "I'd give her two dollars and we'd just sit on her bed and talk."

Torval's eyes filled with smoke and watered heavily.

"She had such a tough life... but I thought she could pull through."

"How long did you know her?"

"Since the night Lucertola and I fought in Sebastian's Saloon. She was the girl. That was the first time I saw her." He swallowed hard and stared straight ahead.

Rolf realized there were times when Torval was lonely, when he felt isolated from everyone, in spite of working with others and being a member of the American

Order of United Workers Lodge. But Rolf never suspected Torval would pay someone just to talk to him. Who could he get to do that but someone like Daisy Smith? Rolf wished there was something he could do to help his brother. *But what?*

OCCUPIED WITH the work of haying and getting ready to send the grain binder out to cut the tan fields of oats and wheat, Torval gradually shed much of his sadness during the next couple of weeks. He was busy every hour of the day, which took his mind off his troubles.

In time, his spirits picked up and he started smiling again and joked around a little. In fact, he was in the best mood Rolf had seen him since they had come to the JM.

One day early in August, Will Malcolm came back from town with a letter for Torval. The envelope was pink with a fancy watermark. Noticing that it was something out of the ordinary, Will sniffed it teasingly and let out a wistful hum.

Finally, he handed it to Torval.

Will and Rolf stood there, waiting to see what Torval's letter was all about. After a quick glance, Torval crammed it into his back pocket and walked off, back to work. From the look on his face, Rolf thought the letter must have come from Lucifer himself. Suddenly, Torval was possessed by terror. For three days he went around distracted and grumpy. He couldn't sit still, but he couldn't keep his mind on his work, either. This time, Rolf decided not to pry. *In time he'll tell me*, he decided. Still, he was aching to know about that letter.

The next Saturday morning—four days later—Rolf and Torval were talking about some things they needed to pick up in town: Some three-eighths-inch carriage bolts, the

binder canvasses they had taken in to be repaired, some gall salve for the workhorses and whatnot. Torval liked to make the trip at the end of the week to hobnob around, maybe get a haircut and visit some of the dives on Saloon Street. Rolf took it for granted Torval was going to Belle Fourche. As for himself, Rolf planned to go to a dance in Snoma, where he hoped to see some young women he wanted to get to know better.

Torval's fingers trembled as he gripped the stubby wooden pencil and tried to write down a list of things to be done. He was more nervous than ever.

"You're pretty excited about going to town this afternoon, I see," Rolf offered as a little joke.

"G-g-gawd, you don't know..." He stopped and gave his brother a hopeless look. "I-I c-can't do it!"

"That's all right. Give me the pencil. I'll make out your list for you."

"No!" he protested. "*I can't go to town!*" Terror filled his eyes.

"Why not?" Now Rolf wondered if Torval had gotten a threatening letter like Will Malcolm had.

"I'm supposed to meet the six o'clock train and I just can't do it."

"*What?*" Rolf didn't understand.

"A woman is coming on that train. I wrote her a few times and all at once she said she's coming. No asking whether she could. Or did I want her to come."

Talking about it only seemed to make it worse for Torval.

"Well, when she gets there, tell her you've changed you mind. That you like batchin' out here at the ranch. Or that we have only one bed for five or six people."

Rolf grinned at him, but he didn't see any humor in what Rolf said.

"*You* got to do it!" Torval declared.

"Not me!"

"But you talk to women good. You know what to say."

"Just say, 'Hello. Nice to see you.'" Rolf smiled.

"It's not funny," Torval said narrowing his eyes at his brother.

"Well, this is some fix. Did you agree to marry her or something like that?"

"I don't think so. . ."

"*What do you mean, you don't think so?*"

"I said something about being tired of living alone, that's all."

"And she took that for a marriage proposal?"

"Maybe. Only..." Torval stared at the ground for a while and then gazed off into the distance. "Only I didn't straighten her out on that score right away. That was three, four months ago."

"Don't meet her." That seemed simple enough to Rolf. If he wasn't there when she arrived, she'd soon get the idea that he wasn't terribly interested in her. Rolf had to admit that was a nasty way to treat a person, but maybe she was asking for it.

Torval shot Rolf a puzzled look. "If you don't show up, maybe she'll just go away."

"No, if we don't meet her train, she'll get someone to bring her out here to the ranch. That'd even be worse yet."

"Then you'll just have to be there and send her away."

Torval started to shake and looked like he might cry. "*I can't do it.*" Seeing how upset he was and recalling the sadness of Daisy Smith's funeral made Rolf soft-hearted for just a moment. Poor Torval. He had gotten himself into such a mess, starting out with

good intentions. At least Rolf *supposed* it all started with good intentions. Sure, he could do it. No matter who it was, he could go to the railroad station, meet the woman and tell her it was all a mistake. If Rolf were in the same fix, Torval might do the same for him. But he couldn't imagine ever getting himself into that kind of quandary. Then again, why should he put himself in such a position? Suppose she made a big fuss at the station.

Or attacked him with her handbag or called the police? Then what? Maybe he shouldn't be in such a hurry to come to Torval's rescue. Rolf hadn't decided to help Torval yet when he took a small photo out of his shirt pocket and thrust it into Rolf's hand. It was a picture of a young woman with large eyes and a pointed chin.

She appeared to have dark hair and a tiny nose. "She doesn't look so bad to me. Maybe you'll like her."

"Don't you see?" he said desperately. "*I can't do it.*" That's when Rolf finally caved in and said he'd go.

"YOO-HOO! Torval! Here I am!" Rolf could hear a strange voice calling, but couldn't see who it was as people streamed off the train and poured around Rolf on the platform. Next thing he knew, a squat, pink toad of a woman stood in front of him, looking like she was about to gulp up an unsuspecting bug.

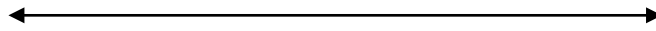
"Torval Hauge! It's me—Judith Porterhouse from Cleveland!" Her voice was oddly deep and gravelly for a woman. This couldn't be Judith Porterhouse, the slip of a girl with large eyes in the picture Torval had given Rolf. He had a notion to pull it out and compare it with the barrel-shaped person standing in front of him. Maybe show

her she wasn't who she claimed she was. She had no neck. Just a face painted on a stump of a head rooted somewhere within the acreage of her bright pink dress.

Amazingly, the hue of her florid face matched the color of her loose garment.

Rolf didn't know what to say. He just shook his head "no."

"Yes it is!" she insisted. "I am Judith Porterhouse and you are Torval Hauge."



End of Excerpt No. 2 of COTTONWOODS.