

CHAPTER I

Not a soul paused to even cast a glance as the stage rolled to a stop. Not too many people came to Spook Hollow anymore – not since more than a year ago when that stranger arrived and took over the old Sherman spread. The few that did come to settle there didn't seem to stay around long either. Folks naturally assumed that the stage was carrying the customary payroll and mail bag that arrived a few times a week. Folks got along. Things were quiet around Spook Hollow and everyone seemed content to keep it that way.

“Here it is, Spook Holler!” The driver didn't yell. He just made sure he said it loud enough to get attention.

There weren't many people on the street in town, but those that were stopped what they were doing and watched as the driver climbed down from his high perch. He removed his hat and slapped it against his leg and then coughed a little as the swirls of dust erupted. He pushed his gray hair back with one gloved hand and placed his hat back on his head with the other before he made his way to the door of the coach. He rested his hand on the latch and delayed opening the door just long enough to make sure everyone was watching first.

Landa Gold watched from the window of The Gold Poke, craning to see despite the stage door and the driver that were blocking most of her view. All she could make out was black boots and a long black coat. In fact, it looked like the stranger was dressed in black from head to toe.

Taking a few steps on the dusty street, the newcomer wasn't afraid to let folks see that they weren't the only curious ones. The hazel eyes didn't miss a thing. The sheriff, shotgun resting on his lap, sat on his customary chair in front of the jail. There was a man loading provisions in his wagon over at the general store. Just up the street, the blacksmith paused to take a long look before dropping the long handled dipper back into the water bucket. A rather strangely dressed couple passed by on the boardwalk and looked the newcomer over from head to toe, and then turned to each other to discuss what they saw. At the hitching rail just outside the saloon, a man tightened the cinch to the packs on his mule and then spit tobacco juice at a cat that was sunning himself nearby.

The stranger took a slow, full circle survey of the town, sizing up everyone and everything. Landa was sure she detected the slightest hint of a nod. It was as if this newcomer was expressing some type of confirmation or recognition.

Everyone in town was thinking the same thing. No conversation was needed to share their thoughts. It was obvious that by the way the stranger looked around. This outsider was looking for someone or something.

“Welcome, to Spook Hollow.” The startled newcomer spun around. The hazel eyes darkened momentarily. “I’m the sheriff here. The name’s Thaddeus Rush ... Sheriff Thaddeus Rush.” He smiled and added that last bit with some pride in his voice. “But you, Miss, may call me T R.” The stranger was obviously unnerved to have been so caught up in surveying the local residents that someone could approach completely undetected. When no words came from the stranger the sheriff added, “And, who might you be?”

Hazel eyes and blue eyes locked. The stranger coughed slightly. “The name’s...ahem...Mercy...Mercy Martin.”

“Well Miss Mercy, it looks to me like you’re lookin’ for somebody. Perhaps I can help you locate them. After all,” the sheriff tapped his badge, “I am the sheriff here.”

“I’m here to meet my grandparents. They sent me a wire and asked me to come lend a hand on their spread.” She smiled slightly at the sheriff before she cast a puzzled glance at the nearly empty street. “I just can’t figure it out. I was sure they’d be here to meet the stage.”

“Well, who might they be? I’d be obliged to get a buckboard down at the livery and take you out to their place myself.”

“Jamison and Ava Murphy.”

There was a catch in the sheriff’s voice as he felt the words pass his lips. “Uh, I don’t know how to tell you this. The Murphy’s are gone.”

“Gone! What do you mean gone? They knew I was coming. I know I was delayed a few weeks and it was a long trip, but they knew I was coming. They were expecting me. Where did they go?” Mercy’s voice was softly curious, more puzzled than alarmed. She looked T R in the eyes waiting for an answer. However, he didn’t need to speak the answer. She saw something in his eyes that gave her the reply. “Oh no, you don’t mean..... How?”

“The doc says they caught some kind of fever. They both went within a day of each other. Would you like me to take you to the gravesite?”

CHAPTER II

On the ride out to the gravesite Mercy and T R talked. The deaths of her grandparents didn’t seem real to her until they reached small knoll overlooking their ranch and she saw the two somewhat fresh graves. T R helped her down from the buckboard and stood quietly beside it while she paid her final respects.

As he waited for her return he saw a rider approaching from the distance and watched as he drew closer. Once Mercy finished paying her respects she returned to the wagon. The rider arrived on the knoll at about the same time. She drew in a deep breath and left it out in a soft sigh. "They wanted me to help with their spread so that they could take it easy. They planned to turn it over to me. I guess it's mine now. If you wouldn't mind dropping me off there, I guess I'll get started on my new life."

"Howdy TR! May I ask who this beautiful young lady is?" The rider leaned and his saddle horn and addressed the pair.

"Sir, this is Miss Mercy Martin." T R nodded in her direction and then in the direction of the rider, "Calvin Houné". The Murphy's were her grandparents. "

"My condolences to you Miss Martin." Houné tipped his hat. The Murphy's were wonderful folks and good neighbors. They'll be missed."

T R looked up at Houné, "Miss Martin was just saying that she'd probably stay on here at their ranch. What do you think of that?"

"I think it's almost time for dinner and my wife'll have my hide if I'm late. Lillian always cooks way more than the two of us can eat. Why don't you two join us and we'll talk then?" Houné looked at Mercy. "Little lady, after that long trip, the last thing you need to be doin' is cleaning up that thar house 'n then tryin' to rustle up yerself some grub ta boot. No arguments! Yer eatin' at the Houné table tonight."

Mercy couldn't argue. She hadn't thought about the fact that since her grandparents had passed weeks ago, their house probably wasn't stocked with provisions, nor would it be clean. She allowed T R to help her into the buckboard and as he clicked at the team, she found herself wondering about him.

She engaged him in polite conversation about himself for most of the trip. The conversation only strayed when he pointed out landmarks and commented about them as they passed by. Occasionally, Calvin Houné would ride beside the wagon and enter the conversation with a comment or joke. Although it was almost two hours, it seemed like only minutes before they arrived at his ranch.

Mercy eyes widened as she took it all in. It was a beautiful ranch. The house was whitewashed and bright flowers grew in the boxes affixed to every window. More flowers grew around the house and in the beds scatter throughout the yard. A woman in a soft pastel dress and wide brimmed straw hat clipped flowers and placed them in the basket that hung from her arm. Calvin wrapped the reins of his horse to the hitching post and T R handed his off to a ranch hand that seemingly appeared from nowhere.

Lillian Houné stopped picking flowers and met her husband as he walked toward the house. "Honey, I hope you don't mind, but I've brought guests for dinner." Introductions were made between the ladies and it was obvious, they loved each other immediately.

CHAPTER III

Tongues wagged in town. Who was she? Where did she come from? What does she want here? There were suspicions, and by the time everyone relayed theirs to each other, Landa was the only one sure of the answers.

Madam Landa was the proprietress of "The Gold Poke". It was the nicest of parlor house in territory and the certainly the most lavish one in Spook Hollow. It wasn't Landa's chosen profession but it was the only other way she knew to make a living after her man went off hunting and never returned. It didn't take long for the bank to call her loan and take the small spread that she and her husband had poured their lifeblood into. But she wanted to stay in town. She knew in her heart that he would return to her someday and she wasn't going to leave town until he did. Even then, she'd get revenge on those that ruined their lives before she moved on with her own.

Being the most popular madam in the territory wasn't such a bad thing when it was information you were after. And, information is what she got. If there was one thing all men had in common it was that they liked to brag. Landa and her girls had heard some outlandish lies. But they had also heard some stories that had a ring of truth to them. They used these stories like pieces to a puzzle. Every piece obtained was given to Landa and she stored them all away. She knew the information would benefit her someday.

Landa wasted no time that afternoon collecting her "puzzle pieces." Her first stop was at the general store. While picking up a few provisions, she listened to the conversation going on around her. From there she crossed the street to the small building that served as the post office, telegraph office and newspaper. Since one could also purchase their stage passage there, it seemed the next logical stop. She sat for a spell and shared a pot of tea with the proprietress, Buelah.

Buelah and her husband, Sidney, owned a small spread just south of town adjacent to the spread that Landa and her husband had owned. The rumor was that Sidney was a gunfighter. He took up ranching to escape the past. However, it often came back to haunt him. Buelah was just as curious about newcomers in town as Landa was. Quite often, if they weren't a key to the whereabouts of Landa's man, Jeb, they were looking for Sid. The ladies exchanged what little information they had garnered and Landa went on her way.

Landa's next stop was to a small lot out on the far edge of town. To call it a house, farm or spread of any sort would have been a stretch. It was more of an encampment. The pair that lived there heard the rattle of Landa's small buckboard long before it rounded the bend and came into view. They stood and waved a greeting to Landa as she approached.

"Vat breengs our friend Landa out 'ere today, eh?"

“Sirena, Zindelo, how good to see you!” Landa climbed down from the buckboard and wrapped the reins to a tree. She shook the wrinkles from her skirt and shot a discreet wink at her friend.

With a knowing nod, Sirena turned to her partner. “Zindelo, Landa and I desire some time alone. Would you be a dear and allow us zat?” Zindelo, touched her lips with a light kiss and then placed another on Landa’s cheek. “I will leave you ladies to your secrets.” He touched the brim of his well-worn top hat and excused himself.

CHAPTER IV

Dinner with the Hounes was truly what Mercy had needed. The delicious food and lively conversation relieved the stress of the long trip and lifted much of the sadness she felt from the loss of her grandparents. After the meal, the men retreated to the den of the spacious ranch house for cigars and brandy while Lillian and Mercy sat in the parlor enjoying tea with their dessert.

The muffled voices of the men could be heard from behind the heavy wooden door of the den. However, their words were indistinguishable. Calvin Hounes had no worry that either his wife or his guest could hear the conversation between him and the sheriff.

“Rush, I saw how you looked at the pretty young thing and I don’t like it. I don’t like it one bit! We put you in that job and we can relieve you of it just as quickly.”

Sheriff Rush shook his head. “I’m good, Mr. Hounes. I swear. We’re good. Okay? Tell him it’s all good.”

Hounes didn’t like it. He and his partner had worked hard to get this far in their plan and he wasn’t about to let this young man who he had entrusted with their secret to ruin it all. When the railroad came into the territory to buy up land, they intended to own most of it. They had gotten the Sherman place, then the Gold spread, and now the Murphy spread. He’d ride into town to talk to his partner in the morning, but for now he just needed to make sure that Sheriff Thaddeus Rush kept his mind on their plan and not on that pretty young lady out there in the parlor.

It was more than an hour later when the men emerged from the den. The ladies were no longer in the parlor. “Lillian, Thad is heading back to town,” he called out, “don’t you want to bid our guest good-bye?”

The ladies appeared at the top of the stairway. “Calvin, I have asked Mercy to stay with us until her grandparent’s home is fit to stay in. We have all these rooms that are empty and the last thing this child needs is another ride on the hard seat of that buckboard.”

“I think that’s a splendid idea! Thad and I will fetch her bags.” He looked at Rush and nodded toward the door. Once on the porch with the door closed behind them he spoke again. “My daddy always said ‘keep you friends close and your enemies closer’.”

“Enemies? She’s not our en....”

“Son, we’ve had this conversation already! The young lady is staying here. You are going back to town and you are going to forget about her! Got that? Miss Mercy Martin is bad news for you – bad news for us!”

CHAPTER V

Zindelo and Sirena weren’t exactly residents of Spook Hollow although they did call it their home for several months of each year. During the cold months they traveled to the south. Sirena had been raised with a strong knowledge and deep respect for the earth and the curing properties of the plants harvested from it. This knowledge included that of many of the cures practiced by some of the Indian tribes they had become acquainted with. Her vast knowledge of these healing methods had not only gained her the respect of both the white men and the Indians but also gained her the role of town doctor since there wasn’t one. During the months they traveled in the warmer climate she was able to harvest plants native to areas other than Spook Hollow.

Zindelo was an interesting character to say the least. He had a gift for engaging others in all types of opportunities and adventures. This “gift” had gotten them thrown out of many a town including Spook Hollow at one point in time. However, he had made amends with the town folk and since they all had their secrets and peculiar ways, they had learned to live together amicably. He had a bright wit about him and once folks got to know him they considered him a good friend.

Zindelo affectionately called Sirena his little gypsy queen. He claimed that he was first attracted to her because of her bright garb and matching lively personality. But, the entrepreneur in him quickly became attracted to the cures that she could brew. His method of selling these brews is what brought on their nomadic lifestyle and their ability to pack up and move on in a hurry.

Sirena called him her “little kochanek”. No one really knew what it meant, but from the affection in her voice they were sure it was a term of endearment. When she called him “idiot” no translation was needed due to her tone and the similarity to the English term.

CHAPTER XI

The days turned into weeks. Mercy made almost daily trips to the little ranch tidying the place up. Since most of the livestock had been sold or run off she soon realized that she would need to bring in a small flock of chickens, purchase a good horse and perhaps a goat or cow for milk. It was too late in the

season to plant a garden and she worried that her meager savings would be enough to carry her through the winter. Calvin and Lillian were more than accommodating in allowing her to stay at their lavish ranch.

On one bright summer day, Mercy borrowed the Hounes' team and wagon in order to ride into town and purchase supplies to repair the home and outbuildings. She persuaded Lillian to ride along with her.

"It's been so long since I've been in to Spook Hollow that I can't really recall exactly when it was."

"Really?" Mercy replied. "Why wouldn't you make the trip more often, at least monthly for supplies and such?"

"Oh, Calvin goes to town so often for his business matters that he brings home most all I need. There's really no reason for me to make the trip. I do miss it some but I am so busy around the ranch that I don't know how I'd have the time anyhow. Even the Pastor comes to the ranch regularly for a meal and offers a personal message to us then."

Mercy found herself wondering about Lillian's naiveté, but she was so fond of her, and Lillian seemed so happy, that she never questioned it. When the pair reached town Mercy made her first stop at the bank to see if the funds from her bank back east had been wired to the Spook Hollow bank. The money she had brought with her was nearly depleted. Will Dodge, the bank president, nodded and regrettably told her that he was still waiting. More depressed than angry, Mercy left the bank for the mercantile where Lillian was waiting.

From the boardwalk outside she could hear laughter and ladies voices. Entering she found Lillian, engaged in lively conversation with two women. Introductions were made all around and the ladies quickly fell into a comfortable fellowship with each other despite their obvious differences. Mercy appreciated the guidance Sirena offered in her selection of spices. She also accepted the offer to visit the little encampment at a later date to have her fortune told. Landa and Mercy spent a few minutes sizing each other up before they engaged in conversation. Both wanted to learn all they could about the other and they were equally skilled in curious conversation without seeming too nosy.

"Rather than block these aisles all afternoon, might I suggest we go over to the café for a bite?" Landa spoke up and the other ladies quickly nodded their assent.

At the café, secrets were shared and bonds were formed. Lillian realized it had been far too long since she had seen Landa who had once been a trusted friend and neighbor. Sirena had nursed Lillian through more than one sickness. Buelah was already in the café when the ladies entered and joined their little gathering. The time passed quickly. Mercy and Lillian had more errands to address and the other ladies realized that they too needed to bid farewell. Seeing the sadness flash over Lillian's face, Buelah put her arm around her friend, "I'll see you on next Saturday, won't I?"

“Saturday?” she questioned, “Why would I be seeing you on Saturday?”

“Saturday is the annual festival! Has it been so long that you’ve been to town that you’ve forgotten?” Landa joked.

“Calvin must have forgotten to mention it. He’s been so busy and works so hard you know.” She looked down to pick up the hem of her skirt as she stepped from the boardwalk into the street

With her eyes were diverted Lillian did not notice the look that crossed Landa’s face. Nor, did she observe the expressions that flashed between her old friends.

“Oh I’m sure he’ll remember once you remind him!” Landa assured in the firm manner she was known for. “You remind him! Then you come to town with him.”

The ladies said their good-byes and promised each other that they would see each other again in only a few days.

Landa, Sirena and Buelah lingered together for a few minutes before the threesome parted. Between what they had known before and what they had learned over lunch, they had compiled enough information to know that the festival would be one that no one, especially Calvin Houné and Pastor Harland Wood, would soon forget.

CHAPTER XII

Pastor Harland Wood was a relative newcomer to Spook Hollow. He delivered the most powerful of sermons from his pulpit. He spoke of the great deeds he had done in every town he had resided in. He told of his adventures while living among the savage Indians with the same passion he used when he declared his friendships with the wealthiest of families in Philadelphia. He spoke of lifelong bonds with politicians and of honorary membership in Indian tribes. He had stories for every occasion and his congregation grew each week that he took to the pulpit. He and Calvin Houné were the closest of friends. Between them, they were the true town fathers of Spook Hollow. They had a great deal of influence on the residents and weren’t afraid to exert even more when the occasion demanded it.

The Pastor and Houné worked hand in hand to make sure that the festival would be the biggest and best that the town had ever seen, especially now that Lillian had mentioned her desire to attend. Some of the young lads in town had been paid handsomely to hunt for birds and other game for the barbeque. Yep, it would be an event that Spook Hollow would not soon forget.

Mercy couldn’t help but wonder how everything could go so right in the planning of the annual festival and, at the same time, everything could go so wrong in her attempts to move into her new home. Her funds still hadn’t arrived. Even in the middle of several lumber mills, she could not secure the necessary

materials to repair her barn. Her well was contaminated. Not one letter from her grandparents had ever hinted of such problems, but it seemed nothing went well for her from the day she had arrived. If not for the friendship she had developed with Lilly Houné and the other ladies, she might have taken Cal up on his suggestion to return to her home back east. She also had her eye on the sheriff but each time she thought she might have a minute alone with him they were interrupted by either Houné or the pastor with some kind of emergency or chore.

As plans for the festival progressed, Mercy got caught up in them. The men built a floor for the square dance and the ladies made pies, cakes and several other dishes. Finally, the day they had been anticipating arrived.

CHAPTER XIII

Cal was up and gone before dawn. A few hours later, Lilly and Mercy took the small buckboard and headed into town. The ranch hands would arrive later after the chores were done as would most of the farmers in the area.

Landa, Buelah and Sirena were already at the church organizing everything for the long tables of food that would be placed out later. The pastor, sheriff and Houné had been there earlier but had since gone. When Lilly and Mercy walked in they heard only "it's time they know."

"Know what?" Mercy asked. "Is there a problem with the festival?"

"Oh dear, I hope not!" Lilly added.

"Ladies, I think you need to sit down." Not surprisingly, it was Landa that spoke first. Although all three women could be outspoken, Landa took the lead as she had gathered all the information. "You know my man, Jeb, has been gone for quite some time. Well, he's back."

Lilly squealed with delight and moved to hug her friend. But, Landa put her hand up to stop her advance. "That's not what this is about, Lilly. It's about where it was and why." She took Lilly by the hand and guided her to a nearby pew. The other ladies followed and took seats.

Once all were seated Landa talked quietly as if she was afraid she might be overheard. She told of Jeb having been ambushed and left for dead and how he was taken in by an Indian tribe. She related his reaction to her report of having lost their small spread. Buelah spoke next, she told of how her man, Sid, had encountered a few men that seemed to have business with Houné and the Reverend Wood in his past dealings, which is why he tried to stay out of the public eye and on his ranch. Those that did come looking for him did so at the bidding of Wood.

Lilly was growing uncomfortable in her seat. She would open her mouth to speak but each time the others would motion for her to be silent until they finished. Mercy held tight to her hands, giving her an

occasional hug while the others spoke. Sirena spoke last. She spoke slowly and clearly, her voice no longer held a trace the European accent Lilly and Mercy had grown accustomed to.

“Lilly, you must trust us. We are your friends and we don’t want to see you hurt. You too, Mercy. If these men are not stopped now, people might die. You heard what happened to Jeb.”

The conversation returned to Landa one more time. “There is one more thing, Lilly. All those times that Cal told you he was away on some kind of business, he was here. Here in town ... and ... ,” she paused and took a deep breath before she finished. “He was down at my parlor house.”

The ladies all sat in silence and looked at each other first. Then all eyes rested on Lilly and Mercy. It was Mercy that spoke first. “My well, the lumber, my stock ... and then she grew pale. Ohhh, my grandparents...?”

Sirena hugged her tightly. “Yes dear. I’m sorry. I tried to help them but they were too sick.”

Lilly slowly rose from her seat on the pew. The others waited for her to speak and when she did it was not at all what they had expected. The quiet, polite, always smiling Lilly had fire in her eyes. “Tonight will be a festival that Spook Hollow will not soon forget!”

Hours later the ladies met at the encampment of Sirena and Zindelo to review their plan. Like Serena, Zindelo no longer spoke with any trace of an accent. In addition, he was dressed quite differently from his customary plaid suit and top hat. He sported a well-tailored suit with a shield shaped badge on his lapel. Seeing the puzzled looks of the ladies he spoke up immediately. “First, I want to say that I am very sorry to have deceived all of. My name is not Zindelo. It is Bauer. Sergeant Bauer. I am a member of the President’s Secret Service.”

The group talked for nearly an hour at times they argued. In the end, Bauer gave in to the ladies and allowed Lilly and the others to make the first move.

CHAPTER XIV

By the time the ladies arrived in the crowded town square the festivities were well underway. There was a small band playing and there was gaiety everywhere. The Pastor Wood, the Sheriff and Calvin Houné were nowhere to be seen. It wasn’t hard for Lilly to guess where they might be found.

“Let’s go ladies,” was all she said and the five of them turned and began their march down the street. Lilly pulled her shotgun from underneath her cape. Mercy dropped her long jacket to the ground revealing her gun belt with a pair of revolvers holstered there. The others brandished either a shotgun, rifle or pistol as well. In minutes there stood in front of The Gold Poke.

Lilly's boot hit the door and it flew open with a thud. She marched in the front door with Serena and Landa behind her. Mercy kicked in the side door and Buelah stormed in behind her. The girls in the front parlor screamed. Landa motioned them aside while Sirena waved her guns at the startled men. "Just stay put and be quiet."

Lilly never paused. She had fire in her eyes as she continued up the stairs. Buelah and Mercy headed toward the rooms in the downstairs. While they made sure that no one would be following Lilly up the steps they waited for the sound of shotgun blasts there were sure to follow.

The first door Lilly pushed open revealed the preacher in a compromising position with one of the girls. She leveled her shotgun at him. He didn't hesitate and began to sermonize. "You'll spend the hereafter in Purgatory....."

"I'm here after my husband! And the only Purgatory you'll be witnessing tonight is Purgatory in Petticoats! Where is he?" She didn't wait for a response she just blasted a load of rock salt his way and backed out of the room.

In the hallway, she found the sheriff hiding behind a quivering young lady. "Out of my way, lawman. You'd best get your britches on and go outside. There's another lawman out there waiting for ya!"

Then she heard a voice she recognized all too well coming from behind the door at the end of the hall. She pushed past the sheriff and the dove in rush. Her boot hit the door with all the force of a mule kick. Wood splintered and the door flew open. Two parlor girls sat on the bed with the sheets clutched around their necks. It took Lilly's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the light. But when they did, she saw that the one girl was pointing to the window. In an instant she unloaded both barrels into her husband's lily white backside.

"You lowdown, lying, murdering coward!" She rushed to the window behind him and hurled a chamber pot at him. She heard the thud when the porcelain made contact with his skull.

The End

EPILOGUE

The excitement at The Gold Poke soon became the center of the town festivities. Once he recovered from his uncontrollable laughter, Bauer handcuffed Pastor Harland Wood and led him away in shame. The sheriff confessed to being an unwilling pawn of Wood and Calvin Houné. Houné was locked up too. He and Wood stood trial when the circuit judge arrived weeks later. Both were sentenced but since Houné did not have a hand in the murders, he received a much lighter jail sentence. However, he may have been better off in jail rather than at the hands of Sweet Lillian Houné.