

Florence, Texas, August 30, 1863.

A shuffle of feet and a single strike of fist against timber. Unexpected company is rarely a welcome surprise in these desolate parts and troublesome times. Gertrude Seidel crouches in the cabin's dim interior, a worn boot planted along the threshold, and her deceptively petite form pressed against the door. She clutches the iron latch in one hand and a Colt Dragoon in the other. The revolver's grip slips in the sweat of her palm, and its barrel grazes the door frame.

"C'mon, Tru," she hisses through clenched teeth, "keep your wits."

Tru's mind races. Comanche? Confederates? Common criminals come to prey on a young widow?

"Who's there?" she demands.

No answer. Only soft scratching and a thud.

Perhaps it is not a stranger. "Wer ist da?" she repeats. Tru only speaks German when she is nervous.

"Ich bin's," a muffled and still unfamiliar voice replies.

Tru peers through a slim crack between loose cedar planks. Blood pulses behind her ears as she observes her caller. A wraithlike lump of flesh and bone slumps against the porch post—eyes sunken, cheeks hollow. The sweltering midday sun licks its shadowed edges from behind. She blinks hard. Once. Then twice, to be sure her mind is not playing tricks. The ache of breath held fast rushes from her lungs. This is neither spirit nor predator at the doorstep. It is Johann. Her boy.

"Hansi!" Tru cries and throws the door open. Her throat tightens at the sight of her injured child, and the stench of impending death sends her reeling.

Johann tries to stand, but his bare feet, savaged by the elements, skid along the rough-hewn planks, and he collapses. "Mutti," he gasps. The boy, shoulders and jaw newly broadened with the approach of manhood, is wasted to nothing.