ELLIE AND HANNAH

 When she finally regained consciousness, Ellie Prager realized that her husband, Luke, and their eight-year-old son, Little Luke, were both dead.

 Their bloodied bodies were splayed across the packed dirt floor of their adobe brick home. Wooden chairs, some bowls and plates, and a table were knocked over. All was silent now except for the buzzing of flies.

 Her family had been stabbed and hacked to death in a heinous knife attack. The last thing Ellie remembered had been sometime in the middle of the night when her husband got out of bed to check on some suspicious noises outside their door. It was too dark to see who it was, or how many people were there when the mystery person or persons barged in. She had been clubbed in the head by either an ax handle or a short log and left for dead. Then all went black...

 The pain in Ellie's head and on the side of her aching, swollen face was dreadful. She struggled to her feet and went outside to the well and drew a bucket of water. She greedily drank first, then gently scooped handfuls of water over her bruised face and disheveled brown hair. The sun was already up and blazing, and it would be yet another hot day. Crows cawed as if to already complain. The date was July 17, 1868. The place was the small town of Mesilla, in far southern New Mexico Territory.

 Her head still groggy, Ellie staggered over to her closest neighbors -- the Roberson's -- and begged for help. Tom ran to fetch the sheriff and the town doctor, and Lizbeth carefully listened to Ellie's account while holding her hands, then made her some eggs, fry bread, and coffee. Eating would help her feel better and heal, the kindly neighbor insisted.

 Sheriff Bill Locke soon arrived back with Tom and heard Ellie's story from Lizbeth while the still rather dazed victim slowly ate. Then all four went back to the Prager adobe to investigate the crime scene. They especially needed to remove the quickly ripening pair of corpses, and then clean up the room damage.

 When Ellie saw her dead husband and son in the full light of day, she broke down and sobbed. Lizbeth consoled her as best she could. Once Ellie recovered, she remarked to the sheriff that Luke's shiny copper wedding ring (the couple couldn't afford a gold or silver ring, back then) was missing off his finger, as was the family's leather money pouch from their fireplace mantel. (Mesilla was too small to have its own bank.) The Prager's life savings from buying and selling cattle had amounted to almost $367 -- most of it in gold and greenbacks, but some in Mexican pesos. (Any Confederate paper money had been discarded as worthless three years earlier in this area, when the War ended. Mesilla had briefly been the capital of the Confederate States of the Arizona Territory, before New Mexico was partitioned off in 1866.)

 "Looks like a case of murder-robbery then," Sheriff Locke proclaimed. "Can't tell yet if it's gringos or Apache or Mex what done it. Could have come over from El Paso, or slipped across the Rio Grande from Old Mexico and then sneaked back."

 That was when Ellie noticed a flesh-colored chunk of the top third of human ear lying in the dirt, its dried blood already darkened where it had been sliced off. She picked it up and studied it. "My Luke must of fought hard with his own knife from off our table before he was killed. Probably couldn't reach for his guns in time, it being so dark. I reckon we need to find a man who matches this missing piece of ear, sheriff," Ellie -- a bit more alert now -- said.

 "And it's clearly the ear of a white man, so we can rule out any Injun or Mex bandits, I figure," Tom added. The ear remnant was passed around to the other people for closer inspection, then Ellie flipped it outside for one of her shoats to eat.

 Doc Wilburn finally showed up, and had Ellie sit down on the bed while he examined her injuries. The lump from the blow on her head was sizeable, but would heal, he judged. The doctor gently washed her swollen face and wrapped some clean bandages over her wounds, then he sent Tom to fetch Father Ramon, the local priest at the Church of San Albino, which was down the street in the modest town plaza. "You'll need to stay off your feet for a few days and get plenty of rest, Ellie," he ordered. "You should be fine in about a week. Father Ramon will take care of the funeral Mass and the burial details." Lizbeth said she would bring Ellie her meals and tend to her two horses, her chickens, her pigs, and her milk cow until she fully recovered. Her late husband, Luke, had sold sixty-two head of cattle down in Mexico the week before, so no additional work was needed in that regard.

 Father Ramon was middle-aged, sturdy and capable. He wore sandals and a simple brown tunic with a piece of white cord for a belt. A carved wooden crucifix hung from a leather strip around his neck. After he arrived and surveyed the grisly scene, he blessed the corpses and went to Ellie. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Prager. What a horrible thing has occurred here." Because the town of Mesilla was too small to have its own undertaker, the priest said he would take the bodies now and wash them and dress them himself, then say Mass tomorrow. "We will bury them behind the church in our cemetery," he promised. "There they can rest in the peaceful arms of Our Lord." Hans, the old town blacksmith from Denmark -- who also happened to be a skilled woodworker -- would construct two simple pine coffins for the funeral. Ellie gave the padre clean clothes for her deceased family members. A wagon was provided by the town livery and gently loaded, then Father Ramon took the remains of Luke and Little Luke back to San Albino's.

 Most of Mesilla turned out for the Mass and the graveside service, the tragic news of the dual murders having spread quickly. Luke and Little Luke were properly buried, and their adjacent tombs marked with headstones. Ellie Prager was now on her own. She wrote to her relatives back in Ohio and to Luke's relatives in Tennessee and explained the sad and sudden developments. Her life had been turned upside down. She knew, however, that she could never completely rest until the killer or killers that had brutally butchered her family were found and brought to justice.

 Until mid-December, Sheriff Locke tried to follow up on any lead or rumor that might help him solve the Prager murders. He telegraphed other Territorial sheriffs as far north as Santa Fe, and even inquired in southern Arizona and west Texas, searching for clues. But Bill came up empty-handed. "I'm getting too old for this job," he confessed to Ellie one day, "and both my leg wound from the War and my lower back have been acting up like sin again. It's hard to even sit a saddle anymore." he sighed with regret, silently cursing the relentless passage of time and its dubious gift of old age.

 "But what about my family's killers?" Ellie Prager insisted. "Are you just going to let them get away, uncaught and unpunished?"

 "Sorry to admit the truth, Ellie, but I think we plum ran out our luck. I have been neglecting other cases and similar important duties, so I'm afraid I have to call it quits now on investigating your particular murders. I did my best, believe me. Some cases never get solved, and the odds of finding justice get worse as time goes by," Bill admitted. "I'm real sorry."

 Ellie was crestfallen. For the past months, she had been living on random charity from the townsfolk, and on a modest amount of money that her relatives back East had sent her. Still, she was forced to sell three of her squealing shoats, her milk cow, and one of her horses just to pay her bills and taxes. Now, even the sheriff had seemed to say that things were hopeless. Somehow, she had to get her life back on track! Maybe she should sell her parcel of land and move to El Paso. She could try for a job as a clerk in a mercantile, or as a cook in a restaurant. Mesilla lost its position as a Butterfield Stage stop when the War broke out in '61, and it also recently missed out on having the railroad come through town when El Paso was chosen instead for the eventual line. So maybe Mesilla's future was fading, and she should give up and leave. What should I do? she pondered.

 Ellie decided to give Father Ramon a visit, and ask for his advice, or at least some of his prayers.

 The padre was alone inside the church, repainting the badly fading altar a fresh whitewash again, when she arrived. He invited her into his study and, once there, closed the door for privacy. There she explained her troubles, and asked for his council. He listened to her compassionately, as they sat close together in plain opposite-facing chairs, their knees almost touching.

 "Mrs. Prager, you are a good person," he coughed, then smiled. "I am sorry that your spirit is still in turmoil. But tell me...don't you ever get lonely? Your husband has been gone since July, and an attractive widow like you must miss having a man in your life," he shyly supposed.

 She was startled when Father Ramon suddenly reached out, grabbed both her hands, then held them tight.

 "Father?" she asked, confused, her brow creasing downward.

 "Ellie, forgive me my weakness, but I have often thought of you. I get lonely too. Very lonely. People have no idea how priests long for physical human contact, for hugging and kissing, especially with an attractive woman like yourself. I am plagued with thoughts of bodily temptations at night, Ellie. I want to touch your skin, caress it, kiss it...I even dream of joining with your warm body..." The priest leaned closer, his brown eyes pleading, his breathing shallow and yearning. "I beg God and you to forgive me, but I can't help myself! Oh Ellie!" he gushed, and made to embrace her.

 Shocked and revolted, she fended him off and ran from the study and out of the church, and back into the cold December winds.

 Ellie was afraid to leave her house for very long periods over the next few days. She always kept her door bolted now, day and night. She kept a suspicious eye out for Father Ramon. What if the secretly lustful priest pursued her? What should she do then? Who could she turn to? Who could she trust? Who would even believe her story? Christmas came and went, with Ellie skipping Midnight Mass at San Albino's, explaining to her friends and neighbors that she had a bad cough and was feeling poorly.

 The young widow was still miserable as the new year of 1869 was ushered in. Her soft brown eyes stared out her home's window, day after day. Time dragged by.

 Ellie Prager was listlessly wandering inside of Talbot's Mercantile, looking at this and that item, when a tall, red-haired woman weighing at least two-hundred and fifty pounds stepped inside out of the biting, frigid winds, smiled, and approached her.

 "Howdy, Sister! I don't believe we've met yet. My name's Hannah." She extended her large hand and pumped Ellie's with vigor, her green eyes twinkling. "I'm the new whore over at Belle's -- you know, the 'house of ill repute' (here, she winked) that everybody knows about but nobody publicly admits even exists. The men call me Hannah the Heifer. Haw! I don't mind that name, though. I'm famous! I get a $5 gold piece for every five-minute poke, so I ain't complainin'. Madame Belle keeps $2 of that per squirt, so I'm still in the money. Haw! I eat like a queen -- no surprise there, right? -- and I have plenty of nice dresses, imported perfumes and such. Some of those cowboys sure smell after two months on the trail, but they are mostly just sweet and eager young bucks. They're happy makin' love, so I'm happy!" Hannah snorted good-naturedly. "You'd be surprised how many men like a big-boned, full-figured gal like me...I'm just one huge mountain of lovin'!" As she laughed, her enormous bosom shook like gallons of jelly.

 Ellie couldn't help but be amazed and amused by this rather wild woman. She was surprised to be so quickly snapped out of her low mood, so she invited Hannah over for coffee and further conversation. The other women customers in the store, however, were aghast at Hannah the Heifer's unconventional yet brave openness and utter public shamelessness. Gossip of the encounter would spread like wildfire among the female residents of Mesilla after the pair left Talbot's.

 For at least an hour, Ellie poured out her heart to Hannah in detailing what had happened to her life since that awful July night. She even included the more recent shameful attempted assault by Father Ramon.

 "Men will be men, even a priest in a robe," Hannah sighed. "I've heard from 'working girls' like myself that some priests sneak across the border at night, dressed in regular clothes, and enjoy their untold pleasures. Sometimes, even children are produced from such unions. Of course, things are kept hushed up. Maybe some money is paid on the sly, secretly taken from the Sunday collection plate. Sad, but true. So your lonesome padre story doesn't surprise me much. But I am very sorry, Ellie, for what happened to your husband and your little boy. And if your town sheriff has thrown in the towel on the hunt, maybe there are other ways to find the culprit or culprits. We should think upon it."

 While sipping their hot, black coffee, Ellie learned that Hannah's last name was Loffner, and that she grew up in Little Rock. "Quit school after the fourth grade. Thrown out of the house at age fourteen. Told by my folks that I was a no-good tramp for liking to love the local boys," she confessed. "Worked in cat houses in Texas and Louisiana during the War. Honey, I've had 'em all -- judges, politicians, business leaders, married men, outlaws, cowpokes, lawmen, soldiers --blue and gray. White, black, Injun, Mex, young, old -- I won't say no if they have the cash! Bet I've seen every pecker west of the Mississippi and east of the Pecos! I learned that men-folk are basically simple critters, and real easy to understand. Their minds focus on food, whiskey, fighting, gambling, and sex. They know what they want when they want it, so I give it to 'em! So now, I thought I'd give Mesilla and Las Cruses a chance for a while. Maybe head on to El Paso if things prove too slow here."

 By now, a second hour had passed, and Hannah returned to the topic of serving justice to whoever killed Luke and Little Luke.

 "I think your sheriff is looking in the wrong places. He's communicating with other sheriffs instead of getting down and dirty with the criminal element. He should have combed the saloons and whore houses in every dusty, piss-ant town and stage stop and asked about seeing a man missing the top chunk of an ear. Even if long hair is covering the cut on such a varmint, it can be briefly noticed by a sharp eye. Find that man, and we can learn if he had any accomplices, or if he was the lone killer. Ellie, you and me need to take a trip together. We need to solve this case ourselves," Hannah the Heifer declared, confidently slamming her large pink hand -- which was adorned with two gaudy rings -- down hard on the table.

 "But I've never even been in a saloon before, Hannah!" Ellie protested. "Let alone a whore house..." she added, in a lower voice.

 Hannah said not to be concerned about either drawback. "I'll do the undercover investigations, so you don't have to worry, Honey," she winked. "Besides, the only places I'm truly at home is in a barroom or on a bed! Haw! When should we start? I'll ask Madame Belle if she'll give me two weeks off from work. Gotta move fast before the trail gets even colder. I know you're short on cash, Ellie, so I'll foot the bills, and you can pay your half back to me sometime down the line."

 Belle later agreed, and the Robersons said they would look after Ellie's remaining stock animals while she was gone. Hannah recommended leasing a team and a flat bed wagon -- with a roll-up canvas canopy -- from the livery. "Besides, finding a horse big enough for me to sit is always a problem. This way, we will save ourselves a lot of wear and tear, plus make it easier for us to haul our gear -- food, water, rifles, warm clothing, blankets, horse feed. We can sleep in the back of the wagon rather than on the ground, and avoid gettin' snake-bit or stung by scorpions. Ugh...I hate snakes!" she shuttered.

 Arrangements were soon made at the livery. Necessary supplies were purchased and snugly packed. The pair of searchers were ready.

 The two women left Mesilla the following morning and headed north. It was a typical cold January day, but temperatures rarely went below freezing this far south, and any snowfall was rare and very limited.

 They progressed about twelve miles a day. Ellie shared every detail of her life story with her new friend, and vis-versa, as they traveled. They took turns shooting at any jackrabbits they spotted, for fresh meat. They each bagged two. Five days out, they finally reached the settlement of Rincon. Hannah visited three saloons, asking the pertinent questions. The pair treated themselves to welcomed hot baths and slept in soft feather beds at the town's sole hotel.

 They continued on to Caballo, Las Palomas (with its hot springs), and passed Elephant Butte. In Cuchillo, however, they got their first important clue: Hannah discovered that a long-haired drifter named Yancy Bonner -- with a scar across his left temple, stopping just short of his eye -- had been spotted. According to the bartender at the Lone Cactus Saloon, Bonner, while enjoying his whiskey, had pushed his hair out of the way for a few seconds while scratching at some pesky lice. The casual movement revealed an ugly, carved up ear, the world-weary barkeep by the name of Quint reported.

 "Did this man say where he was headed, Mister Quint?" Hannah asked.

 "Say...what's it to you, sister?" the gray-bearded but bald-headed bartender wanted to know, suddenly suspicious.

 "Well, he ran out on me after a poke in Caballo, so he owes me five dollars. But the sumnabitch also stole a valuable bracelet of mine, if you really want to know... Worth nearly $50," Hannah stated. "Look, friend. Here's two silver dollars to help spark your memory," she added, flipping him the tarnished coins. "So...which way did he go, amigo?" She flashed her winning-est smile and leaned forward.

 Quint grinned, then scooped up the silver and shoved the cash in a stained vest pocket. "I recollect Bonner said he was heading east towards Ruidoso, in Mescalero Apache lands. But those Injuns are bad hombres, sister, if yer thinkin' a headin' that way. Real dangerous. Once you cross the river, no water 'til you get there. It's pret' near eighty mile of hard travel," Quint warned. "I'd let it go if'n I was you."

 Hannah thanked the barkeep and went out to inform Ellie of their choices. "We could have our suspect in sight, but it's your call now, Ellie. As for me, I'm willing to risk it. We've come this far already." The widow Prager solemnly agreed.

 They refilled their water barrels to the brim, checked and refreshed their food stores, bought more feed for the horses, washed as best they could partly-clothed in the cold river, and set off east the following dawn. The road bed was rocky, rough and rutted. The women went a bit slower than usual to avoid busting a wagon wheel. Soon, they would be climbing from the flats up into the pine forests and eventually into the high mountains. The temperature dropped and they even had an inch of snow on their third day. The water barrels in their wagon had a thin layer of ice on top in the mornings, which had to be busted. The steaming breath of their team was now visible as the pair of horses trudged through the rocky, snowy passes.

 One night around their campfire, Hannah allowed how good it was that Ellie had once married and birthed a child. "Probably neither is in the cards for me, Honey, but you never know. I wouldn't mind settling down and raising some cute young-uns if'n the right fella asks me. Having a normal, settled family sure sounds nice sometimes. But not many men would want a 'soiled dove' as a wife, I figure. Plus, I'm pretty head-strong and set in my ways. But look at you, Ellie...you're only thirty and ya still got your looks! If I was you, I'd get hitched again and have some more kids. If the opportunity presents itself, that is."

 Luckily, they saw no prowling Mescaleros during their eight-day journey. When they finally viewed it, Ruidoso was a welcome sight -- a town at a 7000' elevation, larger than the others they had passed through so far. They stabled their leased rig, checked into the better of the town's two hotels, took welcomed hot baths, sent out their laundry, and ate a deluxe chicken dinner in the hotel's fancy dining room. "Sure beats jackrabbit, beans, and beef jerky!" Hannah proclaimed, as she greedily ordered extra helpings. She even finished off half an apple pie for dessert by herself, stifling a belch when done.

 The next day, refreshed and newly alert, they sought out the possible whereabouts of a certain Mr. Yancy Bonner. "Dear God, please let him still be here," Ellie silently prayed. "We have come so far and waited so long."

 Hannah went right to work -- inquiring, coaxing, flirting, promising -- in each saloon, asking about and looking for the sinister fugitive. Finally, at the Kingdom Come Saloon, she spotted her prey. The grizzled drifter had the tell-tale scar, but his mangled ear was hidden. Hannah went out to tell Ellie, and insisted she come back inside with her to help identify something uniquely telling: a shiny copper ring on the pinkie finger of Yancy's right hand. Was it murdered Luke Prager's stolen wedding ring?

 Ellie, however, was hesitant. "Maybe we should find the sheriff first, Hannah, and let him deal with this," she said in an unsure voice. "It could be safer, and I don't want either of us to get hurt."

 But Hannah Loffner was convinced that there was no time to lose. She had another plan. "The slimy polecat might take off, or start shooting at any time if he senses danger...so instead, I'll lure him outside. You can make note of the ring and ask him where he got it. While he's distracted talking with you, I'll creep over to our wagon and quietly grab one of our rifles. Then I'll keep him covered while you yell for help and some bystander runs to get the sheriff."

 Ellie Prager agreed that it was a good plan, and thought it just might work. Hannah went back inside the Kingdom Come, saddled up to the bar, and ordered a whiskey. The place was crowded, smoky and noisy. She worked her way slowly down the line until she was next to Yancy Bonner.

 He smelled like horse shit. His hair was greasy and his teeth were yellow and decaying, with some missing. On his belt, a fringed leather sheath held a large hunting knife. He was of average height, but his age was hard to gauge under all the layers of grime and filth. He was wearing a buffalo skin coat for the cold weather, and he kept his weather-beaten hat on.

 "Well, lonesome, ever poke a big red-headed gal?" Hannah inquired sweetly. "They call me Hannah the Heifer. I can squeeze your johnson six ways from Sunday. You've never had it the way I can do it, and I guarantee you'll never forget it! Now's your chance. Got a five dollar gold piece? How about it, Big Boy...you man enough to ride me?"

 Surprised at being addressed, Yancy stared at Hannah with blood-shot, pale blue eyes. He looked Hannah up and down, his expression marveling. "Hell, you're big enough to be two women together! Five dollars you say? Sure I say, why not? Where's your crib, Red?" His breath was rotten and stank.

 "We'll go right outside and down the street, Sugar...but say, ain't it polite to remove your hat when speaking to a lady?" Hannah asked sweetly.

 Caught off-guard, Yancy immediately reacted and took off his hat. "Oh, sorry, Miss," he muttered. And when his long hair was briefly pushed back, Hannah caught a glimpse of his left ear with its missing top portion. This was indeed the terrible robber-killer of Luke and Little Luke!

 Bonner put his hat back on as he followed Hannah outside. Ellie was waiting nearby, and walked up to the man. She inwardly mustered all of her courage, then said to the culprit, "Say, mister...pardon me, but I happen to notice that shiny copper ring of yours. My poor husband had one just like it. But somebody killed him for it, and the same person took all our life savings. Our adobe was robbed in the middle of the night last July, down south in Mesilla. My eight-year-old boy was stabbed to death too, and I was clubbed in the head and left for dead. So mister, I'm asking you straight up -- do you know anything about this? And exactly where did you get that ring?"

 While Ellie was distracting Yancy, Hannah moved slowly sideways and slipped a rifle out of their wagon.

 "You be Yancy Bonner, I reckon, Hannah shouted. "This woman's husband cut off a piece of your ear in the struggle you had back then, when you was robbin' and killin' her innocent family." She cocked the rifle. "Now you hold it right there while we get the sheriff. We aim to see you're given a fair trial, but then you're gonna get a proper hangin' -- you cheap, miserable, murdering bastard!"

 Bonner, however, had a different idea. He pulled a mostly hidden short-barreled shotgun out from under his long, thick buffalo skin coat and blasted Hannah twice before she could fire with her rifle. The killer had earlier removed the gun's bird shot/pellet cartridges and instead had carefully hand-packed his shells with assorted pieces of heavier metal for maximum killing power. Hannah went backward, spun, then went down after the gun's double roar. Yancy then tossed the spent shotgun to the ground, and went for his revolver. He drew it and pointed it at Ellie, who was unarmed. "I should have finished you off too when I bashed your head, you bitch" he snarled. "Now you can join your husband and your brat of a boy!" He cocked his Colt, his pale blue eyes intent on still more killing. In the background, bundled up Ruidoso townsfolk began filing out into the street in the cold, bitter air to see what had caused such loud gun blasts.

 But just before Bonner could fire, a badly wounded and bleeding Hannah had turned over and grabbed a four-barrel pepperbox pistol -- which she always carried, secreted in one of her boots -- and let an unaware Yancy have all four revolving shots. Three bullets found his head, his throat, and his belly, but the fourth missed and went wide. The outlaw went down hard and never moved again, his blood oozing out.

 Ellie ran over to her dying friend -- the best friend she ever had -- and frantically pleaded, "Oh, Hannah! Please don't die! Somebody get a doctor!" she yelled. "Help us!"

 "Damn, it hurts, Ellie...but it's no use. I'm finished. At least we got the skunk, and you're still O.K." she whispered. "Please don't forget me, my dear sweet friend. And don't forget to get married again if the right man comes along. I sure he will someday. Have some more kids too...and if you ever have a baby girl...do me a favor...name her Hannah...for me..."

 Ellie promised that she would, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh, Hannah..." she moaned. "No, no..."

 Hannah smiled one last time as Ellie held her friend's large pink hand to her heart. Then the colossal red-haired woman groaned and exhaled her last breath, and closed her sparkling green eyes, which were once filled with such vibrancy and life...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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