

Though Mountains
FALL



DALE
CRAMER



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For Ma and Pa

Books by Dale Cramer

Sutter's Cross

Bad Ground

Levi's Will

Summer of Light

THE DAUGHTERS OF CALEB BENDER

Paradise Valley

The Captive Heart

Though Mountains Fall



THE FAMILY OF CALEB AND MARTHA BENDER
SPRING, 1925

- ADA, 30 *Unmarried; mentally challenged*
- MARY, 27 *Husband, Ezra Raber (children: Samuel, 8;
Paul, 7; twins Amanda & Amos, 2)*
- LIZZIE, 26 *In Ohio with husband, Andy Shetler (5 children)*
- AMOS & *Twins, deceased*
AARON
- EMMA, 23 *Husband, Levi Mullet (children: Mose, 3;
Clara, 2; Will, 1)*
- MIRIAM, 22
- HARVEY, 21
- RACHEL, 19
- LEAH, 17
- BARBARA, 15



Chapter 1

Caleb Bender spent the day riding a mule-drawn planter, putting down row after row of seeds, and there was nothing in the world he loved quite the same way. Like any Amish farmer Caleb was deeply attuned to the seasons and found a unique joy in each of them, but springtime was his favorite. It was a time of awakening, a time when he could feel the promise of *Gott* in the earth and a sense of divine purpose in the sinews of his callused hands. A time of hope. Planting a field was a prayer, an act of purest faith.

Stopping at the end of a row Caleb took off his wide-brimmed hat, wiped his bald head with a shirtsleeve and took a moment to survey his valley, a five-thousand-acre oval of prime pasture high up in the Sierra Madres of northeast Mexico. The valley wasn't entirely his, but he took a kind of proprietary pride in it because he and his family had been the first to come here three years ago, in the spring of 1922.

It was the kind of spectacular day that only happened a few times each spring, a sky so deep blue it was almost painful, a light breeze blowing, a little chilly in the morning yet warming in the

afternoon. The shadow of a hawk passed over him, cruising on the wind, drawing Caleb's gaze to the western mountains where he'd been standing when he first set eyes on Paradise Valley. He felt it even now, the thrill of hope in that first vision. It really did look like paradise, lush green bottomland bracketed by long, low ridges on the north and south. Caleb and his family were pioneers of sorts—advance scouts for a new settlement. They had dug themselves into the valley, shaping earth and straw into bricks and building houses with their bare hands. Even their barns and buggy sheds were finished by the time the Hershbergers and Shrocks came the following year.

The main group arrived last summer, and a big industrious colony of Amish all pitched in, making adobe, cutting timber, erecting houses and barns. More families arrived, and now there were ten homes scattered along the base of the ridges on both sides of the valley, new tin roofs gleaming in the afternoon sun, smoke trailing peacefully from chimneys as wives and daughters cooked dinner. There were new barns and fences to corral the livestock, and everywhere he looked Caleb saw bearded men in flat-brimmed hats and suspenders working teams of sturdy horses, plowing and planting fields. In the coming weeks the industry of ten Amish families would turn Paradise Valley into a quilt of bright green from one end to the other.

Across his lane, in the field down nearest the main road, his son Harvey and a team of four huge Belgian draft horses pulled a wide harrow, the long row of steel disks shiny from use, smoothing fresh-plowed earth. At nineteen, Harvey was his only son now. There had once been two boys older than Harvey, twins, but Amos fell victim to the flu epidemic of 1918, and Aaron died last August on the road back from Agua Nueva at the hands of the bandit El Pantera. His death was a crippling blow to Caleb, and a pall hung over the entire family still.

Along the far edge of the same field where Harvey was plowing, Domingo Zapara rode behind another corn planter just like the one Caleb was driving. A Mexican native, half mestizo and half Nahua, Domingo was a striking figure, tall and proud. He wore his black hair long and loose, hanging past his shoulders under a wide-brimmed Amish hat that once belonged to Caleb. Even the hat had a heroic story behind it.

More than just a trusted hired hand, Domingo had become almost like a son to him. Reared by his father to be a Nahua warrior, Domingo wouldn't hesitate to put his own life in danger to protect Caleb's family from bandits. Late last summer, after the confrontation in which Aaron was killed, it was Domingo who, along with Jake Weaver, tracked El Pantera north to his stronghold at Diablo Canyon and rescued Rachel, Caleb's nineteen-year-old daughter. It was a debt Caleb knew he could never repay.

Domingo's planter stopped halfway down a row and he craned his neck. He appeared to be watching something in the road behind Caleb, and when he climbed off the seat of the planter and started trotting across the field toward the driveway Caleb looked over his shoulder to see what was happening.

A solitary rider approached from the west on a painted pony, cantering along in no particular hurry and not looking like much of a threat. His sombrero hung behind his neck and there was a bandolier of bullets bouncing against his chest. A bandit.

As the rider slowed and turned in, Caleb climbed off his planter and met Domingo at the lane. The two of them stood shoulder to shoulder, watching, waiting.

"I know this one," Domingo said. "Alvarez. He rides with El Pantera, but my father trusted him."

"I know him, too," Caleb said. "He has been here before."

The bandit stopped his horse in front of them and dismounted. He was a dark, leather-faced man with a huge mustache

and a thick head of coal black hair. The butts of two cross-draw pistols peeked out the front of his jacket.

“*Hola, Domingo!*” he said, thumping Domingo’s chest like an old friend. “You have become a *man* since I saw you last! It has been a long time, my young friend.”

“*Sí, Alvarez.*” Domingo nodded. “The last time we met was before my father fell at Zacatecas.” His hand drew the sign of the cross on his chest as he said this, and Caleb made a mental note of it. It was the first time he had ever seen his young friend use any kind of Christian gesture.

“A good man,” the bandit said solemnly. He then looked at Caleb and added, “Perhaps you do not remember, *señor*, but I have been here before.”

“*Sí*, I thought you looked familiar. You are welcome to water your horse, and if you’re hungry—”

“*Gracias*, but no. I will let the horse drink, and then I must be on my way.”

As the three of them walked up toward the trough by the windmill the bandit said, “It is no accident that I stopped here today. I bring news, and it concerns both of you.”

Domingo eyed him cautiously. “News of El Pantera?” It seemed to Caleb that Domingo always knew what was coming.

Alvarez nodded. “Two days ago I stopped for the night in Diablo Canyon. The men in the bunkhouse were full of talk about a young whelp who turned back El Pantera and five of his best men in the pass at El Ojo.” He grinned at Domingo, and his fingers curled into a fist as he added, “It seems the blood of Ehekatl flows *strong* in his son’s veins.”

Domingo shrugged. “It was a narrow pass. A child could have held it.”

“But a child would not have broken half the bones in El Pantera’s body, would he?”

“So El Pantera is still alive?” Locked in a fight to the death, Domingo and the bandit leader had fallen together from a cliff. The fall had nearly killed Domingo, but the fate of El Pantera remained a mystery. Until now.

“Sí, he lives,” the bandit said, “but he is not the same man. His left arm was so badly shattered he has lost the use of the hand, and he has only recently begun to ride a horse again. They say he is half crazy with rage, and he swears revenge.”

“Against me?”

Alvarez glanced at Caleb. “Sí. And against your friends, too. There are already twenty men in his camp, and more are coming. He wanted me to stay, but I told him I had to go to San Luis Potosi for my brother’s wedding.” A casual shrug. “I don’t have a brother. I only came here to warn you.”

Caleb couldn’t resist asking. “Why?”

The bandit’s eyes smiled, though his mouth was completely hidden behind his mustache. “Because Domingo’s father was my friend, and because you treated me and my men with respect, señor. You gave us bread, watered our horses and talked to us like men, so I wanted to warn you of the storm that is brewing. If I were you I would flee. And say nothing of this meeting. . . . If El Pantera learns I was here, he will kill my whole family.”

“This is bad news indeed,” Caleb said. “When do you think he will come?”

“I’m not sure. It will be a little while before he is strong enough to ride so far, but he *will* come. Three weeks, maybe four—that would be my guess.”

“Well, there’s not much left for him to steal. With all the newcomers, our winter stores are almost gone.”

The bandit shook his head grimly. “You misunderstand me, Señor Bender. El Pantera is not coming here to steal. He is coming to burn and to kill.”



Before sundown Miriam went to the barn to do her chores. With her dark complexion and raven hair, Caleb's daughter could have passed for a Mexican if it weren't for the Amish dress and prayer *kapp*. As she dipped a bucket into the feed bin she saw the shadow of someone behind her and spun around, surprised.

Domingo drew her against him and kissed her. Miriam let herself melt into him and kissed him back.

Holding her in his strong arms, he brushed aside a wisp of hair that had escaped her starched white prayer *kapp* and gazed into her eyes.

"Your mother is doing much better these days," he said softly.

To anyone else it might have seemed an odd thing to say under the circumstances, but Miriam knew what he meant. Mamm had been thrown into a state of mental confusion and despair by Aaron's murder last summer, along with the kidnapping of Rachel and a diphtheria outbreak that claimed the lives of four children in the Paradise Valley colony. And then Miriam disappeared for ten days while she and Kyra tended Domingo's wounds at the abandoned silver mine in Parrot Pass. It was there, alone in a veritable Eden, that Domingo asked Miriam to be his wife. After long deliberation she accepted, on two conditions: he would have to wait, and their betrothal would have to remain secret, for it would have broken her mother. For the last six months Mamm's fragile mental state was the only thing preventing them from being married.

"*Jah*, it has been more than half a year," Miriam answered, meeting his eyes. "Christmas was hard for her with Aaron gone, but since then she has grown stronger, more like her old self. Just this morning she was helping me gather eggs when she slipped and fell. Now, you know what the floor of the chicken coop is

like. She soiled her dress, her hands, her kapp, but, Domingo, she was *laughing*. While I was helping her up she laughed like a schoolgirl. It did my heart good.” Laying her head against his chest, hearing his strong heartbeat, she said softly, “Perhaps it is time for us to be married.”

He nodded. “I must talk to your father first. I have too much respect for Señor Bender to do this behind his back. Everything will change for you now, *Cualneiqui*. Are you sure you want to go ahead?”

Tightening her arms about his waist, she said, “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I am *yours*, Domingo. I am forever yours.”

There was a faint crunching of straw behind Domingo and the shadows deepened. Miriam stepped back hastily and looked around him.

Her sister Rachel stood in the big barn door, the westering sun slanting through, backlighting the red hair along her neck, at the base of her kapp. Rachel’s hands covered her mouth and tears welled in her eyes.

“How long have you been standing there?” Miriam asked.

“Long enough.” Rachel’s eyes flitted back and forth between them. “Miriam . . . you and Domingo are going to *marry*?”

Miriam nodded slowly, moving toward her younger sister, reaching to her.

But Rachel stepped back, keeping her distance.

“How could you not tell me this, Miriam? How could you keep a secret like this? From *me*!”

Miriam shrugged an apology, shaking her head. “Rachel, among the Amish, wedding plans are *always* secret.”

“But this is not an Amish wedding!” Rachel cried, glancing at Domingo. “If you marry an outsider it will break our mother’s heart! You will be banned, an outcast in your own family. I know

how you feel about Domingo, but Miriam, have you considered the consequences?"

"Of course I have—carefully, and with great sorrow," Miriam answered softly. "I know what lies before me if I take this path, but I am twenty-two years old and I know my own heart, my own mind." She put a palm against Domingo's chest and smiled confidently into his eyes. "Gott has brought us together, and though I know our path will be filled with trials, it is *our* path, and together we can face anything."

Rachel was silent for a second. The words that spilled out of her next came quietly but with an unmistakable undercurrent of threat.

"What would Dat say if he knew?"

Miriam was stunned into silence. Before she could find her tongue, Domingo said, "Your father will not know until I choose to tell him." He didn't return Miriam's puzzled glance. His black eyes were locked on Rachel. "Everyone has secrets. Now that you know ours, I think you would do well to keep it."

Rachel stared at him a moment longer, then nodded meekly as her eyes dropped away from him. Without another word, she turned and walked softly out of the barn.

Baffled, Miriam asked, "What was *that* about?"

Domingo shook his head, still staring after Rachel. "You will have to ask your sister. I cannot say."

She knew that tone of voice. There was a point of honor here, somewhere. "Cannot? Or *will* not?"

He shrugged. "For me, one is the same as the other."

Domingo saddled his horse and went home for the day, and a few minutes later Rachel came back into the barn. No matter what else happened, the cows still had to be milked.

Sitting on a three-legged stool Miriam glanced around at her

younger sister, wondering what was going through Rachel's mind. She refused to speak, wouldn't even look at Miriam, and yet her eyes betrayed more sorrow than anger. It was puzzling. They were completely alone; why didn't Rachel just speak her mind? They had always been so close, slept in the same bed together all their lives and shared secrets. Now it seemed an impenetrable barrier stood between them, and it broke Miriam's heart.

"Rachel."

No answer. Not even a look.

"Rachel, I'm sorry."

Still no answer, just the steady *rip rip rip* of milk in the pail.

"Rachel, I'm so sorry about keeping this a secret from you. It was just . . . this was a decision I had to make alone, out of my own heart and no one else's. I found a pearl of great price, and I had to decide whether to sacrifice everything for it. The burden was mine alone. There was nothing you could do, and I didn't want to be swayed. Can you understand that?"

Rachel was silent for a long time, but then she took a deep breath and said, "Jah. I know what it is to carry a burden you can't share."

She still wouldn't look at Miriam, but the lines of pain and sorrow etched themselves even deeper in her face and the anger left her entirely. Could it be that something *else* was bothering her? Was it possible Rachel bore a secret of her own—something as earth-shattering as Miriam's secret? Domingo's words came back to her now.

"You will have to ask your sister."

"Rachel, if you have something you want to tell me, you know it is safe with me. You can tell me anything. It couldn't possibly be any worse than—"

"Oh, it can be worse," Rachel said. "A *lot* worse. You have no idea."

Miriam's hands stopped milking and she looked around at Rachel. The cow shuffled its feet and let out a soft *moo*. Worse than marrying an outsider? Only one thing sprang to her mind.

"Rachel, you and Jake aren't . . . in *trouble*, are you?" Jake was *the one*, the love of Rachel's life.

"No," Rachel said, instantly and firmly. "I'm not, anyway."

"So . . . Jake has done something?"

Rachel was silent for so long Miriam wasn't sure she'd heard the question, but at last she spoke, very quietly.

"He killed a man."

Miriam recoiled, nearly falling backward from her stool.

"He did *what*?"

Rachel came and knelt beside her, gripping her arm with both hands, her eyes full of tears. Words spilled out of her, mingled with a great long sob.

"Remember I told you about the bandit who came to me in the middle of the night when I was chained in El Pantera's barn, and Jake pulled him off of me before he could do anything?"

Miriam's head backed away, her eyes wide. "Jah?"

"Jake strangled him with his handcuff chain. The bandit was *dead*, Miriam."

Miriam's hand covered her mouth, shaking. "Oh, my stars! Poor Jake! What must he be going through?"

But Rachel shook her head and pulled away, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"He doesn't know. We lied to him, Domingo and me. We both knew the guard was dead, but we told Jake he lived. Jake doesn't know."

"Rachel, you must tell him. His *soul* is in danger."

Rachel's face contorted as she looked up at Miriam and cried, "I can't! They'll send him to Ohio to face the bishop, and then his father will never let him come back. *I'll never see him again!*"

Rachel's future husband, or his soul. An unthinkable choice, perhaps even more difficult than the one Miriam had made. There was nothing she could say. She could understand why Rachel might keep such a burden to herself. It was her choice to make, alone.

Just like her own.

As the sun kissed the western hills Miriam wrapped her arms around Rachel's shoulders. In the dim twilight of an adobe barn in the mountains of Mexico two sisters huddled together against the world, and wept.



Chapter 2

Sitting among a hundred Amish on the second level of her father's barn for church services that Sunday, Miriam felt the kinship of her people more acutely than ever, for she felt the nearness of its loss. Despite a cool morning breeze they flung the doors wide to let in the sunlight while they sang songs from the *Ausbund*, the ancient traditional hymns that welded them together. Caleb gave a short devotional and then read a prayer of thanks from the prayer book. Miriam knew why he chose that particular prayer. Despite grievous losses, her father was indeed grateful for good weather, good neighbors, and for the calm that had reigned over the last six months. There had been no more outbreaks of diphtheria, and the bandits had stayed away. But before he closed the prayer he added his own plea for Gott to send a bishop to Paradise Valley.

This, too, Miriam understood. Everyone knew that without leadership their blossoming community would wither and die. She had already witnessed little differences of opinion over length of hair and width of hat brim, not to mention that the Yutzys, who came from a more liberal district in Geauga County,

wore buttons on their clothes. A bishop would work with the men to resolve such differences and restore unity—to a point. Experience had taught her that perfect unity among so many human beings, each with his own needs and wants and fears and opinions, was elusive.

She bowed her head and uttered a prayer of her own for peace and patience. Soon now she would marry Domingo, and the ban would follow as surely as night follows day. She could already envision the hurt in her mother's eyes, feel the pain of separation from her sisters. From that day forward she would never be allowed to eat at her family's table, nor would any of them accept a gift from her hand. The ban was no illusion. It was a concrete reality she would have to endure for the rest of her life.

After her father's long prayer everyone stood while John Hershberger read a chapter from the Heilige Schrift, and then sat through a brief message delivered by Roman Miller. Roman was no preacher, but in the absence of a minister the men often shared the duty and did the best they could. This was followed by the testimonies of men who had brought their families to Mexico to be free.

Through it all, Miriam stole glances at the men sitting across from her. Micah Shrock, the strapping son of Ira and Esther, sat on the back row with the other boys, behind the married men, and when she glanced at him he didn't look back. Micah avoided eye contact with her these days, and never spoke to her at all if he could help it. They'd been engaged to be married, until Miriam put on the clothes of a Mexican peasant and went with Kyra into the mountains to look for Domingo. Micah had put his foot down, given her an ultimatum.

She went anyway. Micah wasn't the only one who wouldn't forgive her for that.

Next to Micah sat Jake Weaver, the love of Rachel's life, always smiling, good-natured and affable, completely unaware that he was a murderer in danger of hell's fires. Directly in front of Jake was the self-righteous Levi Mullet, Miriam's brother-in-law. He and Emma had rushed into a marriage just before leaving for Mexico to hide the fact that their first child was already on the way. They'd gotten away with it, or so they thought, but there was always a hint of fear in his eyes, for he had been raised to believe that no sin would ever go unpunished in this world. He lived in constant fear of Gott's reprisal.

Atlee Hostetler, the wiry little newcomer, sat ramrod straight on the backless bench trying to stay awake, bleary-eyed from staying up too late drinking hard cider. He'd come to Mexico to escape the whispers about his binges, but the rumors had followed him.

Miriam didn't know them all, though she suspected that every single person present harbored secret desires and secret fears they held closer than kin—secrets that would always keep them at arms' length from each other.

The service ended as it began, with a song. The richly timbered chorus of voices melding in her father's barn moved Miriam more than anything that went before it, for in the comfort of that moment she discovered a small but profound truth: her people were never more purely and perfectly united than when they sang together, as one.



Paradise Valley enjoyed mild temperatures year-round, and a fair amount of rain during the growing season. Surrounded by ridges and mountains on three sides, they were sheltered from all but the worst of storms and wind. But Caleb Bender knew, perhaps better than anyone, that the worst storms didn't come from the western skies.

They came on horseback.

After lunch Caleb strolled down his lane to join a group of men who were already there, waiting. He had spread the word earlier that he wanted to talk to the men in private, away from the women and children, about a matter of great concern. Only the married men were there, the heads of households. The women and unmarried boys had no say.

Atlee Hostetler had a coal black beard that came to a point, and he stroked it as he looked up and down Caleb's driveway at the row of saplings just starting to bud.

"You planted a lot of trees here, Caleb."

It was Levi who answered him. "Jah, my Emma did that. She loves trees. Planted them all over. There's even maples up on that ridge. Don't know as they'll thrive in this climate, though."

Caleb chuckled. "They'll thrive if they know what's good for them. That daughter of mine won't have a shirker. If all her trees live, in twenty years they'll change the face of this valley, that's for sure. Won't be the same place." Then his smile disappeared as he kicked at the dirt, dreading what he had to say next. "I'm not real sure we'll be here in twenty years yet. That's why I wanted to talk to you men—" he glanced over his shoulder toward the house, where a clutch of younger girls were tending the babies while the women cleaned up from lunch—"out here where the women can't hear. We got a decision to make. You all remember what happened last summer."

Mahlon Yutzy's face darkened. "The diphtheria?" Mahlon's twelve-year-old son, William, had died of the disease. Three of the five new families had lost a child in the epidemic within weeks of their arrival.

"Well, that too," Caleb said, "but I'm thinking the threat of disease is behind us. Mainly I was talking about the bandits—the ones who took Rachel . . . and killed Aaron."

Even now it was hard to make himself say the words. The wound was still too fresh. Caleb chewed on his lip for a moment, staring at the horizon, composing himself, and the other men exchanged worried glances.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and his old friend John Hershberger said softly, “What *about* the bandits, Caleb? Is there news?”

Before he could answer Caleb heard hoofbeats in the drive behind him. Domingo trotted up to the group and swung down from the saddle with a wince. After six months he still limped a little from the broken leg he suffered at El Ojo. He led his horse up to the group.

“*Guten tag*,” the young native said, reaching out to shake hands. One by one they shook his hand and switched from Dutch to High German.

“I still can’t get used to hearing German from a Mexican!” Atlee Hostetler said, the dialect causing him to struggle a bit himself. It was different from Pennsylvania Dutch, but they all understood it because it was the language of their Bible.

Domingo shrugged, smiled. “My German was a gift from a former employer,” he said. “It’s not perfect, but I figured it was better than your Spanish.”

Their hats all tilted down, hiding their faces as they laughed quietly at themselves. “You figured right,” Yutzy chuckled, then pointed at Domingo’s Amish hat. “If not for the poncho I would have took you for Dutch—riding a standard-bred horse and wearing an Amish hat.”

Domingo nodded toward Caleb. “The horse and the hat were both gifts from my *current* employer.”

“There *is* news,” Caleb said, answering John’s question and steering the conversation back toward his original purpose. “That’s why I asked Domingo to come. He knows some of the bandits, and sometimes his friends tell him things.”

The whole group ambled slowly down the driveway toward the middle of the valley while Domingo told them what he and Caleb already knew: El Pantera was still alive, and looking for revenge.

“He will come soon,” Domingo said. “And he will bring an army. Thirty, maybe forty men, with guns. This time he will come for blood.”

“It’s just not right,” Levi said. “We have done nothing to this man.”

“We have done plenty,” Domingo answered. “El Pantera is a proud man. Jake Weaver embarrassed him in front of his men, then we escaped from his barn and took Rachel with us. In the bandit’s mind Rachel was his property—he had stolen her fair and square. Worst of all, El Pantera was badly injured in the fight at El Ojo, and that was *after* I shot his prize Appaloosa and two of his men. Mark my words, he will come for his revenge.”

Mahlon Yutzy shook his head. “There is nothing we can do against an army. They will slaughter us like chickens.”

“That’s why we needed to talk,” Caleb said. “Our lives might be in danger, and the lives of our wives and children. Maybe the Coblentzes did the right thing, going home.” He didn’t want to be the one to suggest it, but he would not withhold the truth.

They all knew the story. Freeman and Hannah Coblentz had packed up and gone back to Ohio, leaving behind a half-built house after their little girl died of diphtheria. Cora, their eldest daughter, was being courted by Aaron and was devastated by his loss. All of it together was more than Hannah could bear.

“There are still things you can do to protect yourselves,” Domingo said. “Don Louis Alejandro Hidalgo, the owner of

Hacienda El Prado, keeps a cadre of armed guards at the *hacienda*, three miles from here. He has said that if you can get your families behind his walls you will be protected. Anyway, there is time to prepare. My friend said it might be a month before El Pantera is well enough to ride this far, let alone fight.”

“But what if we’re in the fields working when they come?” Levi said. “They would be on us before we could get our families out.”

“If you post sentries in the high places they can see the bandits coming ten miles away,” Domingo said. “That would buy you a little time.”

“Jah, and then what? He could still burn our houses and barns, and what will stop him from coming again and again? Will we live our whole lives at the mercy of this animal? The Coblentzes were smart, if you ask me. Maybe we should *all* go back—to a more civilized country.”

Caleb nodded gravely. “We are faced with a hard choice. We must decide whether to go or stay. If we stay, we must find a way to keep our families safe.”

“But we can’t leave now!” Noah Byler said. “We sold everything we have to come to this place, and my son is buried in this earth. Caleb, all we want to do is live in peace. Is there no law in this country? Does no one protect the innocent?”

Caleb looked him in the eye. “Only Gott,” he said quietly.

They walked a ways in silence, each of them weighing the question in his own mind, but in the end Caleb knew they would all look to him for an answer. He was the oldest and had been here the longest. He was also the only one whose child had died at the hands of the bandits.

It was John Hershberger who finally asked, “What do you think, Caleb? Should we give up and go back to Ohio?”

Caleb shook his head slowly. “I won’t tell another man

what he should do, but as for me, I don't want to leave. From the beginning I felt Gott led us here, and that has not changed. Whatever befalls me—and I have already paid a great price—I still think it is Gott's will that I should stay. And if Gott wants us here, then Gott will deliver us. Somehow."

Ira Shrock's face, always red, grew redder as Caleb spoke, until at last he could not keep silent.

"We need to find a way to get troops to come," he said. "These bandits should pay for their crimes. It's not right to let them feast on the innocent. They should *pay!*"

Caleb cleared his throat. "We already tried to get them to send troops, Ira. I practically begged the government official in Monterrey, but he wanted money—a lot of money. More money than we have."

"Hidalgo is rich," Domingo said. "Perhaps you can persuade him to pay for the troops."

They talked at great length, walking the fields of Paradise Valley, but in the end they could see no other choice. They would not take up arms against the bandits themselves, and none of them had the money to bribe the official to send troops to the valley. Most of them had spent their last dime to buy the land. Domingo was right. Their only option was to appeal to Don Hidalgo. After all, he was the one who sold them the land in the first place.

One by one they grudgingly assented, nodding and mumbling among themselves until John Hershberger summed it up for them. "We don't have much choice. If we leave now we lose everything we have. There is no one to buy our farms."

"Then it is decided," Caleb said. "Tomorrow morning I will go talk to Hidalgo and ask him if he will pay the bribe. In the meantime we will trust Gott." With a glance back toward his home he added, "I'll thank you men not to talk about this to

the women. My Martha doesn't need something else to worry about just now."

Domingo raised an eyebrow. "Will you at least put sentries on the heights?"

"Jah," Caleb answered, with a wry smile. "We will trust Gott, and post lookouts."