

Mary Ann Noe  
[www.maryannnoe.com](http://www.maryannnoe.com)

## Juanita Rose

She killed her father.

With a double-barrel shotgun and in cold blood. But, no, not cold blood. Cold reason.

Spring arrived at the farm, the small scrabbly farm way down in southern Illinois, with its one tree out in the field and no shade for the house or barn. An hour by wagon, and a rickety one at that, into town, though she never went. There was nothing there for her. Even her mother told her that.

Her mother. Dead too, and with the same shotgun on the same day. Well, that took her mother far away from the misery of this life, her life ripped from her by her own husband, Minna's father.

Her father. He watched his family wither away, one by one. A baby born dead. A toddler gone from typhoid. Another that never made it to birth at all. The lone boy, crushed in the field by a horse run amok. The dead children took her father's mind with them when they left. He didn't fade away, as some did, mostly women, her mother told her. He fed a rage like feeding a winter fire. When the fire overtook him, he beat her mother. More and more often, over the years it took Minna to grow from seven to seventeen.

In that seventeenth year, come a warm spring, her father's fire burned white hot. Minna was out back, hanging laundry. Something her mother said—Minna heard the soft sibilance of

her mother's voice, though she didn't know what was said—provided the kerosene that turned the fire into a conflagration.

Minna heard the shotgun blast. After a moment of confusion over a gun shot in the house, she knew, without seeing, of the eruption of fire in her father. Fear froze her for a moment. But only a moment. The clothespins, forgotten, spun to the ground. She ran into the house, heedless of her own safety.

Her father stood over her mother, lying bloody before the kitchen stove. The tableau showed the laundry tub on the floor, still steaming from hot wash water. And the cold-water tub for rinsing. And the lye soap sitting in a wet puddle on the slab of kitchen table, the table that saw sewing supplies strewn across, meals aplenty, slaughtered meat ready for canning or packaging. And the good soup tureen sitting on top of the pie safe. And her mother, covered with blood, on the floor.

In that split second, that frozen moment, Minna saw the shotgun at her feet, flung away. Her mind was cold, reasoning. This was no longer her father. This was a murderer. Had been a murderer of another sort for many years, murdering her mother in tiny increments with every piercing word, every blow of his hand or fist, every kick of his foot.

No, not in cold blood.

She swept up the shotgun—yes, he taught her well—hurried through the necessary steps. Smooth, correct and careful. She shot him full in the chest, even as his eyes widened at what he saw in her. Then he fell. She was grateful that he fell backwards, not to land over her mother. That would have been the final insult.

She put the gun next to her mother, positioning it so it would look as if he shot her first, then, before she died, she got off the shot that killed him. Then Minna went back to hanging clothes.

Cold reasoning. If she left the house and farm, which she must, of course, then she must leave it in as normal a state as possible. Someone would find them. She didn't dare bury them herself, though she hated the thought of leaving her mother alone, unburied. She would scrub the house of any sign of herself. They, whoever they might be, could wonder at the utter disappearance of this last surviving daughter. There was a daughter, wasn't there? Maybe. Maybe not. It would take days—weeks, if she were lucky—before anyone made their way to the farm. Small loss. People might tch-tch for a bit, but all would fade into gray nothingness soon enough.

She packed her few belongings quickly, along with some household items. She couldn't find her father's handgun, but she took her mother's prayer book, extra shoes, tin cup and plate, some utensils, several knives... Whatever she could fit in for clothes. And food, most of it dried. She almost left some of the canned goods behind, knowing they would be too heavy and cumbersome for a long journey. But she did take some, figuring on eating those first, and throwing away the glass jars.

She slung her duffel over her shoulder and went out, closing the door behind her. On the front porch, she hesitated just long enough to drink in her mother's rose bush growing beside the steps. This would be the memory she carried with her, the wild profusion of blossoms, coddled and cherished by her mother. One deep breath of fragrance, and she stepped off the porch and started down the lane.

She headed north without looking back. The town was the other direction, and she had little idea of what lay ahead. Her mother schooled her well, there alone on the farm, so she knew how to read and write, how to figure, where the rivers and states and big cities lay. She knew where St. Louis was, the big metropolis up the Mississippi. North, then west to the river, that was the way to disappearing, so she laced up her boots tighter, and set out.

She never knew what happened on the farm after that, closing her mind to that chapter of her life. As far as she was concerned, she was newly born that spring day.

How many days? How many days to St. Louis? A week to walk it?

She became Marta, a name from the road. Marta, a smiling woman standing, hands on hips, before a saloon in the one small town she walked into. Marta's Saloon the sign read. She loved the sound of it. She continued right on out the other end of town with nary a pause. She took the name with her.

Now and then, a wagon headed for market, or a visit somewhere, would slow and ask after her. "Hop aboard. We can take you partway." Her story to where that partway was changed with every person. She stole a potato or two, maybe a carrot, anything edible and portable. Never much. Once, she palmed an apple from a brimming basket. When the woman on the front seat of the buckboard turned and told her she was welcome to take an apple, she ducked her head to hide the blush that never materialized. She considered putting the stolen apple back, but thought better of it when she remembered how hungry she could grow. Surely, they wouldn't miss another. She slipped the first into her knapsack after the woman turned back to the road, and tucked into the gifted apple with fervor.

Late on the second day on the road, after a restless night among the brush along the road, she was invited to clamber to the back of a covered wagon, glad to be out of the sun, under the canvas. She heard a clatter of horse hoofs coming up the road behind them. The riders, two of them, pulled up even with the driver and his wife. Marta kept out of sight, peeking through a tear in the canvas where they wouldn't see her.

“You folks seen a man along here, lookin’ like he’s runnin’ like hell?” The head rider tipped his hat. “Sorry, ma’am. Down south, back there inland, someone broke into a farmhouse and killed the whole family.”

Marta sank farther back into the shadows. As much as she tried, she couldn't control her trembling. She was afraid they'd hear her teeth chattering.

“The whole family?” her driver said, clucking. “What’s this world coming to? What did they take?”

“W-a-all, not sure anything. In fact,” the rider lowered his voice, “looks to be a murder, maybe two. Wife and husband both shot. Shotgun still sittin’ there. The family warn’t seen much. The woman never went into town. Husband did all the town shoppin’ and such.”

Marta gasped, but no one heard. She stuffed a shirt sleeve in her mouth to keep herself from crying out.

The wife leaned out across her husband. “Whole family killed? Children too?” Marta saw the horrified look on her face.

“No, ma’am. No children. A few folk thought there might be a daughter, but most others said, no, they’d heard all the children born to them died from one thing or another. Nothing suspicious, though.”

Marta squeezed her eyes shut and forced away the ghost of her bloody mother. But silent tears leaked out, in spite of her efforts.

“How awful,” the wife said. “We haven’t seen anybody like you’re looking for, have we Augie.”

Augie shook his head. “Nope. You sure it was just one man?”

“Nope. Might be that one of ‘em shot the other, then the other was alive long enough to kill the first. That seems to be what the sheriff thinks, anyway. But could be the intruder killed both of ‘em, then took off.” He shook his head. “Don’t seem likely to me, that last one, because the gun was right there, left behind. But the sheriff sent a few of us out to see what we could find, if anything.”

“And have you found anything?” Augie’s wife asked.

Marta held her breath.

“No, ma’am, not a thing. We were about to high-tail it for home when we spotted you up ahead. You ain’t seen nothin’ either, so we’re headed home. Sheriff can close this case clean enough anyway, call it double murder or somethin’.” He tipped his hat again. The two men reined their horses around and set off the way they came, raising a considerable dust cloud behind them as they left.

Marta released her shirt sleeve.

The man twisted to look back at her. “You ain’t in any trouble, are ya?” He teased.

His wife laughed and poked her husband. “Augie, don’t pester her. You know she’s off to visit her auntie up river. Little thing like that in trouble? No sir.” She settled herself again.

“Let’s get a move on now. We’ve got a piece to go yet today.”

Though Marta wanted to jump down and run, run, run away as fast as she could, she refrained. Safer to stay where she was, for now.

When the road forked and the couple turned away from the river, Marta asked to be let down. She had to stick to the river if she wanted to reach St. Louis.

In St. Louis, she felt truly lost. She went up from the waterfront at night. A stowaway could not afford to be seen. One blessed night and day on the river was enough to fall in love with water, so busy, so life-giving.

But St. Louis at night, on the river's edge, was not safe. She made her way up the embankment after all went still in the depths of the night. She avoided the drunk sailors sprawled on the bricks, though they were past caring about anything. She saw men who ogled women with low-cut gowns standing in doorways, and slid into the shadows to stay far from them. It was nothing short of a miracle that she ran the gauntlet with relative ease. But then, she was only a small brown mouse, rushing ahead in the dark. Nothing special to attract anyone, or repel either.

She came out along an ill-lit street with warehouses. With little money—what money, after all, did the farm give her family?—she despaired of finding anywhere to lay her head.

That's when the true miracle occurred. Tucked in a small alley, just off the main street, a sign hung out over the cobbles. A small sign, barely visible in the night. Faint light from an upper window was enough to show "Juanita's Rooming House."

Marta tumbled into the alley. Bone-weary, she was too tired to think of how she would pay. Across the way, a deeply recessed doorway beckoned. That building, a warehouse perhaps,

had no windows, no other sign of life. Marta backed into the recess, sat down and drew up her knees. She set her knapsack, significantly lighter now, on her knees and wrapped her arms around her legs. Marta was sure she couldn't sleep in such a position, but hoped only to rest.

When dawn arrived, she was still there, tipped over and curled into a ball in the doorway. She snapped awake when the door opposite, the one to Juanita's Rooming House, opened and a woman stepped out and slung a bucket of water into the alley. Some of the water splashed Marta, the alley was so narrow. Both women shrieked.

The woman opposite dissolved into laughter. "What on earth are you doing there, girl? You nearly gave me apoplexy." She set one hand on her hips, the bucket swinging from the other hand. "Come on over here."

Marta was standing by that time, trying to brush water from her skirt and backside. She didn't move.

The woman set the bucket down inside her doorway and came across to Marta. "Did you spend the whole night out here?"

Marta nodded.

The woman laughed again. "I can understand why you didn't come into the...rooming house. I'm Juanita, by the way. Who are you?"

Marta gulped. She had to trust somebody, sometime. Might as well be this affable woman as any other. "Marta."

"Marta what?" Juanita asked, but Marta stood silent. "Ah-hah. Runaway, are you?"

Marta ducked her head.

"Come on in here, child," Juanita said, taking Marta's elbow and steering her into the rooming house. Juanita closed the door behind them, toeing the bucket to a corner. She led



Marta into a very small front parlor. Small, but clean, and appointed with a couple of chairs and a writing desk across from a fireplace. Simple and homespun. Marta felt the comfort of the place.

Juanita motioned Marta to the window, then took Marta's chin in her hand, turning her face into the morning light. "Hmm. How old are you, child?"

"Twenty," Marta said, without thinking. It was close to true. She would turn eighteen next week.

"Twenty, you say," Juanita said, her head tilted askance. She shrugged. "Well, you are a pretty little thing. I could use a pretty little thing around here." She dropped her hand. "But first. You look hungry."

Marta set her hand on her stomach, but it didn't hide the grumbling. She nodded.

"Don't talk much, do you? Well, that's a good thing, too. Too much talk and not enough...other, gets us no profit. Come on, let's get some food in you. And then a bath and some clean clothes. Lord, girl! It looks like you've been gypsying on the road for too long." She led the way out of the front parlor and to a closed door. She opened the door and ushered Marta through to the back of the house.

Marta thought she died and went to heaven. Here, behind that door, stood an impressive staircase along the left wall. Though it hugged the wall, and didn't swoop the way her mother talked about the staircases in some of the grand houses, it was magnificent. Every spindle was carved with greenery. When it reached the ground floor, the last steps flared out and the newel post burst with vines and flowers, among which peeked little animals. Marta gasped with delight.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Juanita said. “I had it carved in New Orleans and shipped up here.” From one side of a wide archway in the opposite wall, Juanita drew half a pocket door to shut off the view. Before she could pull the other half shut, Marta caught a glimpse of the room behind, a back parlor apparently.

But this parlor was the opposite of the little front parlor. Marta never saw such opulence. A quick look of a blue velvet divan, a shimmering chandelier, a marble fireplace, colored lamps. Even a small piano draped with a fringed shawl, a small...violin?...perched on top.

Juanita smiled and pulled the door across, shutting off the vision. “Later. For now, food.” She led the way through another closed door, back into a kitchen large enough to contain all the usual kitchen things, as well as a long table with eight chairs. A serviceable table, much like the one from the farm. Marta shut that thought away. But here, the chairs all matched.

Marta sat down at the table when Juanita gestured. She knew she wanted to stay with this woman, whoever she was.

Marta found out soon enough who Juanita was, and what her “rooming house” really was. Marta’s mother told her about these places after Father called his wife a “whore, who belongs in one of those cathouses. That’s all you’re good for.” After her mother’s tears subsided, Marta badgered her mother so long that her mother told her, with vitriol and in no uncertain terms, what her father meant. It burned into Marta’s memory.

But Juanita didn’t rush Marta, instead bringing her into the fold slowly. First, clean and give away those awful clothes from the farm. Homespun was fine, but not for back parlor doings, that was clear. She could greet guests in homespun in the tiny front parlor, but not bring them back. That was Juanita’s purview. She could work in the kitchen, baking, cooking,

making coffee and drinks. But not deliver them to that magnificent back parlor, where there was music, smart conversation, and, oftentimes, card games with gambling.

Marta grew comfortable in her role. She made the best teacakes in the house, and even the “girls” begged for them. Juanita often gave in and had Marta make double, some for the men guests and some for the ladies drooling in the kitchen. In turn, the girls doted on Marta, taking turns arranging her soft brown hair into lovely curls or elaborate upsweeps. The men began asking for Miss Marta, in spite of the homespun and cotton apron. Juanita demurred.

That is, until one morning when Salvation, the highest-ranking girl, took Marta into her private bedroom and dressed Marta in her second-best green taffeta frock. Juanita, bustling by the open door, stopped, hearing the girls giggling. Her mouth gaped. “That dress! It does wonders for you.” She winked at Sal. “Maybe it’s time to advance Miss Marta’s education.”

“I’m your best teacher,” Salvation said, putting on a coy look.

Marta smiled. She already knew some of what Sal could teach. After all, she lived on a farm once.

The back parlor became Miss Marta’s world. She learned to play the piano, and accompany Sal on the violin. One of her best points, as Juanita uncovered when Marta first arrived, was as a listener. She kept her own counsel, but was more than willing to listen to those clients whose wives didn’t have the time, or the inclination, to focus on their men. Many nights, she never even had to leave the parlor to go upstairs to the equally sumptuous bedrooms.

Juanita shook her head and smiled at Miss Marta’s ability to satisfy men with conversation and rapt attention—and have them quite willing to pay for the privilege. “They’re just hungry for compassion. Some of them are simply lonely,” Marta told her.

Marta stayed with Juanita, learning not only how to please the clients, but also how to maintain a happy and, of prime importance, a healthy household. Juanita insisted on cleanliness, the house and the bodies. She put the girls to work scrubbing and scraping, dusting and polishing. For themselves too, Juanita demanded clean healthy girls, which took finesse at times. She came to depend on Marta's help and calm demeanor. Juanita's girls remained hard-working, educated, and pristine.

Many girls came from rural areas, hoping to find work in St. Louis. Most did not expect to have to walk the streets or answer to a madam to keep from starving. Juanita was discerning in taking in such waifs. Hers was a respected establishment, well-known only to a small and special class of men. Tucked away as it was, in spite of the sign, clients knew to keep their membership exclusive.

Years flowed one after another. Marta spent more and more time in the back parlor, entertaining with music, scintillating conversation, and sweets. She massaged tension-filled shoulders, and made sympathetic sounds when the men confided in her. Juanita often took Marta with her when she retreated to her private office in the front of the house, teaching Marta how to make sure the books were balanced and the girls taken care of. In all but name, Marta assumed the duties of madam. She had no intention of leaving St. Louis or Juanita.

Until. Until her past caught up with her.

Gunshots and Juanita's scream pulled her running from the front office. By the time Marta reached the back parlor, Juanita's blood was soaking into the Persian carpet. Salvation was frozen in place, standing over another woman, a stranger, stretched out before the fireplace, a neat hole in her left temple, a small handgun on the carpet.

Marta's vision went black for a moment. She was, once again, standing in the farm kitchen, her mother, bloody and dead, at her feet, the shotgun close at hand. She leaped back into herself. Sal stood with Juanita's little gun in her hand. She dropped it, as if it would turn on her and fire, all in the blink of an eye.

"She killed Juanita! She killed—" Sal's voice rose in panic. "I got the gun out of the sewing basket. I know her. In the market. Farmer woman. With her husband. He comes here weekdays. But I never say nothing!"

Marta rushed to Salvation and pulled her toward the door. "Sal, look at me! The girls surely heard the gunshots. They'll be down in a minute. Hide in the kitchen. Join them when they come into the parlor. Leave the rest to me. Now go! And keep your mouth shut!" She pushed Sal out into the hall and closed the door behind her. She stuffed Juanita's gun back in the sewing table where Juanita always kept it.

There was nothing to be done for Juanita or the other woman, a woman Marta herself didn't recognize. That was a small blessing. Marta went into action to press sense on the scene. Would the police have to be involved?

She heard feet hitting the floor upstairs. Rushing to the small writing desk, she snatched a pen and paper. Dipping the pen, she slanted her hand at an odd angle and wrote, "Don't love you no more. Don't follow. Juanita'll take care of me." A signature would only create more problems. She spun back to the woman on the floor and crouched down with her back to the door. That might gain her a second or two as the girls descended. Reaching over the body, Marta pushed the note under the woman's far hand.

Footsteps on the stairs, and voices. Barely time to grab the handgun on the floor and wrap the dead woman's left hand around the grip.

The parlor door flew open and the girls dashed in, stopping short with gasps and moans.

“Don’t touch a thing!” Marta’s voice rang out with authority. She glimpsed Salvation in the midst of the others. Everyone looked horrified. “Stay back.” She got up off the floor. “I was working in the front office when I heard a gunshot. By the time I got into the hallway, there was another. Clearly, this woman—” She gestured behind her. “This woman shot Juanita, then took her own life.” She saw Sal tremble and begin a low keening. One of the other girls put her arms around Sal.

Marta walked around the body of the woman and crouched down. “I think there’s something here in her hand.” She motioned one of the girls over. “See if you can get it out.”

“It’s a note,” the girl said, after carefully extracting it. She wrinkled her nose. “Got blood on it, some.” She read it out loud, and looked up with a shocked look. “The man who wrote this named Juanita! He named her! Madam’s dead because of this stupid man.”

Marta’s tension unwound just a bit. So far, so good. “Salvation, go and get the police. Make sure you bring back that Jack McInnis. He knows us. Rita, you go with her. Yes, go now. We can’t put this off.” This ought to give Sal time to settle herself. “The rest of you, go back upstairs. Sleep together if you wish, but don’t come down until you’re called. The police will want to talk to you. Just tell them the truth. We’ll get through this.”

They did, of course. It was a clear-cut case of a jealous wife, jilted by her husband, and bent on revenge. Sal and Marta shepherded the rest of the girls through the questioning, but, true to his long support of them, Jack McInnis moved everything along quickly. It was a clear case of murder-suicide. By the end of a week, the bodies were gone, the blood scrubbed from the wall where Juanita was shot, and the Persian carpet rolled up and disposed of. Marta moved the other

rug from the front office, and things calmed to normal. Indeed, the brief notoriety seemed to bring in even more customers.

It brought in three new girls from the farms too, hoping to cash in on the popularity, and the reputation, of the house. Salvation took them in, but with little interest in adding new bodies to the stable. They all went through this together, and anyone else felt like outsiders.

Once all was taken care of, Marta fell apart. Two murders, four people dead. Three of them people she cherished. After the farm, Marta thought she pushed the sight of that terrible morning into a trunk and buried it away. But it surfaced upon seeing Juanita and the farm wife sprawled out in that beautiful back room, the room that was Marta's haven, a source of community and friendship. All destroyed in one violent instant. Could she never escape such inhumanity?

The nights became forests of sleeplessness, with wild animals behind every tree. She dreamed of paths clogged with brambles, or, if not alien foliage threatening to strangle her, then mutilated bodies of animals, some of them still alive, writhing in the moonlit path as she ran.

It was time. Marta's nightmares took her back to a place she never wanted to visit again. Father, beloved Mother, and now Juanita, the woman who saved her, gone. All gone. Gone the same way. She could not stay in St. Louis. The past, both distant and near, would consume her.

She called Sal into the front office. "Salvation, you are the madam now. No, don't protest. We both know you are the right one. You know all the ins and outs of this place, and the girls like you. I can't stay. Not anymore. And if I could, I would only be a reminder." They both knew what Marta was saying. "I want to take those three new girls with me. I've already spoken with them, and they are all in agreement. We'll leave in the morning."

Sal nodded. "Where will you go? Do you know?"

Marta shrugged. "I'll know when we get there. I've booked passage for us on a steamboat going up to St. Paul. Or maybe one of the other stops along the way." She set her hands on Sal's shoulders. "We'll be fine." They embraced, and Marta left Sal alone in the office.

Just short of a week later, Marta and her three girls arrived in Prairie du Chien. Or rather, Juanita and her three nieces arrived. Marta took Juanita's name with her when they left St. Louis. She added Rose, conjured by the memory of her mother's rose bush, as a tribute. She told the girls she was not the Juanita of the house's name. They had only shared a name. The girls, wanting only to escape drear and drudge, did not question anything.

As they moved north along the river, Juanita Rose introduced her three "nieces" to fellow passengers and staff, sharing the excitement of taking the girls to meet their grandparents "up North." She refrained from more details. A trader she met on board spoke highly of a small town in Wisconsin, up and east of the Wisconsin River, a town called Woods Portage. "Smack dab in the middle of commerce and all sorts of travel. Good place to settle down, I hear." So, Woods Portage it became, for Aunt Juanita and her three nieces.

The coach stopped in front of the mercantile, a prosperous-looking place. A man came down from the porch to open the coach door for them. "Welcome to Woods Portage, ladies. Juanita Rose? Yes, I thought that might be you. I'm Albert Wood. Got your letter, and made arrangements down at the saloon." He swept his arm to indicate a building down the street a piece. "Nice rooms upstairs, and the best food in town. I've set you up for supper." He drew



Juanita aside, as the others unloaded the luggage. “So, you want to start a...boarding house. That so?” He smiled sideways.

“Yes, Mr. Wood—” Juanita cleared her throat. “A...rooming house.” Juanita cleared her throat in the appropriate spot. She smiled, meeting his gaze directly. “And you discerned this, how?”

Wood laughed. “Ain’t nobody here waiting on a missus and three nieces.” He set his finger next to his nose. “I know everything and everybody around here.”

Juanita joined his laughter. “And? Will this...rooming house meet with your approval, sir?”

“Not just approval. With your establishment coming in, I stand to make a pretty penny for the mercantile and the ferry too. All that traffic will bring in more customers for all of us. I have just the place for you.” He turned to direct some young boys to take the luggage onto the porch of the mercantile. “We’ll take care of those later. Leave the girls here, while you and I amble up to that big ol’ house you came by on your way into town.” He turned to a woman standing in the doorway. “Get these girls some lemonade, woncha please? We’ll be back shortly.”

“Too big,” he told Juanita when they had gone through the house, “and too far from the lake and my ferry. I’m just about finished building a ferry office close by there, with my living quarters up above. That’ll suit me just fine. And I’ve got someone coming from Green Bay next fall to take over my mercantile. Ferry business is getting a mite prosperous to be lording it over two enterprises. Soon as they get here, I’ll move out of the mercantile and into my new building. So, you’re welcome to the house, furniture and all, anytime you want to move in.” He quoted her a price well within reason.

Juanita snapped up Wood's offer. She would be the only such house in town, and the traffic coming to use the ferry, or stock up at the mercantile, was considerable. Wood already furnished the house lavishly for himself, and Juanita knew such surroundings would draw customers. Coupled with her girls, soon to be further trained in the needed arts, and her money saved from years in St. Louis, Juanita knew this was a place to put down roots.

A few months later, she wasn't so sure. A man showed up in the twilight, looking for some fun.

As was usual when the house was not yet open for the evening, Juanita herself answered the knock at the door. When she opened the door, it was hard to tell which one of them was the more astonished. Juanita thought she saw her father standing on the porch. Not the angry father, but the Father before all the deaths, the Father who loved and cherished her, the Father who danced in the kitchen with his wife. She knew it was impossible, of course, but those early memories, all pleasant, couldn't be quashed. The resemblance faded.

For his part, the man said, "Mar—"

Juanita put out a hand to stop him. "I'm the madam of this house. Juanita is my name."

"But, I knowed you from St. Louis. Your name's Ma—"

"You are confusing me with someone else, I'm sure," Juanita said.

"Nope. I *knowed* you. But you ain't the St. Louis Juanita I knew." He was adamant. And he was right.

She did finally recognize him from St. Louis. But she couldn't acknowledge that. Could she? Would he ruin her chances of staying in this town? Expose her for coming from a house where a murder took place? Too many people might think she was responsible. She must divert his attention, along with his intentions, if she could. "You know, you remind me so of my father

as a young man. He was so handsome and bold. He loved me dearly.” That was certainly true, and her only good memory.

The man raised his eyebrows and pressed his mouth tight. “I knowed I seen you in St. Louis a couple few years ago. Juanita’s Rooming House.”

Juanita sighed. The burden of her past was driving her into the ground. She was just so tired of it all. “All right. Yes, I was in St. Louis. I took the name Marta to avoid confusion—”

“With t’other Juanita,” he finished. “Makes sense.”

Juanita hoped it was enough to satisfy him. She needed to make sure. “So, what brings you to Woods Portage?” Could she be more blatant, asking about his motives for coming here? But no, the look on his face when she opened the door told him he had no ulterior motive for asking, for whatever reason. He didn’t know he would see her in this town. That was clear.

She led him into the parlor and seated him on a plush chair. “Let me get you some tea.” Whiskey would’ve fortified her more, but she couldn’t risk that. She shoed the lone girl playing the piano to the kitchen for tea. “So, tell me why you’re here.”

He sat on the edge of his seat. “Tomorrow mornin’, I’m heading out to enlist,” he said. “Uncle Abraham says there’s a war fixin’ to boil over. I want to get in on the action early. Good thing I left the river when I did. No boats runnin’ the Mississippi now.” He shook his head and sank back into the chair, taking the cup of tea offered by the girl. Juanita waved her away, out of the room.

“Well then,” she said, “you just don’t worry yourself. I’ll get you settled with my girls, and you can leave from here in the morning.” It would give her control over where he went and what he said, if he stayed in her house. Go nowhere, say nothing. She set her finger on her lips. “And—”

“Ain’t no need to worry none,” he said. “Ain’t gonna say nothin’. Fresh start up here. No connection with that murder house.” He winked. “I kin understand that, Juanita.”

He left the next morning early, before everyone but Juanita arose. She sent him off complaining that he could well and good pay for services rendered, but she insisted on only a token payment. He returned the good memories of her father, and that was worth something. Those memories could erase the ones...after. Then she could shut the door completely on that part of her life. In spite of everything, she still carried the worry that her past might be just over her shoulder, waiting to pounce. Woods Portage was out of the way, but someone had recognized her.

Before the year was over, a small packet arrived, brought on from the post office at the mercantile by their messenger boy. Juanita thanked him and sent him off, whistling, with a handful of fresh-baked cookies. She went into her private parlor to unwrap the parcel. Out fell a twenty-dollar gold piece. In addition, a small prayer book was within. Inside the front cover, a hand-written letter was addressed to her, Juanita.

“The soldier who owned these items requested these be sent on to you, in case of his death. The money, he said, was for kindness given when he was in Woods Portage on his way to enlist. He died of dysentery before ever seeing battle. With sympathy, I remain, Dr. S. Morton.”

Juanita sank into the nearby rocker. Dead before seeing battle. Juanita felt her past slipping off her shoulders like a heavy cloak. For this man to die was unfortunate. But he was gone, taking everything with him. Why this should be, Juanita couldn’t tell. But she, in addition to feeling sorrow at his loss, felt great relief for herself.

Life could go on. She had roots, deep and sure, here in Woods Portage. She closed her eyes and permitted herself to dream of the future.

THE END