Avariss Girls

A Western Novella

By Maryanne Peters

Chapter 1

Man and horse looked tired – dog tired. Both their heads hung, and the hooves moved slowly along the dusty path that passed for a main street in Avariss, New Mexico Territory. The setting sun cast a long shadow, the shape of his hat outside the stable door when the rider himself was scarcely in town. Avariss is not a big town, or it was not then.

Despite that it had some impressive buildings. There was a bank, and a large municipal building, built in stone, and the church at the far end of the street had a stone foundation.

Still the town was so empty that the shadow of a single rider was enough to draw Manolo Garrido into the street.

“Are you staying the night, Mister?” He avoided using the word *señor*. New Mexico Territory was now part of the United States of America. “I can give you full livery for a quarter dollar a day”.

The rider raised his head. The face was strong, and maybe not so tired after all, but it was the face of a man who had spent a big chunk of his forty odd years, in the saddle.

“How much more for a bed?” he asked.

“That’s next door,” said Manolo “That’s a quarter dollar too. For the standard room.”

He detected enough of a hint of agreement to take the reins, and to stand by as the stranger slowly dismounted, and stretch himself, still holding the pommel. Manolo could see that he wore a gun-belt with a well-oiled holster and a long-barrelled handgun in it. It was worn on the left to be drawn by the right hand, across the body. There was a knife on the right-hand side, a big one.

“I’ll take off the saddle and show you the hotel before I brush down your horse,” said Manolo.

The stranger again agreed, with the slightest of nods. He had saddle bags and a rifle to unbuckle, at dust to tap off his hat, and brush off his jacket.

The hotel had a saloon bar like almost every other west of the Mississippi. A drinking place with an entrance separate to the accommodation, but that was shuttered off. Manolo led him not even to that door but to a back entrance. He called out and the man answering to the name “Bill” appeared, in a white shirt and black apron.

“We have a vacancy,” Bill said. “In fact, we have several rooms available.”

“Just one tonight,” but I will be needing a few rooms next month,” said the stranger following the proprietor through the kitchen and small dining area to the hall and counter.

“Name for the register?” asked Bill

“Vernon Ketchell,” the man said. “Of Topeka Kansas. Now perhaps I could get a drink?”

“Pleased to meet you Mr. Ketchell,” said Bill. “We have a full bar, but it does not get much use these days. Not since the gold ran out. As you can see it is a fine building this. And the Municipal Buildings across the street, and the bank, and the church. A year or so back we were a busy town, built on gold. Now, we ain’t much of anything except what you see. Every other building here was canvas in the back, and so this is what remains. The buildings made of stone from rock the miners moved, and buildings like this, and the rest are just fronts.”

“So, I’m guessing everything is for sale,” said Ketchell surveying the bottles of liquor.

“According to your taste, Sir.”

“No. I mean land in this town.”

“Why of course, Mr Ketchell. Everything has its price.”

“I will have a glass of the Whiskey from Scotland,” he said. He watched it being poured and then took a mouthful before continuing: “I have a commission from a man from out East to look for some land and a town like this. But he would want to buy the whole place.”

“I could arrange that.” Bill Oldfield suddenly had a vision of a large wad of money. Clean green bills, smelling like greed. The money he would need to leave this place, or stay, if it paid.

“And surrounding land too. I would need to look at it.”

“As I say. Everything has its price.”

“My buyer would pay a fair price, but I have to say that there is something missing in this town that I have noticed already. I would not want it to be the reason you could not do a very good deal.”

It seemed like the disappointment Bill had a feeling was coming. He cleared his throat. “What would that be, Sir?”

“Are there any women in this town?”

Bill was crestfallen. He tried hard to think and ending up doing so aloud: “Well Manolo has a wife, Maria. And there are two native girls living with farmers just outside town, and old Mrs. Hamley … “Yep, four. Four women and I guess now less than forty men, with most of them working over at the Kilby Ranch, him being the biggest employer in these partys”.

“My buyer has a thing for women,” said Ketchell after a second gulp. “He thinks that men make a camp, but it needs women to make a town. I guess that he has a point. Do you think you could get some in for when I bring him back. It may be the best investment you could make. If he sees women here I think he might just go for this place.”

“Get some in?” What could he mean? Avariss was miles away from anywhere, and were there girls anywhere, how many would come anyway?

“I could ask around,” said Bill.

Chapter 2

Word had got to Ned Kilby overnight. One of Indians had rode through the night as they often times seem to do, and had mentioned the stranger. It seemed that it might be worth Ned riding into town to see this man, although he would say that he had had left his ranch for other reasons.

He had surplus land he could sell nearer to town, but what he really wanted was a population ready to buy his beef, and a the few crops that the Mexicans grew on the terraces by the river. Gold had been good for local farmers. But that was over. Ned had his eye on the future.

The miners had left one thing that was of value, although even Ned did not fully appreciate it. To scour the gravels in the valley a group of miners had formed a co-operative and had dammed the main river to form Lake Aurum, as they had called it. Ned was a cattle man, and his herd was fed well enough from the rains, and the Mexicans had no ability to draw from the lake in the hills.

Vernon Ketchell had seen the lake. He was no sod-buster himself, but he knew that the barbed wire was coming, and penned cattle need cropped feed. He knew that towns need grain and greens to put food on tables. Riffletown looked promising. He had news to report.

Ned drove the buckboard into town in the morning, and made a point of stopping at the guesthouse for a cup of fresh coffee, but the stranger was gone. He could not hide his disappointment from Bill Oldfield as he walked over.

“I know why you might be here, Ned,” the townsman said to the rancher. “If it about selling this town, then I have a plan, but it is a strange one. You see, the buyer wants there to be an existing community here, and the way I figure it, we have maybe six weeks to build one. Let me get a pot of coffee off the stove for us, and we can start talking.”

Ned took a seat by the window and looked out onto the dusty street and the deserted municipal building and bank. He wondered how the people who had grown rich on gold could have believed that the town would be here forever. A herd can last forever, but once all the gold is dug up, there ain’t no more. But damn, Avariss looked like more than a town – like a small scale city.

Bill poured out to mugs of coffee and sat across from Ned.

“What’s it worth, Bill,” asked Ned. “It is just stone and wood.”

“You’re right,” said Bill. “This buyer wants more. Like I said, he wants a community. He wants people on the street. He wants to see women on the street – couples living in the houses. The church full on Sunday.”

“There’s no one here, in case you haven’t noticed,” said Ned, carefully testing the first sip from his mug. It was not as hot as it should have been.

“We have to make this place look like a town and we have six weeks to do it,” said Bill. “I can get all the people living in town to help, and I have some people from Thompsonville who owe me and will come over, and you have a big crew on your ranch we could borrow.”

“Only one problem with that, Bill. They are all men!”

“But do they have to be, Ned? From a distance maybe, or through a window? We are just putting on a show after all, like the tents behind the timber facades on the other buildings down the street. They don’t have to be female down to the skin, just appear female on the surface.”

“You have to be joking,” said Ned, starting to laugh as the vision came into his head. “Who could possibly turn my cowpokes into ladies? That is the funniest thing I have heard in a long time!”

“I’m serious, Ned!” The rancher could see that he was. “You should be too. Want could be more serious than money, and a lot of it.”

“You said you had a plan and it was a strange one … and it is. So, let’s hear the rest of it.” Ned Kilby wiped the laughter from his eyes and leaned back.

“I talked to Martha Hamley last night,” said Bill. “You remember Martha, the undertaker’s widow?”

“Yep. She is the one who has a coffin for with my name on it, and one for you too I suppose.”

“That is what her husband left her when he died,” said Bill. “He said the town was dying and that the undertaker would be the last to go, which probably explains why she is still here. But you know that she had a side line in selling women’s clothes, right?”

“Stripped from female corpses no doubt,” suggested Ned.

“Or bought from grieving husbands,” said Bill. “She made wigs as well, and I am not going to guess where the hair came from. But for our purposes, she is half of who we need to make ourselves some women of the town.”

“I’m listening,” said Ned. “What’s the other half?”

Chapter 3

The stagecoach had long ceased to have a scheduled visit to Avariss, but the coach company had a backup to the backup, and four horses were found for a special trip to the near ghost town.

The ragged carriage arrived outside Bill’s establishment mid-afternoon and Bill stepped out to greet the new arrivals.

They were three women, dressed in colorful but practical long dresses, buttoned up the collars and with corseted waists. Their hair was arranged neatly, with their hats in hand having just alighted. They looked like just what Avariss needed – well-dressed and proper ladies who might be dressed for church.

The largest and oldest of the three stepped forward to greet Bill.

“William, so good to see you again.” Her voice was deep but as feminine as her manner. Bill accepted her proffered hand and held it, uncertain of what to do. “As you can see, I have brought friends. This is Anna-Louise and Fanny. You will appreciate that not many women in Thompsonville are up to an adventure like this.”

“Thank you for coming, Edith,” said Bill. He decided that he would plant a small kiss on her hand. It seemed to please her greatly.

“We have trunks to be unloaded,” she said. “But first I suggest that we see the scale of the problem as you described it. Let’s see how many women we can find in Avariss.”

Bill led them up the steps onto the porch and into the bar. The bar was full. Young men were sitting and standing. Ned Kilby had laid on a barrel of beer, but had warned all of his hands that they should remain sober for what was to follow. The arrival of the women brought about a hush.

“Could we line them up?” said Edith. “I have to know what I am working with here.”

Ned stepped forward to introduce himself, heading first towards Edith, evidently the woman in charge. He offered his hand – “Ned Kilby, Ma’am. This is my hand, and these are my hands.” He grinned, pleased with the wordplay.

“Edith Stanley,” she said with just a hint of a smile. “Is this young man behind you joining the line?” She pointed a finger with a painted nail, the first time Ned had ever seen such a thing.

“That is my son Virgil,” said Ned. “No, Ma’am. I think that you have plenty to choose from here.” He waved a hand towards the line of men. “Be assured that that all know their duty, leastways as long as they work for me. You just choose as you like.”

Edith walked with deliberation to the far end of the line, her heeled boots clicking on the dusty boards. She did not bother with the first two, one being overly tall and the other with a face like an old leather boot. She paused at the third and asked him to step forward. He gave his name as Homer, and she closely examined him before asking him to remain standing where he stood.

It was the same for the fifth man, and the nineth and tenth, and the fifteenth and the seventeenth. She ignored the last man – bowlegged.

“If you include me and Anne-Louise and Fanny, that would be nine,” said Edith. “But add in Virgil here and that would be ten. It could be enough. Ten women. And they will need husbands too, except for me and young Virgil. But I would like to think that husbands will come forward after we have done our work.”

“I still have no idea how you can turn these pigs into Purses,” said Ned. “But I am not happy about Virgil being a part of this.”

“It’s OK Pappy,” said Virgil. “Like I say, I need to be ready to work alongside the men, so I guess that includes this.”

Edith smiled at the boy. She had a plan for the youngster, and he seemed to have confirmed that he would be up to what she had in mind.

“All men standing forward should go with this lady to the parlor,” said Ned. “It seems like you have been selected to have a few weeks on full pay without having to do any manual labor, so count yourselves lucky. Just remember that any of you who doesn’t do exactly as this woman demands, you will answer to me. I think you know by now how things work on my ranch. Disloyalty will not only cost you your job, but the skin off of your back too. You don’t want that.”

The selected men murmured in full understanding. They shuffled through the connecting door to the guest house lounge, with Virgil the last to leave the bar. He nodded to his father as if to reassure him – he knew what was required. He would not let his father down.

Chapter 4

“My name is Hannah, and I moved to Avariss with my husband well after the gold ran out …”. She paused waiting for Edith to approve, but distractedly playing with one of the curls that dropped from under her bonnet. She adjusted her skirts, trying to ignore the discomfort of the corset beneath the bodice of her dress.

“Go on Hannah. Tell us your story,” said Edith. “Tell us why you have made Avariss your home.”

“Well, we think it has a future, me and my husband. He works out on the Kilby Ranch right at present, but we are saving and pretty soon we hope to buy our own spread of land and maybe grow crops … and maybe kids too. And I want apple trees, ‘cos I really like apple pie … I mean, I love to cook apple pie.”

“Wonderful,” said Edith. “Now Ladies, how do we express our support for Hannah here?”

Around the room, there was polite but delicate applause from the other eleven women, as Manolo’s wife Maria was present, as was Bridget Hanley. But there was perhaps with one exception.

“Dolores? We are all sisters here. Show Hannah that you support her. That is what women do.”

“I don’t give a fuck what women do. I ain’t no woman.” The voice coming from Dolores’ mouth was not the one she had been trained in. It was the voice of Davey Taggart, the man beneath the skirts.

“We have a week to go until they arrive and then just a few days after that to do the job expected of you,” said Edith. “You are a woman until the buyer has done what he is coming here to do. So wash your mouth Dolores, and stay with us. You will be the next to speak to us all, but this time I want you to tell us why you love being a woman.”

“I tell ya, I’m done with this.” Dolores rose to her feet and tugged at her hair. The fact is that Davey Taggart wore his fair hair long and Maria had washed it and pinned it high on the head Spanish style. Pulling out the pins made it tumble around the face of Dolores making her look the prettiest there, with the exception of the young Virginia.

“You’re breaking ranks,” growled Edith, perhaps revealing something of her own origins with the deepness of the snarl. “Do you seriously want me to send you back to explain to Ned why you can no longer be relied on? It has been agreed how everybody here will benefit if the town gets sold, and that means all of you. If you kill the deal, Dolores, the whole town will be looking for your blood. Right now, just looking around, I am thinking that if it were not for the fact that we are all ladies here, they would happily just take your balls.”

“Come on, Dolly. Stay with us. We can forget about what just happened.” It was Virginia. She might have been just the boss’s daughter, but now she was so much more. The joy that she brought to the task they had all signed up for had made it easier for most. To Virginia dressing and living entirely as women over the last few weeks had been an adventure and an exercise in fun. Many thought that they would always remember this time with a smile, because of her.

“It’s OK for you Ginny,” said Dolores, using the feminine name because it seemed to fit. “You hardly had a hair on your body, whereas I have been plucked like a turkey. And you are so skinny you probably don’t even notice the corset, and as for the strapping in my groin, maybe I have more to hide than the rest of you?”

Several of the “ladies” bowed their heads. Nobody was laughing. There had been sniggers at the beginning of this exercise, but this had become serious. A deal had been struck, and those in this room would win big if the town was sold. Ned had promised cash, and cash focuses the mind. Which is not to say that Ginny could not coax some girlish giggles to keep things light.

“It’s not about hiding your man bits – it’s about not using them,” said Edith. “If it’s relief you want then I can help, or Anna-Louise, or Fanny? Women are entitled to pleasure too. But we have a job to do. But this is like high tailing out in the middle of a cattle drive, Dolly. There is a heavy price to pay for letting your co-workers down – I’m sure of it.”

“Well, that’s what I am going to do,” said Dolores. “I am going back to the ranch to get my gear and I am riding right out of this town, and leaving you sissies behind.”

Dolores lifted her skirts and headed for the door behind Edith. Edith stood aside and then followed. Ned would need to be told. He would not be happy. He demanded loyalty and there was a lot riding on this.

Anna-Louise moved to the centre of the room. Along with Maria and Bridget Hanley, she was blessed in a way that all the other women in the room were not – she had been born female.

“Alright Ladies, whose next?” she said. “Our big day approaches. We have all made sacrifices to be where we are, but it will be worth it, provided that we never lose sight of who and what we are. We are the womenfolk of Avariss. Now, everybody give me a shy giggle.”

The assembled did just that. Anna-Louise was pleased.

Chapter 5

Vernon Ketchell rode atop the same battered coach from Thompsonville having picked up James Varney and his engineer Dwight Calloway from the train. He had sat with them inside for a distance but felt the need to have the wind in his face and the smell of horses in his nostrils. His own horse was tied to the back of the stage, following at a good trot as they approached the town of Avariss, New Mexico Territory.

He saw the rider on the hill from a distance just before he turned his horses head and rode off – a lookout. He smiled. If Jim was a buyer then Vernon stood to make good money. It might even be enough to buy a place somewhere, with a barn where he could hang up his saddle. He had seen some fine land in his travels, but he knew that dirt was just dirt. A home is something very different. It was something he had never known, but he knew he wanted it.

The view of the town was familiar, but somehow it looked so different in the noonday sun. Or perhaps it was different?

It seemed that the first few houses had been repaired and painted, and the livery stable too. Then he saw two figures cross the road ahead of him – a man and a woman in a blue dress and carrying a matching parisol. Then he saw two women step out of a shop with a new painted sign “Mrs. Hanley’s Parisian Boutique”. They nodded a greeting and Vernon tipped his hat.

“Women,” Vernon said under his breath, with an air of approval.

“I brought a few here over a month ago,” said the coach driver. “Three I think, But I am seeing more here today. This town looks busier than Thompsonville.”

The bank and the municipal building came into view, and the church, all looking spick and span. The coach pulled up outside the guesthouse, and just as he had done on Vernon’s first arrival, Manolo Garrido appeared looking to offer his services.

“Ah, Mr. Ketchell, you have returned,” said Manolo.

Vern stepped down from the stagecoach, just as the door opened and James Varney stepped onto the street followed by Dwight Calloway.

Varney was a large man. He was heavy, from fine food and drink, but he was as fit as he needed to be, and smart as a new bullwhip. He was dressed in a suit, but one tailored in sound fabric, with extra lining in the pants for long rides in the saddle. He wore no hat, but he had one in his bag, made of straw and rolled into a tube, from the other America.

Dwight was smaller, and wore eyeglasses, but under his suit he was strong. He was a man of vision but rooted in practical mathematics. A railway would run through this town, and at a distance from the other stops that he had plotted would be appropriate for a stop to take on coal and water. But he had been in correspondence with a fellow engineer, George Bailey Brayton of New York, about another type of engine to replace steam, one based on controlled explosions.

“Bill Oldfield,” said Bill, stepping forward with a warm hand and a matching smile. “Welcome to Avariss.”

“James Varney, but call me Jim,” said Jim. “This is Dwight, and you know Vern Ketchell.”

“Yes, Mr Ketchell indicated that you might be interested in investing in our town?”

“Buying your town,” Jim corrected him. “If it is for sale?”

“Well I own most of the town buildings, and I don’t need them all. And I am a businessman so of course everything has it’s price,” said Bill. “And actually, by sheer chance Ned Kilby is in town today and his is the biggest landowner around these parts,” said Bill, although chance had nothing to do with it.

“Excellent,” said Jim. “I need waste no time then. I see that yours is not a ghost town, which is a relief, but I would like to get a feel for the place.”

“I would be honored if you would be my guest and stay here in my hotel,” said Bill. “I have rooms for the three of you and just a few other guests. Do you have luggage?”

“Lead on,” said Jim. “We travel light.” He was carrying a bag and so was Dwight. They followed Bill up the stairs and into the lounge. There were two women drinking tea by the bay window.

“This is Mrs. Edith Jones and her daughter Catherine,” said Bill. “Anna Louise is getting married to a local boy this Saturday, and we hope that Mrs. Jones might abandon Thompsonville and come to live with us here in Avariss. Edie, this is Mr. James Varney and his associate, Mr. Calloway.”

“So pleased to meet you, Ladies,” said Jim with the city charm that he had spent years perfecting. “So tell me Mrs. Jones – do you like it here?”

“I have been pleasantly surprised, Mr. Varney, I must say. Mrs. Hanley has a stylish store across the road and we are getting a wedding dress for Catherine here. It seems that there are a number of young married couples so I suspect this place will be awash with little nippers in no time. I am thinking that the town needs a schoolhouse.”

“That seems like a good idea,” said Jim. “What do you think about that, Dwight?”

“You know me, Boss,” said Dwight. “Nobody values education higher.”

Chapter 6

“You’ll have to lift me up to fix this curtain,” said Hannah. “Just hold me around the thighs and lift me up. Come on Sam. I am as light as a feather.”

She was using the voice. She was wearing the dress and using the voice. He had been too long in the company of men, that it seems too easy to forget that she had once been one of them. As he reached around her skirts and smelled the fabric and her scented body beneath, he doubted his own sanity. This was not the same person.

“Keep still,” she said. “Turn me a little. Come around in front. I almost have it. There. That’s done. You can let me down now.”

Sam Drummond let her slide down his body with his arms still around her, so that they stood together in front of the window with his arms around her, face to face.

“Sometimes I wish that this was all true,” her said to her. “That you were a woman and I was your husband, and that this little house on the edge of town was our home.”

He was about to release her, but she said quickly – “Don’t let go of me.” She was looking at him and it seems that she had the same thought.

“Let’s live this for a few days more,” she said.

“If I kissed you, would you think that I was … a pervert?” asked Sam.

“You would just be kissing your wife,” she said. “What is wrong with that?”

He needed no further invitation. Their lips met. It was all part of the game, they could say – a stage play that become so real it was like a dream.

“The is becoming difficult,” said Sam. The thought that you will go back to who you were is causing me physical pain. But on that subject, at least you can go back, unlike like Davey.”

“Dolly was going to ruin things for everybody,” said Hannah. “Personally I didn’t thing that Ned Kilby would go through with it, but he didn’t hold him down or use the emasculator. Others did that. Men we know. Men who felt that he had let us all down.”

“So what kind of future will come out of that?” said Sam. His arms were still around his girl, and that was the way he wanted it, for as long as it lasts.

“There is no Davey anymore, that’s for sure,” said Hannah. “But she has Joseph as her designated husband, and he is a good man. And is it true that he has a couple of young kids living with his mother back in Texas?”

“So I hear. His wife died a few years back – The consumption. He visits and sends money, but kids that age need a mother.”

“I have started think about what it might be like to be a mother,” said Hannah. “Men sew the seed but it is really women who raise the people we need to build this country up.”

“Women like you?” Sam smiled at her.

“Have you heard what people are saying about Edith?” said Hannah. That she is like us? Just a woman on the outside, but carrying a secret under her skirts. Maybe it is possible to live a life like that?”

“Is that what you would want?” said Sam

“I just don’t want to lose this,” she said, putting her arms around him and pulling him close. They kissed again – harder this time.

“I want to make love to you again,” he said.

“You don’t think of it as dirty?” she asked, looking into his eyes.

“As far as I am concerned, Mrs. Drummond, nothings seems more pure,” he said. He lifted her off her feet and laid her gently on the bed, before he drew the curtains they had just hung together.

Chapter 7

But in another bedroom in a similar house, not too far away, a similar situation was unfolding in a very different way. Magnus Cairns, farrier at the Kilby Ranch, had been looking forward to playing the married man with Fanny from Thompsonville.

“I have told all the hands how this is going to work,” Ned Kilby had said. “All the guys who pay husband will get a bonus, and all the guys who are going to play the wives will get three times that. It is just that I cant see you playing a wife, so you won’t be going into town.”

“You know me, Boss,” said Magnus with the smile he was famous for. “If I can hammer steel into shape, I am sure I can hammer myself into what you want for a few days.”

“We will set you up at the old forge in town,” said Ned. “A town like Avariss needs a blacksmith and we haven’t had one since the mines closed. There are some items heaped up that you can brush off and bring to the front. We want you to look busy there and we want you to look married. We have a woman from Thompsonville to play your wife. Take your tools into town and meet her at the hotel.”

He took the wagon, and went first to the forge. It was dusty but had been left tidy. The anvil was there, and heavy tools that he did not have at the ranch. The previous smith seemed to have left in a hurry, perhaps even on horseback, so he could only take the lightest of tools. Everything else had been left. Smithing was not really a portable trade.

There were items at the back – iron gates, wheel rims, and some mining tools, all with just surface rust that he could scrub off with a wire brush. The furnace and bellows were in good order and there was fuel, but he would need to check the flue. There was a water tank and buckets of all sizes, and cans of oil and grease, and iron bars and plates. It was the kind of place he had always wanted to work in, but he was a craftsman and no businessman.

But he understood what was needed so he set to work there, rather than head across to the hotel.

“You must be my husband Magnus,” she said. He looked up and she was standing in the doorway, a small figure against the wide doors with all the light behind her. He blinked to bring her into focus. She looked like the prettiest thing he had ever seen – like a flower on a coal heap. “I am your wife,” she said. “Your wife, Fanny.”

In his huge chest it seemed as if a bird was trapped inside, fluttering and crashing against the ribbed walls in all its confusion. He was struck dumb, although that was not his nature. He could easily sing at his anvil, to bring rhythm to his blows. This woman had silenced him. He struggled to speak, but he managed to mutter his name – “Magnus. Yes, I’m Magnus. Magnus Cairns.”

“Cairns. Cairns Ironmonger. Cairns Forge. I am just wondering about a name over the door,” she said. “I would like to paint a sign. I am afraid I am no use when it comes to heavy lifting, but I am handy with a paintbrush and a pen.”

“Well, I ain’t,” admitted Magnus, with his smile returning. “So I guess that makes us partners in business too?”

She was everything he wanted. By the time Ketchell, Varney and Calloway rolled into town, Cairns Forge looked like everything else he had wanted – a busy blacksmith’s shop, even though it had no customers yet. There was am office for Fanny, and wares lined up outside with labels tied on and prices that reflected material cost, labor cost and what fanny called “a margin”.

“If this town takes off as everyone thinks it might, you could do very well,” she said.

“Maybe it could be we?” he said, slyly. She smiled thinly, as if there was a barrier between them.

The night before the buyers arrived she offered him her body.

“We need to behave as if we are lovers, although not all married couples are that,” she said, as if from long experience. “I can only offer you my butthole tonight, I’m afraid.”

“Any part of you would be gold to me,” he said. I sounded so poetic he barely believed the words were his own, but they were.

She took him into the office and she pulled down her drawers and offered herself to him. But first she said – “Magnus, I want you to understand that in Thompsonville, I sold my body for money. In fact I have never given it to anyone before, not freely, not for …”. She stopped before the word “love” but he still heard it.

“The past don’t matter none, Fanny,” he said. “It’s the future we live for.”

He rammed her softly. He figured that maybe if she did this for a living she would make a noise like every whore did, but instead she just sighed and hummed. But he found his hips taking over as she seemed to be squeezing him. When her he squeal came, he came too, like a dam breaking, and the sun coming out, at the same time.

“Oh sweet Jesus,” he said. “That is what I will live for.”

“You have made me wet,” she said. She kissed him gently on the lips. He was happier than he ever remembered being.

But that was then. Now he was looking at the perfect body and it’s cruel addition. When he had asked her to be his wife and make their marriage real, she had insisted that he see her naked. How could he turn that down? Now he wished he had. The woman that he loved had a penis.

“How is this possible?” he said. In all other respects she appeared womanly – she even had two small breasts like a teenage girl.

“I am a woman but not a complete one,” she said. “The Indian’s call us two spirit people, and say that we are magical. I feel that I am sometimes, but when I see your face I understand that it is a curse.”

He lifted his eyes that had been fixed on the ugliness, to look at the face, framed by her long blonde hair. She was crying. All he wanted to do was to hold her. But how could he ignore that? If she were cast in bronze then fire a hammer and a chisel would be all he needed to fix her. That is the way he needed to look at this. He still loved her. He knew that now.”

“We’ll fix you, my love,” he said. Don’t worry, somehow we will fix you, and then we will get married.

Chapter 8

Rick Marley was Ned Kilby’s leading hand, and a man of value. For that reason Ned had given Rick the first right to select a bride from the new Avariss Girls. They were living at the hotel in town finishing their training and the boys that we designated to be “gentlemen of the town” were brought in to view them as if they were prize breeding heifers.

“If any of you sniggers or makes any fun of these ladies then you will find yourself off the list and lose the bonus on offer,” said Ned. This is serious business because it is all about money, and money makes anything serious.

Rick would not have been concerned if he did not do this thing – he would prefer to be out on the range smelling the sage brush - but Ned Kilby was a good boss and he figured he owed him. If Ned asked him to put that old church suit on and walk through town with a cowboy in a dress on his arm, then he was going to say yes, and that was all there was to it.

It seemed that the only real ladies were the Mexican and the widow Hanley, and then the women in from Thompsonville – Mrs. Edith Stanley and a pair of bar girls with her. The rest he knew, or he had known once. There was Homer, now Hannah, and there was Davey now maimed forever and renamed Dolores, and there was Ned’s boy, now Virginia. Those three would be the prettiest, which was perhaps why he would not choose them. Instead his eyes fell upon the kid they called “Cat” or in full “Fat Cat”.

Cat had arrived at the ranch only the year before, likely a runaway from a family that would not have been poor. The kid had soft hands and a soft body, and book learning and smarts. But what money he once had was gone. There was some story about a man he met on the road, but the story changed so Rick guessed none of them were true. The kid had been parted from his cash.

“We need somebody but the work will be hard and I’m guessing it ain’t going to be what you are used to,” Rick told him.

“It is not as if I have a choice,” said Cat. “I have no money, no food and no place to live.”

He had no skills either, and no natural inclination to work, but he was ready to change all of that. Rick had thrown him into the hardest work he could, because he wanted Cat to be a member of the crew, and with the name “Fat Cat” that was less likely to happen. The only reason that Cat’s duties change a little was because he had good handwriting, and somebody has got to keep the herd book.

And there in front of Rick stood Catherine. His round face was plucked of what whiskers he had and his eyebrows thinned as a woman might, but it was other things that made him look more female than male. Cat had plenty of hair but it was not too long. Somehow his hair had been gathered up and a fake bun had been pinned on top – it was unmistakedly feminine. The other thing was the chest. All the other new women wore blouses buttoned up to the neck, but Catherine had on display two breasts, evidently created by corsetry. She had bare arms too, showing of a softness of the flesh that still persisted despite the boy losing weight since he started at the Kilby Ranch.

“I’ll take Cat,” Rick called out, without taking his eyes off the face of Catherine. He saw a trace of relief or gratitude in that face.

“It’s a good choice but I hope that you have a good suit, Mr. Marley.” He turned to see that the widow Hamley had spoken the words. “I have a wedding gown that will fit young Catherine there, so there may be nuptials if they are needed to close the deal.”

Perhaps strangely, Rick knew what she was talking about. He remembered the chubby young woman arriving in town freshly married to a man who would die in a rock fall at Dutchman’s Mine. She would die soon after, and – as she did for most dead women in and around Avariss, Mrs. Hamley, the undertaker’s wife, collected the clothes. Others would be wearing her clothes, but Rick guessed that what Catherine was wearing might be cast offs from Mrs. Stanley. They were of similar statue and not dissimilar appearance. That fact had not escaped Edie’s attention either.

That afternoon the new ladies - Hannah, Dolores, Catherine, and three others, plus Fanny were paired off, leaving Edith, Anne-Louise and Virginia still single women.

“Our visitors arrive tomorrow,” said Ned. “Some of you have houses to occupy, so go there first. But tomorrow your job is to be seen in town. I want to see movement and activity. This town has to look busy and stable. This is not a town full of cowboys anymore. There are ladies present. Let’s remember that. No bad language. No bad behavior. If the visitors talk to you, answer them. The message is that Avariss is a city in the making, and you are its citizen’s”

“We don’t have house,” said Cat.

“Well, apparently we are engaged, so I work at the ranch and you stay at the hotel,” said Rick. “That sounds right and proper. And if we get a deal before Saturday we won’t be getting married.”

“Oh!” Cat seemed a little disappointed. “I understand, but perhaps we should make plans just in case,” she said.

Which was just as well, because Jim Varney was not ready to sign when Saturday came. He and Dwight Calloway had checked the survey and drawn up the plots to be bought – all the land from Kilby Ranch near the town plus the main buildings and several cottages. For Bill Oldfield the offer was that the hotel and saloon be owned with other buildings but leased back for a period, giving Bill a right to buy it back.

The problem was that the price had not been agreed on. Ned in particular, was holding out for more.

“You know we have a wedding on Saturday,” Bill said to Ned. “Let’s go ahead with that. We get Jim in high spirits and you can deliver the father of the bride speech all about the couple living their lives and raising a huge family right here in Avariss. Put Jim on the spot in your speech, in front of everybody.

“I actually like that idea,” said Ned. “We can fill the church with townsfolk now that we have women. But, do we have a preacher?”

“Believe it or not, Manolo Garrido once studied to be a Catholic priest,” said Bill. “I could ask him.”

Chapter 9

Ned had volunteered his “daughter” to take the three men up to Lake Aurum. Vern Ketchell had been there, but without permission. He had described it to Dwight who could see immediately what its potential might be.

Gold mining needed water to help separate the gold from barren rock, and when that valley had proved to carry no gold, all the miners had worked to together to start the dam, and height and structure had been added over time, when the water was needed. Now water was not needed, but a source could help with a plan to irrigate the plains.

So all three men went where she led them, Jim in the trap beside Ginny and Vern and Dwight on horseback but with survey instruments in the box of the trap. Jim and Ginny were able to sit under the sunshade of the small carriage watching Vern and Dwight in the distance.

“I used to come up here when I was young,” said Ginny. “It is so peaceful, and there is something about the way the light plays on the water that seems to fascinate, don’t you think?”

“Fascinate, yes,” said Jim, but he was looking at her profiles, not the lake.

“To think of all those me, shedding so much sweat and not a little blood as well, to make this lake, only for it’s purpose to disappear,” she mused. “Gold was such a powerful thing.”

“Gold is a metal,” said Jim. “Greed is a powerful thing. People will do anything for money, be it gold or land to build on. People will kill or lie, or deceive, for money.”

“Deceive? Do you think that you are being tricked somehow?” Ginny looked at him accusingly.

“You are only tricked if you believe it,” said Jim. “As for me, I believe in research. I believe in people like Vernon Ketchell out there, who can cover the ground and see what others can’t; and people like Dwight Calloway who can analyse and calculate. I don’t go into a deal unless I know the facts. For instance, I learned from a number of sources that Ned Kilby doesn’t have a daughter. He has sons, and the youngest of those is named Virgil.”

She turned away. She did not want to look at him. She had noticed him staring at her with wide eyes for days. She had thought that it was something else – trying to look into her soul, but now it seemed that he had just been trying to look through her disguise.

“I do what my father expects of me,” she said. “I am not ashamed of that.” She turned to look at him to show that she was not cowed by any words he might have for her.

“Old men always use youth to do their evil,” he said. “And I am not talking about your father.”

“You’re not that old,” she said. “And as for being used, I have spent a lifetime trying to impress an older man. I am less important to him. What I want is to be important in somebody’s life.”

“Ah, you’re looking for love,” he said. “A bit like me.”

“You are toying with me,” she said. “Why come up here if you are not going to do the deal?”

“Did I say I was not going to do it? Where did you get that idea? But perhaps I am toying with all of you. I have found it so interesting watching what is happening in this small town of yours. Weirdly it is like love is in the air. It is like a cloud of the gas or Spanish fly has settled and people are pairing off, maybe me included.”

“There is no woman for you in Avariss,” said Ginny.

“Let me decide that,” said Jim.

They sat for a while in silence. They could see the men in the distance.

“I am going to do the deal anyway,” said Jim. “I feel I have to.”

“Why is that?” asked Ginny.

“If I buy Avariss, and live here, and build this place up,” he said. “Then I know it is a place, perhaps the only place, where you can be my wife.

Ginny’s jaw dropped. She suddenly felt refreshed – a woman to the core once more. “Why, Mr. Varney, are you proposing?” she asked.

“Well I suppose I am,” he said. “Although I will need to buy a ring for that pretty finger of yours to settle the deal. And of course, it would be polite to get your father’s approval, but I know that is for sale just as everything here is.” He had a sly smile on his face.

“Everything but me that is,” she shot back. “If you want me to say yes, I wont be looking for money. I will want something far more valuable you time … and your love. But you are right, if you are going to do the deal, Daddy can hardly disapprove.”

Chapter 10

But first there was to be a wedding. Jim insisted.

“I propose to give one of the cottages that I will own to Rick and Catherine as their wedding present,” he said. “I want to see the happy bride and her lucky husband. I want to hear the speeches, all about Avariss being a town for the future. I am told that you will be speaking, Ned. I want you to share the secrets of what makes this town so special.”

Manolo Garrido did officiate, although nobody was quite sure what was going on. The entire ceremony was performed in Latin.

When they were pronounced man and wife, Catherine leaned over to whisper in the ear of her new husband – “Rick, I just thought that I should tell you, I have dreamed of this day all of my life, being a bride. You have made all my dreams come true. I belong to you body and soul for making me your wife.”

Of course, Rick was surprised, but he also found himself bone hard, standing there at the altar. She would give him the release he needed soon enough, but it would be the first of any times.

Then there was a discussion between Dwight Calloway and Anna Louise.

“I just assumed that you were like the others,” Dwight said. “I told myself that my attraction to you was wrong for that reason. I was terrified that the woman I might be falling in love with, might not be a woman at all.”

“Don’t worry sweetheart. I am indeed a woman. There may not be many of us in this town, but I am one,” said Anna Louise. “And I have no intention of leaving so long as you are here.”

Which would only leave Edith Stanley to pack her bags. But the truth is that she had grown close to Ned Kilby throughout everything, and what with the town becoming so accepting of women like the Avariss girls, Ned decided that he had been a widower far too long.

So it was a loan rider who rode out of Avariss, New Mexico Territory, with the rising sun casting a shadow in the other direction.

Avariss was not a big town, then.

The End



Some of the Avariss Girls