



A story based on the life of Dan Powell, founder of the town of Powell, South Dakota, who lived from approximately 1852 to 1929. This work is based on the facts gathered by Dr. Albert "Britt" Karns, a descendant of Powell. It weaves the documented places and people involved in Powell's life with a creative interpretation of what may have driven him from place to place, and the people he may have encountered.

Dan Powell

The Making of American Cowboy

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Dan Powell

The Making of an
American Cowboy



Debbi Weitzell
with A.L. Karns

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

This is a novel based on historical fact. Dr. Karns is a great-grandson of Dan Powell, and has done the research on his family. Debbi Weitzell is his sister-in-law, a writer who wanted to help him tell the story.

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First Edition

Chapter 1

Marietta, Ohio

1860—1861

Dan was nine when the cholera came. Ellen was eleven. They came home from school one autumn day to find a yellow cloth tied to the door latch. Their mother, father, little sister and baby brother were inside. Their neighbor from the next farm over, Old Mr. Jenkins, was standing in the lane. He turned toward their house and yelled, "DOC!"

Dan felt a horrible wave of fear pass through him. Jenkins stepped into their path. "I'm sorry, children," he said. "You can't go in."

Doctor Jones opened the door, but he only came that far. He called out, "Dan, Ellen, are you feeling poorly at all?"

They looked at each other, then back at the doctor. "No, sir."

"What did you have for breakfast this morning?"

"Didn't have any," Dan answered. "We couldn't if we were going to get to the schoolhouse on time."

"What about your lunch buckets?"

"Bread and jam," Ellen replied. "I made it myself."

"Any water?"

"Just from the school pump."

The doctor heaved a big sigh. "All right, then. You let me know if you get to feeling sickly at all. But you must stay away from this house. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir," they replied, though they didn't understand much at all.

The doctor went back inside, and shut the door tight. To Dan, a door had never looked so forbidding.

The three stood there in the lane, feeling the early fall sun beating down on them; but somehow Dan couldn't feel its warmth. They kept looking at the house for a long time.

At last Dan spoke. "Are they real sick?"

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Jenkins shrugged. "Not yet, but they will be. Last I heard it was your Pa and the baby that was worst off."

"Who's in there with them?" Ellen asked.

"Just Doc Jones right now. But he's got sick folks all over the valley. I expect he'll have to be leavin' soon."

"But who will take care of them?"

Old Jenkins, shuffled his feet a bit. "Well sir, it's a quarantine. Anyone who goes in is riskin' the cholera hisself."

"So if Doc leaves..." a picture of his family, dying in anguish alone, passed through Dan's mind. He squared his shoulders. "I'm goin' in."

He took a step or two, and Ellen was right on his heels, just as determined.

Jenkins threw out a strong, sinewy arm that hit the boy in the chest and stopped them both. "Can't let ya," he said. "Doc says it's bad. He said right out, 'Don't let those young'uns in here.' Right as he was tyin' on the quarantine cloth. Didn't say what I was to do with ya, though. Guess you best be comin' home with me."

"We can't just leave them!" Ellen yelled.

"Ya can't go in, I tell ya!" Jenkins sounded dead serious. Almost mad. Dan could tell there was no way they were getting around him. Both children stood looking at the house, dumbfounded. Dan was frozen to the ground, even as a warm breeze blew around him. The temperature wasn't cold, but he felt chilled to the bone.

Finally, Old Jenkins broke the silence. He put an arm around each child, loosely, and started moving them down the road toward his place. "Got some stew on for dinner. Won't be a lot. Wasn't expectin' nobody. But I got some bread, and some apples if you're still hungry after that."

Dan looked at Ellen. She looked as bewildered as he felt. Dan felt his feet shuffling along, prodded by Jenkins. Ellen was walking, too. But though his body was moving, Dan felt that his mind and soul were still standing in front of the house, staring at it and wondering what was going on inside.

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Old Jenkins had bread, all right, but it was nothing like Ma's. The children ate mechanically, and not very much. Dan could tell that Ellen was as wrapped up in thoughts as he was. They didn't say anything, but the communication was clear.

Old Jenkins kept talking. They'd known him for a long time, as he was their neighbor, but Dan thought he had never heard so many words come out of this man. In the fog of his emotions, he somewhere noted his surprise at this.

"Well now, we'll have to find somewhere for you young'uns to bed down," Dan heard Jenkins say. He looked out the small window in Jenkins' tiny cabin and realized it was dark outside. "I'm afraid there ain't room in here, but I got a loft full of fresh, soft hay and these here quilts." Jenkins pulled some colorful quilts out of a chest. "My mother made 'em long years ago. I figure these'll keep ya warm."

Before they realized it, the children were in the loft of Jenkins' barn. The animals made soft sounds below them as they settled in for the night. The children were tucked in and warm, but they felt anything but settled. They were quiet for a long time. Dan looked at Ellen and saw that she was wide awake as he was.

"Ellen?" he said. She looked at him. "Are they gonna die?"

"I don't know," Ellen answered.

"Who's gonna help them?"

"I don't know."

"What are we gonna do?"

There was a long pause before Ellen said, "What Ma always tells us when things are bad. Pray."

Simultaneously, the children got up on their knees and started praying as hard as they knew how. Dan had no idea how long they were there. He woke up to sunlight and knees that were a little the worse for wear. Ellen was asleep beside him. He sat up and stared out at the morning, wondering what news would greet them when they descended the ladder. It turned out it wasn't good.

In a matter of days, Dan and Ellen were the only Powells left. The cholera took the rest. Pa, Ma, two-year-old Mary, and Baby Joey. They learned that Grandma McPeck, Ma's mother, had tried

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to go in to take care of the family; Doc wouldn't let her. She still had children at home, and he couldn't risk her spreading the disease further. Doc himself had stayed till it was all over.

The day of the funerals was foggy and seemed like a bad dream. All their family and three of their cousins. And there were more funerals lined up behind theirs. Folks were dropping right and left. The circuit preacher had all he could do to keep up. The funerals were just for the benefit of the living, anyway. The bodies had all been put to the ground right away. They couldn't be left to molder till the preacher came, especially when they died of something so contagious.

Most of the family's things had to be burned, including the house—the house that Pa had built with his own hands. A few things were sold off—the things from the barn, mostly. However, Pa's valise hadn't been touched for months, so Doc let Dan have that.

Pa's valise had been a thing of pride for him—a gift from his own father when he set out on his own. It was large and made of fine leather. Dan remembered how his father had carefully pulled the case from its spot under the bedstead in the winter, when there weren't as many chores in the evenings. He'd unwrap it from its ancient burlap and rub it down with oil. Said it kept it soft, so it would be ready to carry his clothes when he and Ma went up to St. Louis one day on an anniversary trip. They talked about it at least every spring, when the crops were newly up. "Gonna be a good year," Pa would say. "We can take that trip next fall." But of course "next fall" never came. There was always something: a new baby, a neighbor who was seeing hard times, shoes for growing children or a failed crop—something.

Doc brought some small things of their mother's to Ellen—things that could be scalded clean so the cholera was gone from them. The land the house had been on was sold to pay for their burials, and to pay off their tab at the mercantile. Then the house was burned.

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After a month, when threat of the disease had passed, Grandpa and Grandma McPeek came to collect Dan and Ellen from Old Jenkins.

It wasn't so big a change, some would say, to go live with their grandparents. The McPeeks were among the best-off people in the county. They owned 38 acres, and had a big house and a huge garden, and lots of livestock. The Powells had lived with the McPeeks when Ellen was little, and the children had always lived close by their grandparents. All their aunts and uncles and cousins—McPeeks and Michaels alike—were close by. It wasn't so different, but everything was changed.

As it turned out, Uncle James Michael suffered as much as Dan and Ellen did with this epidemic. His wife Carolyn, their ma's sister, had died in childbirth the year before, leaving him with four small children. The cholera took three of them.

Folks said some of the men who ferried in goods on the Ohio River brought it. Bill Carter's Pa died, and Sue Litchfield herself—only eight years old—died of it, too. They heard there were more folks around Marietta; but for himself, Dan was beyond thinking of other folks when they'd just lost their whole family. Pa had been a very giving man, and would have been unhappy with him for that, he knew, but he just couldn't help it.

The whole world was different now. The school stayed closed down for the rest of the term; it was too big a risk that somebody would pass on the illness. The streets were empty most of the day. Even at the mercantile, folks tried not to be in the store at the same time as their neighbors.

Finally the worst of it was over, and life started to settle in a bit. Still, it was nothing like it had been before. When school opened, Dan and Ellen had to walk past their old homestead to their grandparents' home, where they had to compete with their young aunt and uncles for attention. Grandma was full of love and sympathy, but even young Dan could see how tired Grandma seemed every day. They'd had eight children of their own, Ma being

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the oldest (only 30 when she died), and four of them were still at home. Uncle Levi at 17 was about old enough to set out on his own, but the twins, Price and Mary, and Uncle Jesse, weren't much older than he and Ellen.

Grandma said that Ellen should share a room with Mary right off, but Ellen had told her that she and Dan felt better if they could be in the same room in the quiet of the night. They had, after all, shared the loft in their own house, and they were used to being able to talk, and just know the other was there in the dark. Grandma had swallowed hard and said she understood that, and set them up in what had been Ma and Aunt Caroline's room. It was a nice room, away from everything and everyone, which allowed them to have a little break from their sorrow.

It was comfortable enough, but there were problems, too. Grandma kept telling them that they had seen enough hardship and she didn't make them do chores, like she did her own kids. Dan didn't mind that at all at first; but after a few weeks, he could see that the other kids had started resenting it. They said it wasn't fair that they had to do all the work. Dan knew they were right; Ellen did, too. But Grandma seemed bent on favoring them. It really put them in an awkward situation.

One night, Ellen spoke in the dark. "Dan? You asleep?"

"Wanna be," he mumbled.

She continued, somehow not recognizing the fact. "I miss Ma."

Dan was quiet for a minute, and he swallowed hard. "Yeah," he said.

"Promise me we'll stay together."

"Course we will. What're you talkin' about?"

"Orphans get adopted out. I don't think I could take it if they split us up."

"Grandpa and Grandma wouldn't let that happen."

"How do you know? They've got their own kids. And Uncle James leaves Martha here all the time."

"But she don't live here."

"Doesn't. And that doesn't matter. Uncle James has to leave her all day while he's at work on his place. Then you add you and me to

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all that mix. It's a powerful load, don't you think? And they are kind of old."

Dan snorted. "Well Pa and Ma weren't old, and they died anyway."

"I saw Grandma crying today. And Grandpa...well, he doesn't say anything. What if they decide they don't want to keep us?" she went on with a far-off gaze. "What are we going to do?"

Dan bristled. "What can *we* do about it?"

"Oh, Danny, it's not a 'get mad' question. It's a thinking question."

"What good does it do to think about it? It just gets you all stirred up."

"We have to have a plan, Daniel."

Dan sighed, knowing that he was going to hear about a plan whether he wanted to or not. "Okay. So what kind of a plan do we need?"

"I don't know. Something. Something so that they will love having us here and never want to let us go." She thought for a minute. "We have to be especially good."

"Whaddaya mean, 'good'?" Dan asked.

"Don't slur your words, Daniel."

Dan bristled again. He knew she was right, but he hated it when she corrected his grammar. Still, he could see this was not a time to argue with her about it. "What do you mean, Ellen?" he asked, distinctly.

"We need to do extra chores and such," she said. "You know, make ourselves worth having around."

Dan didn't like the sound of that. "Can't we just try real hard to get along with the other children?"

"No. We have to do so much that they just can't get along without us."

"Are ya sure?"

"You."

"Are *you* sure?"

"It makes sense, doesn't it?"

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"I suppose," Dan droned, though he hated to admit it. She had a point. He hadn't thought about it till now, but she was right—Grandma did seem awfully tired by the end of the day, and Grandpa mainly came in from his work, read for a while, and went to bed. He hardly talked to anyone. And things were getting more tense with their young uncles. Lately they didn't even ask Dan to shoot marbles with them at school. He could see that it wasn't the best situation, and they could probably do something to make it better.

So the plan was set in motion. Dan and Ellen would be better than any children that ever lived in Marietta, or in all of Ohio, for that matter. They worked hard to show their appreciation. They took to chores before school and as soon as they got home.

The work was a lot for them to do, especially in their grief. But since Grandpa didn't say much, they didn't know how they stood with him most of the time. Dan traipsed every inch of the woods gathering wood to be chopped. He helped feed the animals and cleaned out the barn. Ellen helped Grandma cook and clean, and collected eggs. She also mended Dan's shirt when he caught it on a nail.

"I guess all that girl stuff isn't as silly as I thought," he told her.

The crazy thing was that soon their cousins seemed to be jealous of how hard they worked.

A few months after the family died, Mr. and Mrs. Brookfield came by the house. They were some of the wealthier people in the district. Mr. Brookfield had been a soldier in the Union army, but came home earlier than most after a leg wound made it impossible for him to fight any more. Nobody knew much more about it, just that he leaned a bit more on his walking stick than he had before the war and he limped a little. He stood tall and slender, and Dan knew he had at least four full changes of clothes. He'd be wearing something different if you saw him in the field, or at the mercantile, or on his front porch of an evening, or at the church on Sunday.

Mrs. Brookfield was a pleasant woman, when she wanted to be. She was well aware that her husband held more land than anyone in

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the county, and of the position that afforded her. She used that position to advantage whenever she could, and could be very nice indeed if she wanted something from you. Dan remembered the story that went around about how she had wanted the preacher to assign specific pews to families, and have them pay. The idea was that the pews up front would cost more, and that way she could be guaranteed both of making a grand entrance every Sunday and of getting a good seat. She sputtered something awful when the preacher had told her that church was for everybody, and God didn't charge anything for folks to come in, and he wouldn't either. Dan also remembered how Mrs. Brookfield offered to buy a bell for the church, on the condition that a plaque bearing her name be placed on the tower. He smiled. There was still no bell at the church.

The Brookfields had no children; no one to whom to leave their mighty kingdom. Dan had heard Mrs. Brookfield clucking about that from time to time. He had often wondered what kind of a life a boy of theirs would have, and pitied him. Now he had a sinking feeling, as he wondered what brought them to Grandpa's place—mainly because he thought he knew.

After pleasantries were exchanged, Grandpa and Grandma went outside with the Brookfields to talk. Dan and Ellen were told to wait in the house. The door latch clicked. Dan and Ellen looked at each other for a long moment, neither daring to say a word. Then they rushed to the wavy pane of glass in the parlor wall.

They couldn't distinguish any of the words being said; they could only see a very animated Mrs. Brookfield, her arms flying about, obviously in great distress about something. Grandpa just stood with his head down, shaking it back and forth. Grandma looked near tears herself. Mr. Brookfield made up the final point of the square, walking stick planted firmly in front of him, and saying nothing. At last, Mrs. Brookfield began to sob into her pure white handkerchief. Mr. Brookfield shook hands with Grandpa, and led his wife away.

When they came inside, Grandpa's face was flushed. Grandma went straight to the kitchen without saying a word. Grandpa went and sat heavily in his worn old rocking chair, and appeared to be

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pondering something awful hard. At last he looked over at the children and said, "You two are all right living here, ain't ya?"

Dan piped up right away, lest any hesitation could be seen as a negative. "Yes, sir, Grandpa. We like it fine."

Ellen nodded her agreement.

Grandpa set to rocking. "All right, then," he said. And that was that.

But Mrs. Brookfield started dropping by the house at least twice a week—always when Grandpa was out in the fields. Grandma never seemed to have expected her. Dan was suspicious. He didn't remember Mrs. Brookfield ever being this neighborly before.

"Oh, I just ache for your family's loss," she crooned one day. "These poor children, losing all their family and having to work so hard to boot."

Grandma stiffly replied, "We don't ask these children to do any more than the others."

"We do it because we want to," Ellen quickly injected.

"Just perfect little angels," said Mrs. Brookfield, "and so strong in their time of bereavement."

Well, she did have a point, and it was nice to hear someone express a little sympathy, but somehow Dan still didn't trust her.

"You're such a pretty little thing," she would say to Ellen.

Dan could see that Ellen softened a bit under such talk. He could also see that Mrs. Brookfield's attentions were beginning to lean more toward Ellen alone.

"Don't you see what she's up to?" He asked Ellen one night.

"She's just a kindly soul," Ellen replied.

"Since when? She never came by to talk with Ma, and until now I never remember her being so all-fired friendly with Grandma, either. She never helped nobody as long as I've known."

"Anybody," Ellen corrected.

Dan wasn't interested in grammar lessons at the moment.

"She's trying to steal you away!" he shouted.

Ellen's jaw dropped. "Oh, Dan! No!"

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“Sure enough!” he yelled, with all the maturity his nine years could muster. “She’s got no children! She sees herself gettin’ a pretty little girl to pamper and train up to be a lady!”

Dan thought he heard a little dreaminess in Ellen’s voice, “Well,” she said, “maybe that would be a better place for us to live. We can’t stay in the same room forever.”

“She ain’t makin’ up to *me* at all. It’s you she wants.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go without you.”

“I know that, but she don’t.”

“Doesn’t.”

“Fine then.”

“But we’re family! We made a promise!”

“Don’t seem to matter much to her.”

“Dan...”

“You mark my words! That woman wants you and you alone! And she’ll be about it any way she can.”

Ellen thought for a minute.

“What if you’re right? What if she is trying to win me over? Couldn’t we do some winning of our own?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Couldn’t we convince her that her husband ought to have a son, too?”

The idea caught Dan off guard. “You think?”

“I don’t see why not. Every man wants a son, don’t he?”

Dan smiled. “Doesn’t.”

Ellen burst out laughing. Dan followed, and they laughed themselves into an exhausted sleep.

The next time Mrs. Brookfield came by, Grandpa and Grandma were gone to the mercantile. Ellen sat Mrs. Brookfield under a big shade tree in front of the house and began the campaign.

“Would you like some fresh bread, Mrs. Brookfield? Just out of the oven. Grandma let me make it all by myself.” Then, while the woman was eating it, “You know Dan takes the wheat down to the

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mill. He can carry an awful load. That boy sure works hard. And he's right happy to be doing it."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Brookfield looked Dan's way. Dan, for his part, tried to look like the hardest working angel this side of heaven.

Ellen invited him over from the woodpile where he had been chopping kindling for all he was worth since they had seen their prospect heading toward the house. "Dan, do come say, 'hello.'"

He put down his hatchet, grandly wiped his hands on his kerchief, as Pa used to do, and gave his best attempt at a swaggering walk over to the ladies.

"How 'do, ma'am," he said, bowing slightly. "So nice of you to come calling. Ellen's always glad to have you visit, and you know I just love anything that makes Ellen happy."

"I'm very glad to hear that, Daniel," Mrs. Brookfield replied. "I want Ellen to be happy, too."

"Yes, ma'am, it's Ellen and me. We stick close. We just don't know what we'd do without each other. We're as close as a brother and sister can be."

"That's us all right," Ellen added.

Mrs. Brookfield tipped her head and smiled, wryly. "Seems to me I remember some pretty good shoutin' matches between you two, comin' from the schoolyard not so long ago."

Ellen waved her hand. "Oh, just little things. We never fight about anything big. And besides, that was...before everything. We're even closer now."

"Yeah, closer," Dan added.

"Oh, dear. Well, yes, I suppose you would be, after all you've been through." Dan heard it coming, but he kept a smile pasted on his face and weathered it through. "My, yes, a sweet little girl like you. It's a tragedy, that's what it is."

Ellen blushed and ducked her head. "We are very grateful for the home we have here. We're glad to be together."

"Well, of course you are, child. And aren't we grateful that your grandparents could take you in to their big family?"

"Both of us," Dan chimed in.

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Mrs. Brookfield turned to look at him. "I see your point, Daniel. Don't hurt yourself tryin' no more." She turned back to Ellen. "I'll talk to Mr. Brookfield," she said. "Perhaps he would like a boy around the place."

But wouldn't you know it? The very next day Mr. Brookfield was out plowing under the clover in a field he'd left fallow, when his poor old horse saw a snake. The big old mare reared up, and stepped backward on her hind legs. Mr. Brookfield tripped in the furrow, and got tangled in the harness, and the horse came back right on top of him. Then it trampled him trying to get up. Killed him right on the spot.

It seemed to Dan that Ellen took real pity on Mrs. Brookfield. Now they had something more in common than just being girls. Mrs. Brookfield bought Ellen presents: dresses and ribbons and girl things like she'd never had before. Grandma didn't seem too pleased, but she didn't say much. Dan guessed she didn't want to deny the girl the pleasure of nice things.

Increasingly, as the weeks went by, Ellen seemed cranky about having to share a room with her brother.

"I have things now!" she whined one night. "I have my dresses and petticoats, and a bone hairbrush, and stockings!"

"So?" Dan was unimpressed.

"So I can't keep them just anywhere!"

Dan thought a minute. "What's the problem?" he asked. "You have a peg right here."

"A peg?" she huffed. "Daniel, I need privacy!"

"Since when?"

"Since now. A woman needs a private place."

That startled the boy. He had never in his whole life thought of his sister as a woman! He didn't know how to respond. He just got up and started out of the room. "Call me when you're done havin' privacy," he said.

It wasn't long after that that Mrs. Brookfield had another talk outside with Grandpa and Grandma. The cold Ohio autumn notwithstanding, they stood outside while the children stood at the window. Grandma seemed to be shouting, and she came back into

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the house in a huff, slamming the door behind her. She went straight to the kitchen and started given the bread dough what for.

When Grandpa finally started back to the house, Dan ran to the table and sat down, picking up a book. Ellen turned to the mending she had in hand.

Grandpa came in. He looked straight at Ellen, then went and sat in his rocker, staring straight ahead.

"Children," he said at last, "I need to talk with you."

Dan jumped right in. "Is there something I can do for you, Grandpa?"

"You saw Mrs. Brookfield here, I'm sure."

"Yessir," Dan said.

"She seems to think you children—or at least one of you—want to live with her."

Dan looked at Ellen and swallowed hard. Neither of them said anything.

"I have to say I'm kind of surprised at that. I thought we were doing pretty well here."

"Oh, yessir," Ellen said, "We're doing fine."

"Now I know I asked you about that a while back. Were you telling me the truth saying you were happy here? Now's the time to speak if you're not."

"No, no, Grandpa," Ellen said. "We just...we thought..."

"Ellen thought there were too many kids here and you might not want to keep us," Dan blurted out.

Ellen shot him a look that would have melted iron.

Grandpa sat quiet for a minute. Then he said, "Come here, children."

They looked at each other, then edged their way toward him. As soon as he could reach them he gathered them to him. At the same time, he called out, "Mother, come here, please."

Grandma came in, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. She still looked a little upset.

Grandpa looked at his wife. "Do we want these children in our home?" he asked.

Grandma's eyes teared up. "Of course we do."

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"But there are so many of us," Ellen said. "Levi, Price, Mary, Jesse, Martha, then the two of us."

"Is that what all this is about?" Grandma asked. "Child, you're far too young to be worrying about such things."

"We thought it might be easier if..." Dan couldn't finish the sentence. He could see that the whole idea was hurtful to his grandparents.

"You're all a handful, I will say that," Grandpa said, "and I'll admit it's a stretch for us. But we've been stretched before. You are blood of our blood. You belong in this family. Now no more of this nonsense. You hear?"

"Yessir," Dan said, and he felt a whole lot better than he had a few minutes before.

It was just then that Uncle James came in the front door. "What kind of a party is this?" he asked.

"These children seemed to think they should have shed of us," Grandma said, and the whole story was told, bit by bit.

"Well," Uncle James said quietly, "it's interestin' you should be talkin' about this just as I come in here, 'cause there's somethin' I have to say." He took a deep breath. "I've been thinkin' along those lines myself—that Martha and me put an extra burden on you."

"James..." Grandma started, but he cut her off.

"Let me say my piece, Elizabeth. I've surely felt the lack of Carolyn and my family, and I am grateful for you opening your home to Martha and me; but I think it's time I start rebuildin' my life. I thought it might be good for all of us if Ellen and Dan came out to our place with us."

The siblings looked at each other, speechless again.

"It would be far more company for us. And Ellen could take care of Martha, and I know Dan's a fine young hand on the farm here. I could use his help."

"Oh, I don't know, James," said Grandma, "that's a lot to put on these children."

"I don't mean to put upon them more than is reasonable. I'm just thinkin'...well, it could be a family for all of us again."

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Grandpa looked at the children one by one. “What do you think?”

Dan liked Uncle James. He liked the idea of being the main hand on a farm. He liked the idea of having his own family again, and not feeling like a visitor in his grandparents’ house. He looked at Ellen and could see that her eyes were sparkling.

“Let’s try it,” said Dan.

“Are you sure?” Grandma asked.

“Yes, let’s try it,” said Ellen.

“All right then,” said Grandpa, “if that’s what you want. But we want you both to know that you are welcome here any time. Family is family, now and forever. Right?”

Dan nodded. “Right.”

Suddenly, the world was full of possibilities.

As it turned out, a few months later, Uncle James sold his farm and moved in with his parents, Dan and Margaret Michael. Of course that took little Martha out of the bunch at the McPeeks’ home, even while the older children were at school. The Michaels had a good piece of land, too, and were well off. All their children were grown and gone, except for one daughter and her family who lived in another house on the place.

Uncle James became the legal guardian of Ellen and Dan Powell.

Life in the Michael home was good enough. It took some getting used to, of course—yet another change in their lives. Grandma Michael (as she asked them to call her) was more than kind. Ellen got her privacy, as she was given a room of her own. Dan realized then that life was going to keep changing, no matter what he thought about it.

Chapter 2

Separation

1861—1865

Living didn't take any big twists for about a year after that, unless of course you count the war. April 1861 had been of the beginning of the real fighting—American against American. (It was early in the conflict that Mr. Brookfield had been injured and sent home.) The killing drug on. It was unthinkable. Still, most of the fighting was in other states, so folks in Marietta tried to go on with everyday life as best they could. However, most of the men were off to the war, and widows and wives left alone with children. The men who were at home in Ohio were either too old to go to war, or had been wounded and come home, or—like Uncle James—were widowers with children, excused from service. Even he considered enlisting. That is, until he met Sarah Marks.

Mrs. Marks was a pretty, young widow whose husband had been among the first of the Ohio Calvary to die. Childless, she had taken a job as a tailor's assistant, mending gentlemen's clothing and making uniforms for the militia. A torn pocket on his jacket had taken James to the tailor's shop, and there he had met Mrs. Marks.

They courted for most of 1862 and were married in November of that year. Children followed. Soon Dan was feeling like he had before—the fifth wheel on a four-wheeled wagon. The house was getting crowded, and though he was treated as family, he couldn't help feeling that he was still somehow an outsider.

James' brother David had moved to Kansas in 1860. His letters told of wide-open opportunity there. James continued to talk about the possibility of moving; it was often the topic of conversation at supper. But Sarah was reluctant. Both their families were in Ohio, and the youngest children were so small. James assured her that Ellen, Dan and Martha would be able to take care of the younger children. However, Sarah reminded him that it probably wouldn't be long before they themselves would be going off on their own.

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This went on for quite some time. Sarah almost agreed to go in 1863 when the war got as far north as Salineville, about 40 miles west of Marietta; but the Ohio Cavalry beat back the Confederates, and things calmed down. Then, in early 1865, with the war coming to a close, David's letters about the boom in nearby Kansas City was too much for James to resist. He made up his mind that they would go in the spring.

For Dan there was just one problem; he'd had his mind set on getting a job working on the river. He wanted to try something other than farming and taking care of animals. He was almost 14, and the call of adventure was deafening.

"Heading for the prairie is adventure," Uncle James had told him.

Daniel tried to sound mature. "No, sir. With due respect, going west with my family isn't what I'm looking for."

James protested—even tried putting his foot down hard; but Dan saw himself as a man. He'd seen more in his days, he thought, than most would ever see, and he wasn't afraid to face the world on his own. Uncle James finally gave up the battle and told Dan he could stay. He'd move back in with the McPeeks.

Dan knew that he'd given a false impression. Uncle James thought he was going to stay in Marietta and try to get on at the ferry that ran between there and Parkersburg. That might do to start out, but Dan had bigger ideas. He decided he'd wait a few days after they left, then break the news to the rest of the family.

Saying good-bye to Ellen was hard. As a matter of fact, that's the one thing that almost made Dan abandon his plan. The night before the family was to leave, they sat on the front porch together.

"I don't understand, Danny," Ellen said. "I want you with me."

"I can't explain it, Sis," he said. "It's just somethin' I gotta do."

"Your grammar is getting worse," she scolded. "Who's going to remind you of the rules?"

He smiled. "No one, I hope."

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She hit his arm. "We've never been apart, Danny. And Kansas is hundreds of miles away."

"They's letters."

"Oooo, Daniel! There are letters! You see what I mean?"

"I'll write."

"It's not the same."

They sat for a long time after that, arm in arm, staring at the loaded wagon, until the sun was down and the air was so chilled that they had to go in.

Morning came, and the family waved good-bye. Dan was sad as he watched them leave, but at the same time, a thrill of freedom ran through him. It wouldn't be long now!

He worked all morning in the barn, feeding the horses and cows, and mucking out the stalls. Just about lunch time, the preacher came by. The same circuit preacher who had spoken words over Ma and Pa and all the family.

"Good day to ya, Dan," he called. That being both Dan's and Grandpa Michael's names, they both turned around. Dan let Grandpa answer.

"Hello, Reverend. What can I do for ya?"

"Well, it ain't you that I'm thinkin' could help," he said. "It's the boy here."

Dan hated it when grown-ups called him a boy, but he let it slide by.

"Me, Reverend?"

"Yessir, Daniel. Seems Old Mr. Jenkins ain't doin' too well. I thought maybe you could lend him a hand."

Daniel remembered how Old Jenkins had been so kindly to him and Ellen those first few weeks, when the family took sick. "Well, if I can," he said. "What does he need?"

"A hired hand," the preacher answered. "He can't hardly get around his place anymore. He needs a young, strong back on the place."

Dan thought about his plans. "Well, fer how long, do ya think?"

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The preacher shook his head. "No tellin'. Maybe he'll get better, but he ain't getting' any younger."

I ought to do it, Dan thought. Pa would want me to. Ma would surely want it. He looked at Grandpa Michael.

Grandpa shrugged. "Up to you, boy."

"I reckon I could for a while. How much is he payin'?"

"You'll have to work that out with him. But I won't lie to ya. It probably won't be much. He ain't got but what it takes to feed his stock and once in a while hisself. It would be more an act of Christian kindness than a job."

That wasn't so appealing. Dan thought some more. He had a nice home and plenty of food here with Grandpa and Grandma Michael, so he could do with little or no pay. It wouldn't hurt him any to help out Old Jenkins for a while. It might even make his grandparents a little more sure that he could handle being on his own if they saw him do such a job before he left. And he thought again of that awful day—how Old Jenkins had given them a place to go.

"Sure," he said. "I'll help him out."

"That's fine, boy! Just fine! I'll stop by there and tell him to expect ya in the mornin'."

Though Dan had been walking by the Jenkins place for years (as well as by the new house that now stood where his family had lived), he hadn't really paid attention to how much it had gone downhill. The fence was broken, the roof needed patching, and the barn door was off its hinge. The whole place looked sad and abandoned. When he walked up the steps of the porch, a loose board almost pitched him back to the ground.

"That'll be first on my list," he muttered.

He knocked and waited a long time before Old Jenkins came to the door. He kept thinking about the size of that little cabin. He thought he could have crossed it ten times by the time the door creaked open. There stood his old neighbor, more shriveled than he thought a living person could be.

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“Mr. Jenkins, it’s Dan. Daniel Powell.”

“I know ya, boy. Come on in.”

He shuffled to the side, opening the door enough that Dan could enter.

“The Reverend says you could use a little help around the place,” Dan said.

“Yeah. I’m sure ya can see that. I ain’t been up to my usual self of late.”

“Well, you just tell me what you want done, and I’ll get right on it, sir.”

“I ’preciate that, Dan’l. I surely do. If ya could see to the stock first, I’d say. Then...well, you can see plenty ta do, I’m sure.”

“Yessir, Mr. Jenkins. I’ll get to work.”

The chickens attacked him when he entered the barnyard, as if they hadn’t eaten for days. Dan fed them the seed that was in a hopper on the outside of the barn—what little there was of it—then went into the barn to see what else he could find.

The barn was a mess. The stalls hadn’t been mucked out for weeks, from the look of them. There was no water in the troughs and little hay in the loft. The cows looked hungry. The horses hadn’t been curried for quite a while. The size of the job ahead of him might have overwhelmed him if he hadn’t been able to put his sympathy for Mr. Jenkins and the animals first.

“Nothing for me but to do it,” he said, and set to work.

A week later, things were in a much better state. The animals were content, because their food and water was coming regular. The horses’ coats were shiny and the barn was clean and orderly. Dan had mended the step on the porch and fixed a hole in the roof of the house. He still had a long list of things to do and he was working long hours, but it made him feel good.

Old Jenkins was thankful, and he said so every day. Dan couldn’t help but note that. He couldn’t remember his old neighbor having much of anything to say when they lived next door, let alone being so nice. Ma used to have him over to supper sometimes, and

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he would eat pretty much in silence, then thank her and excuse himself as fast as he could. Maybe it was his age that had made him more talkative. Maybe it was those weeks Ellen and Dan had stayed with him that had loosened him up. Anyway, he truly did seem to be grateful for Dan's help, and that was nice.

After about a month, when Dan showed up one morning, Jenkins was on the porch waiting for him.

"Thought I'd help ya out today," he said.

"Well, that's fine, Mr. Jenkins," Dan replied.

He thought this meant that Jenkins was getting better and would soon be able to take over his place on his own again. But an hour later, the old man had to go into the house to rest. He came out for a while after lunch, but not for long. Still, Dan thought, it's a step.

It went on that way all through the summer. Mr. Jenkins got up to two or three hours at a time, but never more. The heat was too much for him sometimes; then the weather started to cool.

One day when he got home after being at Old Jenkins' place all day, there was a letter from Ellen waiting for him. She said she was going to marry Paul Michael!

Paul was a good-enough fella, the son of Uncle James' brother David. He and Dan had palled around a lot growing up. It seemed a little odd at first that Ellen would consider marrying him, since they were more like cousins than friends. But Ellen's letter explained it all:

"When we got here to Kansas, I didn't know a soul except for David's family. Honestly, Dan, there just aren't many people around! And Paul was so kind to me. We took to spending a lot of time together. I never realized how nice he was. And then somehow we were in love, and he asked me to be his wife. I want you to be happy for me, Danny, for I truly am happy myself."

Well, how could Dan argue with that? It was hard to think of Ellen as a married woman, but then it was going to happen

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someday. He was glad that he knew the man she was marrying, and that he could trust he would treat her well.

Dan wrote back and gave her his blessing.

One morning in October, Dan knocked on Old Jenkins' door, but no one answered.

"Mr. Jenkins?" he called. No answer. "Mr. Jenkins?" He opened the door and went in, half afraid of what he'd find.

Mr. Jenkins was in bed, and not looking well.

"I'll get Doc Jones," Dan said. "You rest easy. I'll be right back."

He ran as fast as he could to the doctor's office, then ran back, beating Doc, who came in his buggy.

"It's a bad cold," Doc said, "maybe worse. You'll have to keep him warm. Give him plenty of broth and a little whiskey if you can."

Then he motioned for Dan to step outside with him.

"I'll tell you straight, Dan. There isn't much fight in him. He's too old and frail. He'll need all the care he can get, around the clock. Do you know someone who could stay with him?"

"I'll do it," Dan said, without hesitating.

"It's a big job, Dan, and you may be looking at...well, he may not make it."

"I understand that, sir. We've gotten close, Doc. I can't turn my back on him now, when he needs me most."

Dan explained the situation to his family, and by that night had moved into the drafty little cabin with Old Jenkins. He worked the farm when the old man was asleep, and tended the patient as well as any nurse could. It was exhausting work, but Dan felt a personal responsibility to it. It brought back those days when he wanted to help his parents, his sister and his brother, and nobody would let him.

Winter came early. It was a harsh one. Most of the crops around Marietta froze in the fields. The Ohio River was frozen nearly solid. No boats could get through. There was barely enough to eat, let alone to feed the animals. Jenkins had Dan sell off most of the chickens to buy feed for the cow, keeping just enough so they could eat a few eggs and a couple of roasted hens over the coming months. They bought what they could get on credit at the mercantile, when they could get there. Some days there was so much snow they couldn't even get to the barn to feed the poor cow. They just had to hope she could hold on till the wind died down and the snow stopped drifting long enough for them to cut a path to the barn.

Finally, it became clear that the illness was going to win out over poor Mr. Jenkins.

"You been a good boy, Dan," Jenkins wheezed out that last day. "Like a son to me."

Dan choked back a lump in his throat.

"I wish I had somethin' ta leave ya," the old man went on. "All I got's this land, and after this winter, that's gonna be in hock."

"It's okay, Mr. Jenkins."

"I'm leavin' ya right where I found ya that day yer folks took sick, ain't I, boy? With nothin' and nobody."

"No, sir. You gave me a lot, and I thank you." Dan felt good saying it.

Jenkins pulled a crumpled piece of paper out from under his blanket.

"Doc wrote this here paper fer me. An' he signed that it's what I said I want. Whatever's left after the bills is yours. You sell the animals. And you bargain for 'em. Don't let nobody take ya."

"Yes, sir."

"That will give you a little."

There were no more words, but Dan sat beside Old Jenkins till he breathed his last.

Somehow, looking at the peaceful body of his benefactor, Dan found the closure he'd never had when his family died. He'd never been able to sit with them. He'd never seen them in death.

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Somehow it hadn't been real, because he hadn't seen it. Now an understanding came to his heart. He took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, he felt the sorrows of all those years fall into their nesting places. He knew it was time to move on.



A story based on the life of Dan Powell, founder of the town of Powell, South Dakota, who lived from approximately 1852 to 1929. This work is based on the facts gathered by Dr. Albert "Britt" Karns, a descendant of Powell. It weaves the documented places and people involved in Powell's life with a creative interpretation of what may have driven him from place to place, and the people he may have encountered.

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