

Golden Days Ahead ~ a prequel short story to Golden Hearts

Vernon Marshall gasped hot, stuffy air. Soaked in sweat and stinking of blood, he hauled in a second breath. Disoriented in the darkness, he lay on his back, something hard beneath him. The tastes of toast and jam and metal on his tongue. An ache pulsed on the back of his head, and dozens more pains protested his movements.

Buster was the name of the dog he had when he was five. His father had given him cufflinks for his twentieth birthday. Small snippets of a life, but why did he have no recollection of how he was bound and stuffed in a solid box?

He swallowed hard against fear. A fear that gave monsters nightmares.

He made to sit, but his hand banged against something, and ropes dug into his wrists and neck. A groan parted his lips, and he lay back down. The noose loosened, and he drew in a long breath.

A locomotive whistle blew, and Vernon jostled against the sides of the crate.

The train gathered speed, lurching forward to a forgotten destination. Grey light filtered into the crate through a narrow slit. Two steamer trunks stood beside his.

Something grated against the car floor. The wooden boards of the car groaned, and the steady woop woop-woop of wheels rattled against the tracks.

He pulled against his bindings, but the rope dug deeper into his skin and choked him. He gulped air, pulled on his wrists, then stopped when the edges of his thoughts blurred. Another breath, then he tugged on the bindings. The tendons in his neck tensed tight from effort.

Breath, tug, breath, tug, and on the last breath, he strained, and the ropes loosened. A fleeting moment of triumph followed by blackness.

Vernon gulped air, still hot, but it smelled sweatier and thicker with blood. He sat up but struck his head against the top of the trunk. Another welt to add to the collection. He eased back down, and his skin burned raw and chafed around his neck and wrists. He reached for the trunk's lock, and the ropes slid away.

He rolled onto his side, bumping his shoulder against the wood wall. A sharper ache to add to his catalogue of complaints. He pushed against the metal plate of the lock, but the bolts were smooth and solid, and the lock was on the outside, and his muscles were fatigued.

He kicked against the side of the trunk, and pain throbbed in his toes and ankle. It grated against the floor, filling the silence between the woop-woop-woop of the engine and the cars rattling on the tracks.

Alarm choked him, robbing his mind of clarity and his lungs of the thinning air. He fisted his hands and braced for the brightness of day to assault his eyes, ready to lunge, charge, kick, bite, and spit his way out.

Courage stomped on fear, and Vernon kicked the side of the crate.

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Short story based on Vernon Marshall, lead male character in *Golden Hearts*, Book 2 of Frontier Hearts
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Wood cracked, a little, enough to encourage his courage and spear his fear.

He kicked harder, the hurt in his toes and ankle a new entry in his catalogue of pains.
Kick, release, breathe. Kick harder, release. Breathe harder.

The wood splintered a little more, enough to give him a second source of
precious air. Cooler air, laced with the scents of musty papers and paint and
freedom.

He leaned towards the second hole and steadied his breath.

The dim light revealed burlap post office bags, barrels, and bushels marked District of Alberta
that were stacked in the corner. A crinkled wanted poster issued by the Northwest Mounted
Police was tacked to the wall. Two yokes were tied down to the barrels.

He kicked the trunk. It gave a little, then a little more, then enough for him to push the board
loose.

Elation washed over him, carrying with it a splash of hope and a swell of energy. He scrambled
out of the box and stood. Dozens of glass splinters pricked the soles of his bare feet. He
hopped on one foot, then the other, and the shards dug deeper into his flesh.

He winced and cursed the wretched day, his faulty memory, and the taste of blood on his
tongue. He leaned his hips against the desk, shimmying backwards until both buttocks sat,
then hooked an ankle over his knee and picked out the glass.

A broken lantern lay beside the trunk. The smell of kerosene weighed down the air, covering the
scents of grain, leather, and wood. The train car rocked, and the kerosene spill spread across
the floor, seeping through the floorboards.

The woop-woop-woops of the locomotive's engine gained speed, and the wheels ground
against steel, faster and faster.

Feet free of glass, his catalogue of pains now with two appendices, he checked his pockets
for a wallet or a ticket or a morsel of food. His trouser pockets were empty, his shirt pocket
was empty, and there was nothing sewn into his collar, sleeve, or trouser cuffs.

His memories were rippled reflections in a sea on a moonless night. Something had been
there, a rock had skipped across the water, but the size and shape of the rock disappeared
into the sea's depths.

He removed a large envelope from the table, swept the glass aside, then tossed the envelope
back onto the table. He crossed the car to the undamaged trunks and tried the locks. One

opened. He rummaged through women's clothes, a velvet pouch, and found men's clothes underneath. The shirt was high quality and had a tailor's mark on the collar; the jacket was tight in the shoulders, but the shoes were a good fit.

Vern slid his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket and removed a billfold. He thumbed through its contents—fifteen one-dollar bills, a picture, and train tickets to Prosper, Alberta. The man in the picture

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wore a top hat and a faint but proud smile. A baby in a christening gown was propped on his knee. Next to the man was a woman, eight or maybe ten years his junior, but her eyes held ageless wisdom.

The shapes of the man's eyes and ears were familiar. Familiar in the set of his shoulder, familiar in a sharp sense of humour, familiar for a keen intellect, but not familiar in name.

He tossed the billfold into the trunk and closed its lid.

He scooped up the velvet pouch and opened it. A masterfully carved ivory cameo of a woman, with a string of pearls caressing her neck and set against a gold frame, lay inside. He ran his thumb over its gold leaf-shaped filigree, his hands remembering the feel of delicate tools.

The acrid smell of smoke mixed with the air. A blue flame snaked along the spilt kerosene.

Vern tossed the pouch back into the trunk, then stomped on the flame. Kerosene splashed on his trouser hem.

The flames licked higher and wider, spreading across the floorboards and snaking towards the burlap sacks.

He grabbed a dress from the trunk and patted down the flames, but the motion fanned the blaze near the kerosene container. A flash of fire engulfed his vision.

His arm shielding his eyes, he stumbled backwards and caught himself on the desk. Grey smoke filled the room, crowding the corners of the car and bunching over the barrels.

Vern lunged for the trunk, grabbed the wallet and velvet pouch, and leapt towards the car door. He tried the handle. Locked. The door handle rattled against the jamb. The high-pitched clack was the worst of sounds over the woop-woop-woops of engines, the grinding of steel wheels against steel tracks, the crackle of fire, and the boom of his pulse.

He took a step back and threw himself at the door. Something inside him went crack, and the catalogue of complaints expanded into an encyclopedia of expressions of agony. He used his body as a cannonball of flesh and bone against the door twice, three, four times more.

The door gave way with a loud crack. Vern stumbled forward, his arms pinwheeling for balance. He grabbed the railing of the car and pulled himself away from the gap between the cars.

The crackle of fire intensified, and the flames flickered from an angry orange to a bright blue to an orange reserved for painters and clowns. Charcoal-coloured smoke puffed through the door faster than a stampeding herd of buffalo.

He pulled his collar over his mouth, ignored the buckle in his knees and the heaviness in his gut, and stepped over the coupler.

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The wind shifted, blowing smoke and sparks and soot and Hell towards him. Flames spread through the car's entrance like a carpet of fire and spread burning threads in a deadly pattern towards the new car.

He sprawled against the floor of the landing, reached for the cut bar, and pulled it.

Hell slid further and further behind. Fiery tentacles spread through the wagon, spitting and cracking with fury.

Vern gripped the platform's edge, gaining a moment's rest from the nightmare.

He remembered his mother's snorting laughter and the yellow daffodils in the flower baskets on his parents' porch. Yet the half-dozen welts on his head barred the memory of how he arrived on the train from his mind.

He inventoried his pain and found the ledger to be in red.

Vern stood, straightened his shirt, tugged his cuffs, and raked his fingers through his hair. He clenched and unclenched his fists, not that it brought down his pulse, eased the knots in his shoulders, or settled his unravelling nerves. Then, he eased the door to the car open, ready to feign a smile, land a punch, or turn around and jump from the train.

A dozen rows of high-backed cushioned benches stood empty.

An opened newspaper lay on a table between benches. Vern picked it up. The Manitoba Free Press was dated July 27, 1886. He skimmed over the advertisements for a jeweller, ranching and homesteading supplies, information on land grants, and advice on advances in fall ploughing. One article described a murder trial in Winnipeg, and another on a train robbing gang operating near Brandon.

The train gathered more speed. The car shook on the rails. The woop-woop-woop of wheels was rhythmic as the pelting of November rain against a window.

Vern walked to the end of the car, opened the door, and stepped out onto the landing.

A man stood against the door window of the next car, his back to Vern. A rifle was slung over his shoulder.

A shot of courage — or perhaps madness, or perhaps the midpoint between the two — raced through Vern. He jumped to the next car, then pressed his back against the wall.

A baby cried from inside the train car.

“Shut that baby up,” a man shouted.

The baby shrieked.

“I said shut that baby up, or I’ll throw you both off the train.” The gunman had a frontier accent, a blend of Scottish, Finnish, Sioux, and French—a jumble of words to trade and a puzzle of accents to decipher.

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Vern flung the door open and tackled the gunman.

A shot reverberated, and glass shattered.

The baby cried, a woman gasped, and angry shouts erupted from the other passengers.

Vern sucked in a breath, the air cooler, his shirt damp from sweat and stinking of gunpowder. He rocked back to his haunches.

Blood pooled from under the gunman. Vern pulled the rifle away from the man’s hands, then rolled him onto his back.

Startled eyes stared back at Vern. The hunting knife the gunman had been holding sliced the gunman in the belly.

Two men at the other end of the car wrestled with two outlaws.

A second shot sounded.

Vern charged to the front of the car, punched one of the gunmen, then tackled him to the ground. Punches landed, stomps on the feet, and the two gunmen were pinned to the ground belly-down with a jumble of fists, feet and elbows.

Vern pressed his knee into the small of a gunman’s back. “We need ropes.”

Belts and curtain ties were collected, and Vern tied up the gunmen.

The woman from the picture held her baby to her chest, pressing kisses on the child’s head.

The baby quietened. The woman's eyes were brown like with specks of gold, like a polished bronzite gemstone. She gave the impression of a dependable woman who had backbone and a fierce sense of humour.

"You're alive." The woman's voice cracked with emotion. A relieved smile flashed across her lips. She rose and went to Vern, baby on her hip. "How badly are you injured? I have to tend those marks around your neck."

The pieces of his broken memory rearranged themselves. She was Victoria Marshall, his brother's wife. They were headed west in search of land and opportunity in Prosper, Alberta. Clement was three years older than Vern and a lawyer who didn't like offices. Vern was a goldsmith.

"It's just scratches." And bruises, and possibly a sprained wrist, with some memory loss, and a body wide agony. "Are you injured?"

"No, and neither are the passengers." She angled her body away from the dead gunman. "Where's Clement?"

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"I don't know." She held her chin high, but the tremor in her voice gave her away. "Two outlaws took him and another man to the front of the train."

"Why?"

She ran small circles over Georgie's hand. "I don't know."

He turned to the bound gunmen.

The outlaws' faces were rough from road and weather. One had had a jagged scar down his cheek, prominent cheekbones, and had a meanness about him reserved for ensnared badgers. The other was blond, rounder in features, and dimness in his eyes that suggested he'd given up on life.

Vern nudged the leg of the outlaw with the scar with the toe of Vern's shoe. "What are you doing? What do you want with this train?"

The outlaw didn't respond. He stared blankly ahead with the same grim expression as a man walking towards the gallows.

A male passenger with a handlebar moustache and a sunburnt nose punched the gunman in the gut. The gunman retched and leaned forward but remained silent.

Vern collected the rifles and revolvers. He ran his thumb over the gunsmith's hallmark. The edges were jagged, and the engraving was of poor quality. He removed the bullets and

looked down the barrel.

It was clean, recently oiled, and straight.

At least the gunsmith had enough pride in his work to make a gun that shoots straight. Vern reloaded the bullets. "We're not going to beat it out of them. We have to take control of the train."

Handlebar Man frowned, then lowered his fist. He stood a few inches taller than Vern and had dozens of scars on his knuckles and a chipped front tooth, proving he'd bested many a challenger.

The woop-woop-woop of the train gathered speed, now almost a woosh of unbroken noise.

The revolver's weight in his hand was an insufficient counterweight to the fear in Vern's gut. "What's the next stop?"

Handlebar Man took a rifle. "Regina."

"Anything important happening there?"

"Nothing in the newspaper." Handlebar Man had a Scottish burr.

The car rocked.

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Vern gripped the back of a bench. "Why stay on the train? They had control over people, could have taken their jewellery and money, and unhooked the last car with the cargo. Fast, easy, and no one gets hurt."

Victoria held Georgie's hand. "Maybe they're trying to get to the trial to spring the murderer free? It could be why we're moving faster."

Vern shook his head in an I-have-no-idea gesture.

"We're turning," Handlebar Man said. "There's no turn on the track to Regina."

The aches in his body yielded to the swell of worry. "How do you know there's no turn?" "I've ridden this line dozens of times."

"Dozens? The line's not three years old."

"Who do you think helped build it?" Handlebar Man stood taller, the sunburn on his nose a badge of honour. His hands were bronzed and calloused, and his boots unpolished.

Vern counted the bullets in the revolver. "What's out this way?"

"Farmsteads, a few settlements. If we keep heading this way, we'll be in Fort

Qu'Appelle." "What's there?"

"A mercantile, some farms, the Northwest Mounted Police have an office there."

Handlebar Man opened his pocket watch. "I reckon we're ten, fifteen minutes out at this speed."

Fifteen minutes to rescue his brother, save Victoria and Georgie and the other passengers, and the unsuspecting townspeople of Fort Qu'Appelle. Pressure built in Vern like steam in a locomotive, but there was no release valve, only a hard end in Fort Qu'Appelle.

One cut at a time, one loop at a time. That's how Vern had been taught to make jewellery. "We have to get control of the train. Are you with me?"

Handlebar Man and the two other helpers nodded. Grim expressions firmed their jaws and shadowed their eyes.

"Bring Clement back safe." Victoria sat, cradling Georgianna. Ashen grey painted Victoria's cheeks. Her eyelashes were heavy with tears, but none streaked down her cheeks.

"I will." He spoke the words with confidence, but couldn't muster strength in his shoulders. "If any of the outlaws try to escape, shoot him." He pressed a revolver in Victoria's hand.

Victoria's eyes widened, and her chin trembled, but she remained composed. She handed Georgianna to a woman and took the gun.

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Vern collected a second revolver, checked the chambered rounds, and strode out of the car. He squeezed the revolver's grip, but the tension made his hand shake more. He looked over his shoulder, and Handlebar Man and the helpers nodded.

Vern opened the door to the next car. Empty. They walked through it, then a second.

Also empty. The smoke from the steam engine thickened, and the air filled with sparks

of burning coal.

Vern stopped at the door of the last passenger car. The next car was the tender, holding coal and water for the engine. Revolver tucked away in his jacket pocket, he stepped onto the ledge of the tender. The tender rocked, and Vern lost his footing. He gripped the rail with sweaty hands, sliding his hand along it, edging forward, trying to keep his legs strong. He slid towards the locomotive, and his vision blurred from heat and smoke.

Ash coated his tongue and clogged his nostrils. He cleared his throat several times to suppress a cough. The hiss of steam punctuated the woop-woop-woop of wheels.

His jaw was tight, his collar tighter, but his grip on the revolver tightest. Vern peered around the corner into the cab.

Two men with rifles and bandanas over their faces watched Clement and another man shovel coal into the firebox.

Vern gulped stifling hot, smoky air and stepped around the corner. He'd left Hell on the tracks and had stepped back into it. A full-circle transit on a transcontinental rail line.

One of the outlaws startled and raised his gun.

Vern shot first. Stepping into the cab, he shouldered a second outlaw.

Clement struck a second gunman with his shovel, and Handlebar Man shoved the third outlaw out of the car.

The outlaw's yell petered out in the hiss of steam.

"Victoria and Georgie?" Clement's words were rushed and worried.

Vern clasped his brother's shoulder. "They're fine. They're in the passenger car. We've bound the other gunmen."

"We'll go check on them." One of the helpers leaned into the cab from the tender, then slid away. Vern nodded.

Handlebar Man leaned out of the cab. "We have a problem."

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Just the one? "What is it?"

"Fort Qu'Appelle is a mile away." Handlebar Man's accent thickened with worry. "That's good. We can hand over the outlaws to the Mounties."

Handlebar Man pulled on the brakes and steel ground against steel. "Not at this speed. We have to slow the train."

"How do we do that?"

“Close the firebox and close the water valve.”

Vern took the shovel and forced the door to the firebox shut.

Clement closed the wheel of the water valve. “Now, what do we do?”

Handlebar Man grimaced and pulled harder against the brakes. “Blow the whistle to release steam.” Vern pulled the whistle, and steam hissed. “Now what?”

“Pray.”

“Pray?” Vern and Clement said.

Vern hadn’t gone through Hell twice in a day to sit back and pray. “Does uncoupling the passengers from the locomotive help?”

Handlebar Man shook his head. “It’s more dangerous. The cars have enough momentum to hit the engine and pile up at the platform.”

“That’s it. I’m done.” The second gunman jumped off the train and rolled to the ground. He screamed and clutched his leg.

Clement looked on, his jaw slack, his eyebrows raised.

Vern blinked, shook his head, and then blinked again. The sight of the outlaw jumping was the least shocking of events on a day marked by a series of staggering sequences.

“There must be something else we can do.” Vern hated the helplessness in his voice, the hopelessness of the situation, and the Hell this train would rain down on Fort Qu’Appelle.

Fort Qu’Appelle was in view. Its wooden structures stood proud against the prairie. A few cowboys corralled a herd of cows. A black stagecoach stood outside the hotel, and a man loaded the luggage onto the coach’s roof.

Vern looked at the gauges, but none were of help. “How fast are we going?”

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Handlebar Man leaned over the rail. “Twenty-five, twenty-six miles an hour.”

That fast? No one would make it. Not poor Georgie, who had just begun her life, not the innocent people in the passenger car, not the porter at the rail station.

The tremor in Vern’s hands worsened, and he pulled on the whistle. “Get out of the way,” he yelled to the townspeople, but his voice was lost in the woop-woop-woop of wheels.

Clement extended his hand, and Vern clasped it, pulling him into a hug.

"I'll be with Victoria and Georgie." Clement patted Vern's back, then sidled along the edge of the tender.

Vern swallowed hard. His shirt was soaked through with sweat, his tongue covered in ash, his future as opaque as the clouds of black smoke billowing from the stack. He prayed to Saint Eligius and stared out, defeated, desperate, and on death's door.

He pulled the whistle and waved for the townspeople to clear the tracks and station. He yelled until the back of his voice was raw and his throat rough.

The locomotive hit the idling train with the force of lightning striking steel, but the steel didn't bend. It twisted and turned into gnarled heaps.

Vern bounced off the walls of the cab and was thrown onto the ground. His world splintered into wood, steel, pain, and darkness.

Vernon Marshall gasped hot, steamy air heavy with machine oil, coal, and dirt. Pain spread from his chest to his limbs and roared with a vitriolic vengeance. He sucked in air, more shocked than surprised that he was still alive.

Soaked in sweat, blood, and steam, he rolled onto his side and forced air into his exhausted lungs. He smelled of smoke and ash and luck. Abdomen, ankles, arms, back, elbows, legs, ribs, thighs, and wrists experienced a new level of pain. The encyclopedia of complaints expanded into a library, and an alphabetical list of complaints rolled through him.

"Are you hurt?" a man asked, leaning over him.

Hurt? Hurt implied a stubbed toe or a twisted ankle. Vern was on a new plane of existence where torment and torture were soulmates. "I'm fine. What about the passengers?"

"We're seeing to them now." The man's voice wavered.

Vern rolled onto his hands and knees and stared at the ground. "There's a mother and child in the passenger car. Do you see them?"

"I see a woman in a blue dress and a baby. They're being helped out."

The tightness in Vern's chest eased, but not much. "That's them. And her husband?"

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"There's a man inside the car with a cut on his head. He's got brown eyes and a blue jacket. He's helping the other women down."

"That's Clement." Vern pushed himself up to his feet, and his world tilted. He swallowed past the nauseous and headache and planted his feet firmly on the ground.

A handful of Northwest Mounted Police rode in on the scene. Townspeople flocked around the derailed train, helping people out.

Vern rubbed the back of his neck. "Have you seen a man with a handlebar moustache? He was beside me in the cab."

"You mean that man?" The man pointed to Vern's left.

Handlebar Man and the second man who had shovelled coal with Clement rode away on a four-horse wagon.

Vern ran his tongue over the cut on his lower lip. It stung, but pain was proof of life.

The locomotive had crashed into another train car already parked at the station, splintering it like kindling. The furniture, including a safe in the car, lay broken.

The man beside Vern whistled and then cursed.

"What's wrong?"

"That's the Canadian Bank of Commerce's train, and they were making a pickup from the gold mine. Those two men have stolen the gold."

A widow is out for justice, and a wounded hero is set on a new life. They combine forces to right wrongs.

Three years ago, Alberta—Bertie—Jepsen's husband was gunned down in cold blood by a gang of train robbers. Since then, she's been on a mission to track the murderers down. Between being a loyal sister, a midwife, and a business owner, Bertie uses every moment of spare time to investigate her husband's murder. The injustice of it drives her, compels her, and pushes her to the brink of sacrificing everything to track the criminals down.

Vernon Marshall travelled across Canada to start a new life. When his train was hijacked, it left

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Vernon with more bruises than he could count and a constant headache. He does his best to understand the ways of the West, but life in Prosper is very different from life in Toronto. When an encounter with Bertie leaves Vernon smitten, he embarks on her quest to find the train

robbers. Vernon is struck by Alberta's kindness and loyalty to her family, but is she strong enough to love him despite his family secret?

Bertie is determined to interrogate the handsome and far younger Vernon, but in the process, she loses her heart to his charms and handsome smile.

Will uncovering her husband's murderer allow Bertie to move on, or will it tear her apart?

Every town has secrets. Prosper, Alberta, has more than most. Will Bertie and Vernon's secrets tear them apart, or can they join forces and finally discover the truth?

Golden Hearts is perfect for readers who enjoy a Western historical mystery-romance set on the frontier, featuring an older heroine out for justice and a younger, injured hero with a charming smile and a heart of gold.

Order your copy of [Golden Hearts](#) here.



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