

The Iron Door

A Novel by Jeb Brack

First Draft

1/11/2018

Chapter 1

Cash Joyner sat beside the road, waiting for the stagecoach. It wasn't due for at least another hour, and in fact he'd been sitting there since dawn, watching the sun rise over the mountains and shivering in the early September chill. This was the third time he'd tried to catch the weekly stage, though, and he was determined not to miss it this time around.

The first time, he'd plain showed up late. By the time he reached his chosen vantage point, the coach had gone by and all he could see was a small dust cloud east across the desert.

The second time, a week later, he arrived early enough to choose his spot, at an outcropping of rock close to the road. He tethered his horse a ways off the track and watched until he saw the stagecoach approaching, then stepped into the road and levered a round into his rifle, taking up a proud stance with the rifle held across his chest in a businesslike manner. The coach clattered toward him, and he yelled for it to halt.

Later, it occurred to Cash that with all the noise of the horses and the wheels and such, the driver of the stage never heard the order to stop. In any event, it didn't, and Cash figured if you were too stupid to get out of the way of a team of four horses pulling a huge wooden carriage, then you deserved what you got. He jumped aside as the stage thundered past, leaving him to choke on the dust of its passing. He kept the rifle clasped to his chest, but his stance was a little less commanding as he watched the stage continue on, following the one a week before.

Clearly, there was more to robbing a stagecoach than he had anticipated.

He gave it a good deal of thought before trying again, and this time he believed he had the problem licked. He chose an ambush site far out from towns and ranches where the road ran narrow, with a steep hill on one side and river bank on the other. He got there the day before the stage, and spent a long, back-breaking day moving stones into the roadway. The stones had to be

big enough that the coach wheels couldn't get over them, but small enough so he and his horse could move them. He used a spade to pile the stones with soil, to make it look like a rockslide from the hill. At first, Cash kept a close watch for approaching riders or wagons; if anyone asked he planned to tell them that he was clearing the slide instead of creating it. No one came.

By nightfall, the pile was knee-deep across most of the road, and Cash was exhausted—and a little disgusted as well. The whole idea of robbing the stagecoach was to avoid strenuous labor in the first place. He figured one day's worth was better than doing it all day, every day for a measly couple of dollars a month, and when the stage came by he'd have the biggest payday he ever saw, so it was worth it. He ate a little hardtack washed down with water, too tired to cook anything, and rolled up in his blanket for the night.

He slept sitting up, not wanting to get too comfortable, and his plan worked—he slept quite poorly, startling and looking around every half-hour or so, then trying to find a position that eased his stiff neck. As the sky lightened toward dawn, he gave up trying to sleep and instead stamped around to get warm. A fire now, he reasoned in his sleep-fuddled state, would only give away his position to anyone watching. Eventually, the sun made it over the edge of the mountains and the day began to warm up, and Cash settled back to watching for the approach of the stage.

Now he heard someone approaching all right, but it came from the opposite direction, and it sounded like a single horse. Cash shielded his eyes against the still-low sun and saw a rider, still distant, trotting down the road toward him from the east. Cash swore under his breath; the stage was due soon, and now it looked as though he'd have to start dismantling the rockslide. And what if the fellow wanted to help? Imagine the two of them, working together so the stage could just rattle on by while Cash could do nothing but watch. No, he'd have to get rid of the

guy one way or another. If he wouldn't ride on, then...Cash glanced at his rifle. He didn't want to shoot anybody, and hadn't since the war, but this was a matter of survival.

The rider drew near enough for Cash to make out his face. The guy was bearded, with salt and pepper hair, and big under his leathers, which were dusty and well-worn. A rifle scabbard hung from his saddle, and beneath his mackinaw Cash could see a gun belt, spare cartridges glinting. The guy rode easily, without any hint of suspicion as he drew up to Cash's rockslide. "Morning," he called. "What've we got here?"

Cash nodded down at his handiwork. "Looks like part of the hill gave way," he said. He stayed close by his rifle, but didn't pick it up. Not yet.

The big guy regarded Cash from beneath the brow of his sweat-stained hat, then turned his attention back to the pile of stones and dirt. "Just come across it, did you?" he said. Cash nodded. "Well, what do you suppose we ought to do about it, clear it? Or leave it be?"

Cash pretended to give it some thought. "Normally I'd say clear it," he said at last. "With two of us it wouldn't take but a couple of hours. But..."

"I know what you mean," the guy said. "I'm in a bit of a hurry myself."

At this, Cash allowed himself to relax a little. He collected his rifle and grinned at the big man. "Besides," he said, "There's a stage due along today; why not let them earn their pay for once?"

The guy laughed and guided his horse around the tail end of the pile, saying, "Well, shit, why didn't you say so? With the passengers helping, the driver'll have it clear in no time!"

They both chuckled as Cash secured his rifle to his own saddle and swung aboard. The big guy continued west along the road, touching the brim of his hat as he went by. "Take care now," he said as he passed.

“You too,” said Cash, and started his horse walking east. After a moment, he looked back and drew up his mount. The big guy kept moving west and Cash watched him until he was out of sight around the next bend. Then, with a sigh of relief, he dismounted, re-tethered the horse, and resumed his vigil.

The coach seemed to be running late today, and the sun was high in the sky before it appeared. By then the last of the night chill had fled and the day looked as though it would be a hot one. Cash wished he had slept a little better the night before; he kept yawning and he took bites of hardtack and jerky to stay awake. At last he heard the rattle of the big metal-rimmed wheels on the uneven road, the clatter of hooves, the jingle of the harness audible even more than a mile away. He rose and slapped the dust off his britches, put the rifle down out of sight behind a nearby stone, and took hold of the spade. Then he waited for the stage to draw near.

When the driver saw the pile of debris ahead, he did just as Cash hoped and reined in the team so that it stopped only feet from the obstruction. Cash stopped his digging and waved to the two men on the driver’s bench. “Hey there!” he called. “I’m glad you boys are here. Give me a hand and we’ll have this cleared in no time!”

He smiled to himself as the driver and the guard both clambered down. Both men wore sidearms, he saw, and the guard of course carried a double-barreled shotgun, but neither seemed particularly wary as they came over. Cash leaned on the spade and looked past them toward the carriage, where a couple of passengers had poked their heads out to see what the delay was.

“I just come on it a while ago,” Cash told the driver and the guard. “You want to help me out here?”

The two men looked at each other in a way Cash couldn’t quite read, then the guard said, “Sure, fella, we’ll lend a hand.”

“Well, here, you take this.” Cash offered him the spade and the guard took it. “I’ve got another one right here,” and he reached down behind the stone and came up holding his rifle.

“Don’t move,” Cash told them both. “If either one of you moves wrong, I’ll shoot him dead where he stands.”

Neither the driver nor the guard looked especially frightened at this prospect; in fact, they didn’t look the least bit surprised to be ambushed in such a fashion. The guard dropped the shotgun and the spade and both men put their hands in the air. The driver said, “Mister, I got to tell you, this won’t do you a bit of good.”

“Shut up and turn around,” Cash said. When they had, he reached forward and pulled their revolvers out of their holsters, then prodded them toward the coach. The passengers, a man and a woman, were still peering at the scene from their windows. Cash called to them, “This is a holdup, folks. Just take it easy and it’ll be over soon, and I promise no one will get hurt.”

He came up short when the woman called out, “You’re too late, mister!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we’ve got nothing for you to take. We already got robbed not an hour ago.”

Cash’s jaw dropped. He poked the driver with the muzzle of his rifle and asked, “What’s she talking about?”

The driver nodded, hands still in the air. “It’s true. Fella waved us down a while back with a letter in his hand, asked if we could take it along. George here reached down for it and the guy yanks him clean off the seat, then points his pistol at me and tells me to open the strongbox.”

“We done it,” said George the guard.

Six hours later, the sun dipping below the ridgeline, Cash still fumed at the idea of it. Of course he'd checked, and just to save face he'd taken what money the passengers had on them, but they hadn't been lying—the strongbox, bolted under the seat, stood empty of anything of monetary value. Cash's whole take from the job came to just under six dollars. Not a bad day's wage for digging and hauling, mind you, but hardly the riches he'd expected when he planned this job.

So he'd left the coach to clear the roadblock and set off after the big fellow, pushing his horse hard to make up time. George and the driver reckoned they'd been robbed an hour and a half before coming on Cash's ambush. The way Cash reasoned it, the guy wouldn't stick to the road for long; that would just take him back into town. Instead, he'd cut across country at the first opportunity. Sure enough, before long Cash found telltale gouges in the dirt, fresh hoof prints heading north off the road into the nearby hills.

Now daylight was failing, and still no sign of the big man except the occasional hoof mark. Whoever he was, the guy knew all the tricks: he rode in streambeds and gullies where possible so rainfall would obliterate tracks; he wound his way along bare rock so as to leave none at all when he could. It slowed Cash down to look for traces, and if he'd been much farther behind he might never have seen them, but he felt confident the fellow wasn't far ahead.

As it happened, he was right about that. Riding up a dry wash he leaned over in the saddle, searching the ground for the next mark, and two things happened at once: he heard a sharp *crack* nearby, and felt a tug at his shoulder as a bullet passed where his head had been a moment before. Cash hadn't been shot at since Vicksburg, but soldier's habits die only when the soldier does. Before the echo of the shot reached him, Cash rolled out of the saddle, hitting the ground hard, and scrabbled for the brush that lined the gully.

Startled by the sudden noise and motion, his horse trotted farther up the slope, taking with it the rifle in its scabbard. Cash stayed on his belly and drew his revolver. It wouldn't be much use against a rifle, unless he could figure where the bushwhacker was laid up and somehow circle around behind him. With his left hand, Cash felt his right shoulder, where the bullet had clipped him. There was no blood, and no pain, but he could feel ragged threads in the cloth of the sleeve. An inch or two lower, and the slug would have smashed his collarbone, or worse, pierced the lung.

At Vicksburg, and Shiloh before that, Cash had many close calls of the same kind, bullets or shell fragments that came near or struck someone else while leaving him unharmed. He never grew accustomed to it, but somehow his body learned to put off being frightened until the business at hand was finished. After the battle ended, he would tremble uncontrollably, sometimes even weep—but not until his job was done. Somewhere ahead of him and to the right, the big fellow with a rifle waited to see what he would do, where he'd gone. If Cash made the wrong move or too much noise, another bullet would follow the first, and the next one might be better aimed.

Cash cursed his own stupidity. The big fellow knew all the tricks, all right, and Cash should have anticipated this one. Of course he would set an ambush on his own trail, to see if he'd been followed and discourage pursuit. Only blind luck kept him from putting his bullet through Cash's head. Strangely, that thought steadied Cash a little; you could be good and you could be lucky, and sometimes the one got you through until the other one showed up. So far, the big fellow was good, but Cash had just gotten lucky. It was time to get good.

Moving slowly, trying not to disturb the dry brush around him, Cash began to shrug out of his coat, then his boots.

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Forty yards farther up the wash, Tom Mulvehill watched over the sights of his rifle, looking for any sign of movement in the bushes below him, listening for the telltale rustling that meant his target was shifting position. He couldn't be sure, but it looked to him like the rider had leaned over just before Mulvehill fired. If the guy wasn't dead, it made things more complicated; Mulvehill didn't relish poking through the scrub in the dark, looking for an injured (or worse, unhurt) man with a gun. No, there was still some daylight left, enough to see if the guy tried to move, and if night fell first, Mulvehill could just up and leave. The rider's horse had kept on going, and he'd have a hell of a time finding it in the dark. By the time he did, Mulvehill would be long gone.

A soft rattle of pebbles shifting sounded from below, and Mulvehill flattened himself against the boulder he'd chosen for his firing position, swinging the muzzle of the rifle slightly back and forth, searching for the source of the noise. The evening dimness made him imagine he saw bushes moving on the edges of his vision, but he knew where the rider had gone down and he didn't think the guy would have moved far.

There it was again; someone was moving down there, right about where Mulvehill figured. He settled the rifle against his shoulder and sighted along it, waiting for the guy to show himself.

His eye caught the motion and he took aim just long enough to assure himself it wasn't his imagination, then fired, cocked, fired again, cocked again and paused, holding his breath.

He had spied a hat, edging up over the tops of the bushes, and fired low, trying to hit the head inside it. The hat instantly dropped out of sight again and Mulvehill tried to decide whether he'd scored a hit. He strained his ears to make out any sounds through the ringing of the gunshots. He heard a brief thrashing in the brush that soon went still, and a single wet, choking cough of a kind he'd heard before—the final breath of a dying man.

Rising from behind his boulder, taking care where he trod, Mulvehill advanced down the wash. He kept his aim fixed on the patch of brush where the hat had appeared, in case the fellow wasn't dead but only wounded or shamming. When he'd gone ten yards or so, he stooped and picked up a couple of small stones with his left hand, keeping the rifle trained with his right, and tossed the stones ahead of him to one side. No one rose up to investigate the noise, so Mulvehill stalked a few yards closer until he was able to see over the bushes that had screened the rider.

The darkness was nearly complete now, with just a corona of light outlining the hills behind him, but the glow was enough to make out a pale shape beyond the sagebrush—a khaki-colored duster stretched out along the floor of the wash. One arm draped over a bush, and the coat bulged oddly in places. Staring hard through the gloom, Mulvehill thought he could make out a dark hat at one end and boots sticking out of the other. He raised the rifle and drew a bead before stepping closer and reaching down to poke at the shoulder of the hunched form.

Behind him he heard a voice say, "Drop that rifle, you son of a bitch, or by God I'll put a hole in your head to match the one in my hat."

Mulvehill froze and slowly put his hands out and up before tossing his rifle to the side. "I'll be goddamned," he said. "I fell for that even harder than you fell off your mount."

"Shut up," the voice said. "Now give me your pistol slowly. Butt first."

Mulvehill hesitated, weighing his chances and finding them slim. He would have to draw, spin, find his target in the near-dark, and shoot—all in the time it would take for the man to pull the trigger. The fellow behind him seemed to sense his thoughts, for Mulvehill heard the oily click of a weapon being cocked.

“You won’t make it,” the voice said. “Now hand over that pistol.”

Mulvehill drew his Colt from the holster with finger and thumb, then took it by the barrel and extended his arm back. He felt it taken from his hand.

“Now where’s the swag?” the voice asked.

“What swag?” Mulvehill hedged.

“Don’t be stupid. This morning you robbed the stage not an hour after you saw me. I worked hard for that stage, and by God I’ll have the take for it.”

Mulvehill let astonishment creep into his voice. “Was that you? I thought you was just clearing a slide! Anyway, I didn’t rob no stage.”

“Then why the hell did you light out cross-country?”

“Well, I only said I didn’t rob no stage today. I have in the past, I admit, and I was hoping to avoid the towns around here. Then I saw you behind me and figured you had to be the law, or a bushwhacker. I surely do apologize and I’m glad to be proved wrong.”

A short silence followed this speech, then the voice said, “Mister, I’ve heard some liars in my time; hell, I got pretty good at it myself. But you’re about the smoothest I’ve heard yet. Turn around.”

Mulvehill turned slowly and got his first look at his captor. In the gloom, he could barely make out the fellow standing a few yards away, too far for a sudden jump to take him by surprise. On the other hand, it might just be dark enough to make a run for it. He didn’t relish

the prospect. He figured his chances would be about even that the fellow would hit him with the first shot, but that was better than standing still and getting shot for sure.

“So you were aiming to hold up the stage, were you?” he asked. If the fellow kept talking, he might be less alert.

“Where’s the swag?” the fellow asked again.

“I ain’t got it.”

“Never mind,” the fellow said. “It’s got to be on your horse. I was hoping you’d lead me to it, but I suppose I’ll find it soon enough if I just shoot you.”

“Hold on,” Mulvehill blurted. “No need to do that, it’s on my horse, sure enough. Shall we go get it?”

The guy waggled Mulvehill’s revolver in a you-first gesture, and Mulvehill led the way back up the hill past his ambush site. On the far side, a pile of enormous boulders butted together to form a sheltered space where his horse was tethered—and beside it stood the fellow’s bay mare.

“Your mount’s got sense,” Mulvehill commented. “When the shooting starts, she goes looking for a safe spot and a friend.”

“Where’s the swag?”

“Saddlebags.”

“Get it.” The fellow kept Tom covered whilst he collected the reins of his horse, but Tom felt disinclined to make any sudden movements. Time enough for that later, if the situation got desperate enough. He flipped open one bag and removed a lumpy cloth sack and nine smallish leather pouches.

“Gold’s in the pouches,” Mulvehill said, “And the sack has the cash money and the jewelry from the passengers.” *Plus a two-shot Derringer pistol I took from one of them*, he thought. *Let me show you.*

“Not all of it,” the lean fellow said, fishing in his own saddlebag and pulling out an empty cloth sack much like Mulvehill’s own. “You missed about four dollars and a gold watch worth about two.” He tossed the balled-up sack towards Mulvehill and said, “Tell you what. Give me five of the gold pouches and the money; you keep the other four and the jewelry.”

Already reaching into the sack for the Derringer, Mulvehill stopped and gaped. “What? Why?”

“I figure I worked harder for my share, so I get the odd pouch of gold,” the fellow said. “As for the money, you owe me a new hat.”

Mulvehill worked this over for a moment, then said, “I don’t want to sound as though I’m complaining, but it sounds to me like you mean not to shoot me.”

“Put the stuff in my sack.”

He did, five tightly packed leather pouches of gold still bearing the labels of their former owner, and a poke full of bills and coins. The Derringer he left at the bottom of his own sack. “Smart thing to do,” he said, “would be to take it all and put me down. Didn’t I try to do for you? Yet here you are, leaving me alive with half the take. Ain’t you afraid I’ll come after you again?” He tossed the now-heavy sack back toward the fellow who still covered him with his own revolver.

The guy shrugged and scooped up the sack left-handed. “Might could be you will. But then when I shoot you, it’ll be self-defense, won’t it?” He tucked the sack back inside his saddlebag.

Mulvehill just stood, thunderstruck, the Derringer forgotten. “Didn’t I try to plug you half an hour ago?” he demanded. “Why the hell didn’t you shoot me in ‘self-defense’ right there when you got the drop on me?”

The fellow turned and made a left-handed draw from the holster on his right hip, pointing both weapons at Mulvehill. Mulvehill flinched, waiting for the shot, but the man only paused a moment before tossing his gun, the one from his own holster, to the dust at Mulvehill’s feet. Mulvehill stared a moment, then stooped and picked it up, the butt and frame of a revolver with the cylinder and barrel missing.

“What’s this?”

“That’s what’s left of my pistol,” the fellow said. “I raised my hat atop it to draw your fire, and you shot half the gun clean away. I guess I was damn lucky you didn’t kill me with your first shot.”

Mulvehill kept looking from the shattered pistol to the lean man, then back again, with his mouth hanging open, until neither of them could stand it any longer. They both dissolved in gales of laughter.

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Half an hour later, they were Tom and Cash, and they had a fire going to brew some coffee. Their mounts, fed, watered, and unsaddled, were hobbled nearby. Full night had fallen, and they lay close by the flames under a canopy of stars, shining icy through the chill air.

“Cash, this morning when I came upon you I took you for a damn fool,” Tom said. “I see now that you’re no such thing. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I misjudged you.”

“I’d rather you was sorry you tried to blow my head off,” said Cash.

“When I saw you slaving over that rock pile, I thought you was wet behind the ears, but that trick with the hat was a new one on me. Where’d you learn that?”

“In the trenches around Vicksburg,” said Cash. “We used to hold up rammers with hats on them and wager how long it would be before a Yankee sharpshooter would hit ‘em. I wish I’d had a rammer today. That ball nearly took my hand off.”

“I’d say you did well enough without a rammer. You might not know how to hold up a stage, but you damn well know a few things.”

“Thanks, I guess,” said Cash. “You must have robbed a stage or two in your time.”

“You could say that.” They were quiet a while before Tom said, “You must have been pretty desperate to try stage-robbing for the first time all by your lonesome.”

Cash shrugged. “Tried my hand at many a trade; no reason I shouldn’t try that.”

“True, but most trades, you don’t get shot or hanged if you do it wrong.” Tom shook his head. “You’re a puzzle to me, Cash. You don’t stick at highway robbery, and I’ll wager that horse you’re riding wasn’t lawfully purchased, yet you didn’t shoot me down when you had the chance, when it would have been the safest thing to do.”

Tom fell silent, and the silence stretched out. Coyotes yipped in the hills around them.

Tom decided Cash had fallen asleep when his voice drifted across the fire. “Shot a lot of men,” he said. “Most didn’t deserve it, even the ones that was trying to shoot me first.”

“In the war, you mean?”

“Yep. Then we gave up at Vicksburg, and it seemed to me all those men were shot for no reason. When the bluecoats turned us loose, some went home, some went back to fight some more, but I come out west.”

“Since then, you never got in a fight?”

“Plenty. But I never shot no one.”

“Except in self defense.”

“No one.” Cash pulled his blanket over himself and settled down under it, propping himself against his saddle. “I would, though, if somebody tried to take from me what was mine.”

“Fair enough.” Tom poured out coffee for both of them, and blew across his to cool it before taking a sip. “But you don’t scruple at taking what belongs to others, is what I’m getting at.”

Cash considered, tasting his coffee as well. “Not if I need it more, I guess.”

“Well, I’ve word of a bank not far from here, and they’ve all manner of money in their vault. And here’s us, with only a few dollars between us. I’d say we need their money more than they do, wouldn’t you?”

“Might could be.”

“Well then?”

“Well then,” Cash said. He put down his coffee cup and extended his hand to Tom, who clasped it. Then Cash drank down the rest of his coffee, rolled over so his back was to the fire, and in moments he was asleep.

Chapter 2

For Levi Dobson, president of the First Zion Farmer's Bank in Corinne, in the Utah Territory, regular habits were the mark of a successful banker. In his opinion, no one in their right mind would entrust their funds to a fellow who kept late hours, or arrived late to appointments, or went fishing on business days, so he did none of these. Instead he kept meticulous time on his pocket watch, prided himself on his punctuality, and opened the bank doors Monday through Friday without fail at nine o'clock precisely. Farmers found cash hard to come by, Levi was fond of saying, so they liked to know that they could depend on the man who kept it for them.

Because he trusted no one but himself to open the bank and the safe each day, he regarded it as his duty to stay healthy. Therefore he dosed himself with cod liver oil each morning, kept himself out of drafts, and refused to touch his children if they showed the slightest sign of sniffles. He bathed nightly, at great inconvenience to his wife, who had to heat the water to the proper temperature so Levi might avoid becoming chilled. Every evening he would set out on his half-hour constitutional around the streets of Corinne while Teresa warmed his bath, returning at a quarter to nine to begin his ablutions.

One evening in early April he set out as usual, but did not return on time. Despite the still-early sunset of springtime, Levi never varied his routine, so it was full dark when Teresa missed him. She had grumbled somewhat while warming the bath water, which also was routine, but when the parlor clock sounded the quarter hour and Levi did not come through the door, she became alarmed. She went out on the front porch of their home just off the main street, looking for some sign of her husband. She heard instead shouts of "Fire!" and saw a ruddy glow silhouetting the Mercantile store, behind which stood the First Zion Farmer's Bank.

Levi, on exiting his house, had according to his custom turned down the main street toward the business district of Corinne. He liked to stroll past the bank and check the door and shutters one last time before continuing his constitutional, perhaps greeting the few citizens still on the street but never stopping to chat, since that would delay him from the warm bath waiting at home. In April, with the sun already below the horizon and the wind turning chill, no one remained to speak to in any case; Levi had the main street to himself. He stepped to the front door of the bank and tugged at the stout handle, securely locked and unmolested.

He turned away from the door and found himself confronted by two strangers, standing in the street just off the board sidewalk. He had failed to hear them approach and at first did not notice the drawn revolvers each held, noting instead that they had pulled bandannas up to hide the lower parts of their faces.

“Can I be of service to you, gentlemen?” Levi said, but even as he began, the men came up on either side of him and took hold of his arms. Levi felt the pistols jab into his ribs and understood the situation all at once.

“Shut up and open the door,” one of the men growled.

“This is a robbery,” the other said, although Levi felt it was unnecessary to point this out.

Since he kept the keys with him at all times, it was the work of only a moment to unlock the front door, and then the men shoved him inside and followed him in, turning to shut and bolt the door. One of them struck a match and lit the kerosene lamp beside the door, keeping the flame low so no light would show through the gaps in the shutters. In the dim glow, Levi saw the men were clad in the rough manner of cowboys. One was thickset, the other taller and leaner, but nothing distinguished them in appearance except that they had removed the spurs

from their boots, the better to steal up behind him at the bank door. Whoever they were, they did not lack for wits.

“What do you want with me?” he said, even though he knew perfectly well. He hoped to hear more of their voices, for if they were locals he might recognize their speech.

“Open the safe,” said the thicker man, still pitching his voice low as a growl. Levi felt sure he did not know the man, which gave him some slight hope. If the thieves were not local men, they might not know of his precautions against situations of this sort. Everyone in town knew he kept a loaded shotgun behind the teller’s counter; fewer knew of the revolver in the vault. Of course, during business hours armed guards stood watch, and lawmen patrolled the streets after the doors were closed, but guards and guns were poor defenses against men with nothing to lose, and Levi’s sense of duty would not allow him to rely on such. Therefore he, and only he, knew of his preparations for the last ditch.

He led the way through the small lobby to his office door, which he unlocked with the key from his ring. The office beyond, like Levi himself, was neat as a pin, though austere. Directly across the room, behind the desk, stood the vault door, an iron-bound appurtenance taller and broader than the front doors of most homes. A specially-built lever secured the door to its iron frame, worn shiny from years of opening and closing every day, and the stout lock had but one key that never left Levi’s person. The chamber it guarded was an iron cage like a jail cell, built inside the wooden walls so as to thwart anyone who might cut through the walls to circumvent the door.

The thickset man grunted at the sight of the vault door, then gestured with his revolver and repeated, “Open ‘er up.” Levi quickly complied, swinging wide the heavy door, but when he

made as if to step inside the vault chamber, the lean man stopped him by clutching Levi's collar and pulling him backward.

"Keys," said the thickset man, holding out his free hand. Levi gave him the ring and the man holstered his pistol before stepping into the vault. The chamber held a cabinet of many small drawers, where some customers stored personal valuables; two locked chests containing the effects of two miners who had died during the summer and whose estates were still being settled in the courts; and a shiny fireproof safe. The thickset man ignored the cabinet and chests and instead flipped through the keys until he found the one that matched the safe. He unlocked it and heaved open the door. Inside, the safe was divided into smaller compartments much like a lady's chifferobe or a stationmaster's desk. Down the right side were small pigeonholes for keeping documents separate, and a few shallow drawers for loose items. Down the left were taller shelves, deep as the safe itself, and it was on these that the bank's assets rested.

"Bag," said the thickset man, and the thin one let go of Levi's collar long enough to pluck a sack from his belt and toss it to his partner, who made short work of pushing bundles of bills into it. With that accomplished, he skipped over the documents and went directly to the drawers, pulling them open one by one and fishing out the jewels and baubles he found. When he opened the third drawer down, he paused then turned to look back at Levi.

"What's this, mister?" he asked, and though Levi couldn't see his face, he could hear amusement in the man's voice. "Was you worried about gettin' robbed?" He raised his right hand from the drawer, and in it he held the little revolver with the pearl grips. Beside Levi, the thin man snorted through his bandanna. The thick man shook his head, but made sure to stash the weapon in the bag with the rest of the take. Still looking at Levi, he opened the fourth drawer and started to reach in.

A sound like the slow tearing of a piece of paper came from within the safe and the thickset man leapt back, crying out, “Son of a bitch!”

“What is it?” said the thin man, and stepped to his side to see what the matter was.

His partner gestured into the open drawer. “See for yourself,” he said. “Damn near got my hand!” He turned back toward Levi, drawing his revolver as he did, saying, “You son of a...”

But Levi was not where he expected. As soon as the thin bandit left his side, Levi was moving, grabbing the heavy iron door of the vault and swinging it closed. He almost made it, but the thickset robber, seeing the shrinking gleam of light beyond the vault door, managed to snap off three shots before the door slammed home. Levi felt the sting of one of the bullets along the side of his head, another in the meat of this left thigh and shouted in pain and fear, but he put his shoulder to the door and pushed with all his might. The door rang against the frame; a moment later the two men inside the vault threw themselves against it and the impact drove Levi back a step, but the door failed to burst completely open. While the men inside gathered themselves for a second attempt, Levi lurched forward and shot home the bolt, securing the iron door in its stout frame. He couldn't lock it without the keys, and those were inside the vault with the robbers, but that mattered very little. There was neither latch nor knob on the inside of the door.

Levi stood away from the vault door, gingerly, as if expecting the latch to pop open of its own accord. A sharp, loud sound came from behind the door: a pistol shot, followed by incoherent and almost inaudible yelling. It seemed the men had discovered that the door couldn't be shot through. Levi's shoulders slumped in relief. The vault would hold the men long enough for him to fetch some help.

But when he turned away from the vault, limping on his injured leg, he discovered what had become of at least one of the bullets the thick man had fired--it had struck and shattered the oil lamp placed on the desk, which he now found engulfed in flames.

Levi hobbled from the bank to raise the alarm, but that was already too late for the two men locked inside the vault. The fire burned for hours, and though the people of Corinne turned out at once to battle the fire, it spread quickly among the dry wood-frame buildings, fanned by the cold autumn wind.

* * * * *

Three days later Cash and Tom sat their horses at the side of the street in Corinne, staring at the still-smoldering rubble of the bank. Jagged black timbers rose from the pile of cinders and ash and here and there a metal fitting or a twisted doorknob shone dully. In the center of it all stood the metal cage, askew on the charred, fallen floor joists. The vault door, still shut, bore streaks of soot. The safe gaped wide, empty of valuables.

“Damnation,” said Tom Mulvehill.

They turned and rode toward the center of town, looking for a saloon among the buildings that remained standing. They still had the takings from the stage four days previous, and looked forward to spending some of it.

Chapter 3

With half the town crammed in to Haney's Saloon that night, Dove Ed Williams kept so busy clearing tables and bringing out plates of food that he didn't see the two strangers come in. Men, women, and even a few children crowded every space in the wide main room, some using the upright piano in the far corner for a table. Men stood all along the bar down the right side of the room, eating chicken and dumplings and drinking coffee with one foot on the brass rail. The place was hot and stuffy despite the cool air outside; Haney's rarely saw a crowd like this, which was why they had hired Dove Ed in the first place, why Merle Haney had stooped to hiring a vagrant boy like Dove Ed against his better judgment.

"I catch you stealing anything," Haney had said, "I'll horsewhip you all the way to the Marshal's, then watch him horsewhip you out of town, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Dove Ed said. He needed the job, so he refrained from pointing out that the Marshal's office and the jail had both burned to the ground. Besides, before he took the first lash, he'd beat the lard out of Haney—which would take some doing, Haney was so fat. Dove Ed didn't say that, either. Instead for the last two days he worked like a dog, hauling dishes, washing dishes, wiping tables, sweeping and mopping and soaking up abuse from Haney and a few of his regular customers.

He expected a certain amount of that thanks to his name: his mother, an immigrant from Wales, had named her infant son Dafydd. She insisted on the Welsh pronunciation, but there was one difficulty: she could neither read nor write. The county clerk who recorded the boy's birth could, but had to make his best guess as to the spelling of the name. His mother, always frail, died before his eighth birthday. Soon his name was the only thing left she had given him, and he took fierce pride in it. For someone with Dove Ed's temper, it meant no end of trouble

and fighting as he grew, but at least he learned how to win. Still only 15, he had hard, knobby fists and a lean, wiry body topped by a black-haired head as long and angular as the rest of him, and just as hard.

His father didn't approve of fighting, of course. Hugh Williams believed that hard work and perseverance would make him rich, but after he dabbled at it for a while he gave up. Their homestead in the Idaho Territory went to weeds while Hugh settled for the odd jobs here and there that kept him in drink. He was a jovial man with not a malicious bone in him, and when he died of consumption a year ago the saloons in town held a moment of silence in his memory. Dove Ed sold their tumbledown shack and few meager possessions before taking the plow horse and riding south to seek his fortune. So far his fortune seemed to consist of an apron, a cot in a disused tool shed behind Haney's, and a salary of a dollar a week, and if Corinne hadn't fortuitously burned down three days ago he wouldn't even have that.

He piled his tray with soiled dishes and was heading for the scullery when he heard an angry voice yell, "The hell you say!" The barroom went quiet. Like everyone else he looked around and saw Merle Haney, stout, ruddy, his face streaming with sweat from the heat of the room, standing nose-to-nose with two men in riding gear. Well, nose-to-nose with one man, really, a thick-chested man wearing a mackinaw; the second man, lean as a rod, stood behind his friend with a warning hand on his shoulder. Neither of them was sweating, but their beard stubble and the bright color in their cheeks showed they'd been riding a long time in the sharp wind.

Haney shook his head. "I'm sorry, boys," he said, and Dove Ed grinned to hear the discomfiture in his voice. "I can give you dinner and coffee to go with it, but we've no rooms and the Marshal outlawed liquor for the duration of the emergency."

The newcomer got even redder. His head reared back and he looked down the slope of his nose at Haney. He cocked his hands on his hips, pushing back the mackinaw so that his holster was visible. "You're shitting me," he said.

"No sir, sad to say. Maybe you noticed on your way in to town, there's a shortage of saloons in Corinne tonight. Won't you take a place at the bar? Supper won't be but a minute."

The long fellow tugged at his friend. "Come on, Tom, let's just go," he said.

Tom shrugged the hand away. "I'll be damned if I'll ride on with an empty belly. It's a long ride to the next eatery, I promise you." He turned toward the bar, and Haney sagged as he let out the breath he had been holding. He mopped his face with a sleeve and looked around the room, catching sight of Dove Ed watching him. His officiousness reasserted itself all at once as he barked, "Well, boy, what are you looking at? Get those dishes cleaned up and bring these gentlemen some supper!"

Dove Ed emerged from the kitchen a few minutes later bearing a tray laden with food and looked around for the two men, Tom and his tall friend. They stood at the end of the bar, crowded in between the wall and a group of men clustered at the center, listening to Doctor Ellstrom hold forth. The doctor would hold court for hours, passing the time and swapping tales with anyone who cared to stop. Unhappily, Dove Ed recognized several of the men there now, including Jacob Putney, a ranch foreman with a lazy eyelid and a mean streak whose favorite target was Dove Ed himself.

Dove Ed kept his head down as he hustled behind the bar to take supper to the two strangers, hoping Putney wouldn't notice him. He was in luck, for Doctor Ellstrom had a full head of steam, and all eyes were on him.

“I warned him,” Ellstrom was saying, “You’ve got to carry a gun, I said. What if you’re held up? But Levi always said, ‘I’ve no money on me; if someone tries to rob me, ‘twill be where the money is. It’s easier to keep the gun and the money in the same place!’”

A chuckle ran through the group, and Jacob Putney said, “You got to admit he was right; he didn’t need no gun after all.” Everyone agreed with this, and Putney went on, “Where’d he get that damned thing anyway?”

“Up in the pines along Logan Ridge,” said Dr. Ellstrom. “He said he took his children for a picnic and heard it in the rocks.”

Dove Ed reached the end of the bar and tried unsuccessfully to catch the strangers’ eyes. The two men glanced at him, but they paid more mind to the doctor’s tale than to the plates of chicken and dumplings, biscuits, and mugs of coffee he set in front of them. They took up their forks and dug in without even looking down at their food, hanging on every word.

“Why didn’t he just kill it?” someone said.

“I asked him that very question,” Doctor Ellstrom said. “Levi told me, a bit shamefaced, that when he saw that baby rattler, the idea struck him all at once, and he acted without thinking twice. He snatched up his walking stick and used it to prod and hook that serpent into his wife’s picnic basket. Then he clapped the lid shut and brought it down and put it in the drawer at the bank.”

Watching the men, Dove Ed saw Tom stop eating, fork halfway to mouth, and stare at the doctor. His companion likewise froze, listening in disbelief. Dr. Ellstrom did not notice the consternation he had caused the two, and kept on. “Fed it up on milk...”

“And honey,” someone interrupted.

“Will you shut up, Kessler?” Bob Kessler, the stage line agent, fancied himself Dr. Ellstrom’s equal in wit, but the doctor would have none of it. “Fed it on milk till it got too big, then trapped mice for it. Levi said it got as big around as his wrist.”

“That’s horseshit,” Kessler said. “Rattlers don’t grow that big.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Kessler,” said Putney. “I saw one bigger than that at Sloan’s last year. It nested under the henhouse for weeks stealing eggs, and it was big around as my peter when they killed it.”

“If it was only big around as that, it proves Kessler’s point, don’t it?” Dr. Ellstrom said, and the men laughed. The two strangers joined in until the doctor continued, “I wish I could have seen the looks on their faces when those two boys opened the safe and found that old rattler sitting on the money!”

“From what I hear,” Putney said, “They didn’t have any faces at all when the fire finally burnt out.”

“That’s so, and I was there to see it when they pulled them out,” Dr. Ellstrom said, making a face at the memory. “Couldn’t have happened to two nicer fellows, either.”

“Too bad the snake had to die in such company, though,” said Kessler, and the men joined in another round of laughter. Dove Ed noticed that Tom did not laugh this time, and in fact his face darkened as he turned his attention down to his plate. His friend caught Dove Ed’s eye, raising his mug. Dove Ed fetched the pot, glancing over at Ellstrom and his cronies.

As he topped up the two cups with fresh coffee, he said in a low voice, “Sorry about the coffee.”

Now Tom did look up, puzzled. “Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“It ain’t whiskey.”

Tom regarded Dove Ed for a long moment before sipping from his mug and setting it down. “No, it surely ain’t.”

“I might know where you could get some.”

“Yeah? Where?”

Dove Ed looked around again. Across the room, Haney was setting out food for other customers, but in Ellstrom’s group, Putney was looking their way. Dove Ed turned his back and gathered up Tom’s plate. As he wiped the bar top of imaginary crumbs he said, “Tool shed out back. Ten minutes.”

With that, he headed for the kitchen, relieved to see that Putney’s whole attention was given to Bill Kessler, who was finishing a dirty story, “I don’t know, but I think his wife’s name is ‘Verandah’!” The men around him roared again as Dove Ed pushed his way through the door into the scullery.

Ten minutes later he poked his head out the rear door of Haney’s Saloon. There was no sign of Tom or his friend. Dove Ed jogged across the back alley to the tool shed where he bedded down each night, a small, drafty hovel crowded with all manner of odds and ends: tools, tack and harness in poor repair, castoff furniture. Amidst all this Dove Ed made his bed on a tabletop from which he had removed the two and a half remaining legs. A tiny stove with a jury-rigged tin-can chimney provided some heat, but it often went out during the night. Dove Ed either woke to feed it or woke cold in the morning.

Now he went to a washtub hung from a nail on the wall. The washtub had a hole rusted through the bottom and through this Dove Ed reached in and down. He drew out a whiskey bottle and two smudged, chipped shot glasses. The bottle stood less than one-third full, and he

frowned as he sloshed it, feeling the emptiness of it. There was a light tap at the door of the shed, and he put the bottle with the glasses atop the unlit stove. "Come in," he said. "It's about time. I got to get back before Haney..."

His voice trailed away as a man stepped through the door who was neither Tom nor his thin friend. "Hey, boy," said Jacob Putney. He pulled the door to, glanced around the cramped quarters. "Nice place you got here."

Dove Ed kept silent. Putney blocked the door, the only exit from the shed, so he backed away until he fetched up against the wall where the useless washtub hung. Jacob Putney didn't look like much; neither tall nor broad, he was unimpressive unless you stared him in the eye. Then you could see how strong he was, a strength that stemmed from caring only about himself and not a scrap for the welfare of anyone else. This was a man who didn't mind hurting other people. Dove Ed thought that in a fair fight he could best Jacob Putney, but he also thought that against Jacob Putney, fair fights were hard to come by.

"What's the matter, boy?" Putney pointed at the bottle and glasses. "You expectin' compny? Well, here I am. Ain't you gonna pour?"

Dove Ed shook his head. "That ain't mine."

"I know it ain't. It's Haney's. Took it from his storeroom, and you're peddlin' it from his tool shed." Since this was in fact the case, Dove Ed shut his mouth. For the past three days he had made twenty times his salary selling drinks of whiskey from a bottle swiped off Merle Haney. Since locals like Putney were liable to turn him in, Dove Ed sold only to strangers passing through. They were so happy to get a drink they all stayed mum. Dove Ed knew it couldn't last, but he had hoped to earn a stake and move on before he was found out. Luckily, it was Putney and not Haney or the marshal he was facing now. The marshal would have to, and

Haney would love nothing better than to jail him; Putney would just kick him around and take the whiskey.

“Boy, you must be the stupidest Mick in the Territories,” said Putney. He labored under the misconception that Dove Ed was Irish, probably thanks to the faint trace of the musical Welsh accent inherited from his parents. Dove Ed never bothered to correct him; what did he care if Putney called him “potato-eater” or “Paddy”? “I seen you talking to those boys just now, lookin’ around to see if anyone’s listenin’. I seen you all week.”

Putney uncorked the whiskey bottle and poured one of the glasses full. He kept hold of the bottle as he raised the drink and smirked at Dove Ed. “Want one? There’s two glasses.” Dove Ed shook his head. “Suit yourself. Me, I’m awful thirsty.” Putney downed the drink in one swallow and poured the glass full again. Dove Ed watched, hoping he would just take the bottle and leave; once Putney left, he planned to collect his stake from inside the washtub, get his horse from the stable and blow town. Surely Putney would be found drunk, and when he was the marshal would be curious about where his liquor came from.

Putney had thrown back the second shot and was pouring again when a knock came at the shed door. Dove Ed started. He had forgotten Tom and his friend. He and Putney stared at each other, long enough for a second knock at the door. Putney replaced the bottle on the stove and draped his hand over the revolver hanging off his right hip. He downed the drink in his hand, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, and nodded at Dove Ed.

“Come in,” called Dove Ed.

“Bout time,” said Tom and opened the door. Dove Ed saw him draw up short when he saw Putney. The two regarded each other for a long moment, hands near their holsters, and for

the space of a breath Dove Ed knew that they would draw. His right hand crept up to rest on the washtub, unsure what to do.

Then Tom said, “Innocent?”

Jacob Putney’s face creased with a smile and his body relaxed. His hand eased away from his pistol as he replied, “Innocent.”

The tension drained from Tom’s shoulders as well. He said, “I thought so. Tom Mulvehill, and this here,” he indicated his tall friend, standing behind him, “Cash Joyner.” The two men ducked through the doorway into the shed, which now felt overcrowded.

“Jacob Putney.” Putney nodded to Cash. “Innocent?” he said.

“Innocent of what?” Cash said. Tom smiled and shook his head.

“No, just a friend.” He looked around the cramped room, then at Dove Ed. “I must say this is the smallest saloon I ever been in.”

Before Dove Ed could say anything, Putney spoke up. “Ain’t got but one bottle and two glasses, but it drinks the way it ought.” He held up the bottle, now showing only an inch or so of liquid in the bottom. “Can I pour for you boys?” He filled both glasses and handed them over, keeping the bottle and its meager leavings for himself. As he raised it to his lips, he fixed a warning gaze on Dove Ed and kept it there while all three drank.

Tom sipped half his shot, then smacked his lips in appreciation. “That’s good,” he said, then turned to Dove Ed. “What do we owe you for the libation, friend?”

The question caught him, and Putney, by surprise. Putney lowered the bottle in a hurry, trying to speak, but Dove Ed beat him to it. “Dollar each,” he said.

“What? It ain’t but a quarter inside,” said Cash.

“But it ain’t for sale inside,” Putney said, glaring at Dove Ed. “Out here, it’s a dollar each.”

Cash started to protest, but Tom held up a hand. “Worth it,” he said, and dug in his pocket, coming up with a pair of dollar coins. Dove Ed held out his hand for them.

“You can just pay me direct,” said Putney. Tom paused, his hand outstretched, as everyone looked over at Putney.

“Didn’t know this was your place,” Cash said.

“It’s mine.”

Tom slowly withdrew the two dollar coins, but did not offer them to Putney. “Twas the boy offered us the drink,” he said.

“Just cause he tends bar don’t mean he owns the saloon,” Putney said. He switched the bottle to his left hand and extended the right toward Tom. Dove Ed fumed as Tom tossed him the silver coins, one by one. Putney grinned at him and said, “Thanks. Now, boy, how about the rest?”

Dove Ed’s mouth hung open in fury and disbelief. “The rest of what?”

Putney clucked at him like a mother hen. “The rest of the take, boy. We been peddlin’ whiskey for three days, and I want the money now. Did you forget why I was here in the first place?”

Rage boiled up in Dove Ed, clouding his vision. He ground out, “You’re a liar.” Putney’s expression went black as thunderheads, but Dove Ed continued, “I stole that whiskey and I sold it myself. Not you. Keep the two dollars. You’re getting fuck all else.”

Tom and Cash glanced back and forth between him and Putney but said nothing, waiting to see how it would play out. Putney’s hand was back on the butt of his revolver, and he

swigged down the last of the whiskey before tossing the bottle aside. “Come on, Paddy,” he said. “I ain’t got all night.” He drew the revolver and aimed along the barrel at Dove Ed. In the close confines of the shed, the sight blade on the end of the pistol about tickled Dove Ed’s nose.

“All right,” said Dove Ed. “I’ll get it.” Moving slowly, he turned to the washtub beside him. With his right hand he steadied the tub as he reached through the jagged hole with his left. He pulled it out, bringing with it a cloth bag that jingled faintly. He held it up long enough for Putney to fix his eyes on it, then he said, “Here,” and tossed it in a gentle arc. Putney followed the bag, reaching for it with both hands, raising the barrel of his gun toward the ceiling in the process.

As soon as he let go of the bag, Dove Ed reached under the rim of the washtub with his right hand for the little pocket pistol he had hidden there. It was an old relic of his father’s, a stumpy .28-caliber Remington barely big enough for his hand. He clutched the rounded grip and yanked the weapon out, knocking the washtub from its nail. The clatter of the old tub startled Jacob Putney; he fumbled the bag and his own pistol and wound up clasping both to his chest in a disorderly bundle. He gaped at Dove Ed in the split second before the boy pointed the Remington at him and pulled the trigger.

Chapter 4

The abrupt, flat bang of Dove Ed's pistol slapped the walls of the tiny shed, and a miniature rain cloud of black powder smoke rose over the boy's head. Putney screeched and reeled backward, clutching his left side. His revolver and the poke full of money he let fall as he stumbled over the old stove, knocking the chimney loose and sending the empty whiskey bottle spinning into the shadows. Trying to regain his balance, Putney struck the wall and slumped down by the door, moaning. Dove Ed waved his Remington about, trying to decide who to cover: Putney, or Tom and Cash.

Over Putney's whimpers, Tom said, "All right, son, you can put that away now." Dove Ed fixed his sights on Tom, who still held his shot glass as though there were whiskey in it. Behind him, Cash had his hand on his own gun and looked as undecided as Dove Ed felt; only Tom seemed unconcerned.

"Don't you move, now," Dove Ed said. "I'd just as soon shoot you as your friend."

"In that case, you'd best cock the hammer again," Tom said, with the air of a man commenting on the weather. Dove Ed flushed as he realized that he'd forgotten to cock his pistol after his first shot. He thumbed the hammer back and pointed it at Tom again, but by now Tom was moving to kneel beside the stricken Putney.

"Son of a bitch shot me!" Putney said through clenched teeth. His breath came in quick gasps and sweat sheened his face even in the chilly shed.

"What did you expect?" Cash said as Tom eased Putney's hand away from the wound so he could get a better look. "I'd of done the same, you tried to steal my stake. Ain't that right, Tom?"

Tom said to Putney, "Don't look at it, Jacob." Then he peeled the bloody cloth of the shirt away from the ribs, tearing it a little to get at the injury. "Does it hurt much?"

"Of course it damn well hurts! Get Doc Ellstrom; he's still inside the saloon."

Tom shook his head. "I'm sorry Jacob, but Doc Ellstrom can't do much for you now." He tugged the bandanna from his neck and folded it into a rough pad which he pressed against Putney's side. "Hold that there; that's all anyone can do."

Dove Ed stepped closer, craning his neck to look at the man he'd shot. His pistol hand hung at his side, the weapon forgotten. Cash put up an arm to stop him. "You don't want to see, boy," he said.

Dove Ed felt sick inside. "I didn't mean to kill him," he said.

"Yes you did," said Cash. Dove Ed glanced at him, an angry retort on his lips, but Cash continued, "He meant to kill you too. You just beat him to it."

"And a handy bit of work it was, too," Tom said. He put his hand on Putney's forehead. "Jacob, I hate to ask this, but time's short and might could be somebody heard that shot."

Putney rolled his eyes to look at Tom. "Ask me what?"

"We broke all sorts of laws here today, us and the boy. We'll be leaving soon, but if the marshal should find you..."

Putney nodded, then winced. "Oh God," he said, "I think I'm losing feeling in my side..."

"Look at me, Jacob," Tom said. The fierce urgency in his voice brought Putney's gaze back to him. "If the marshal should find you...!"

"Don't worry, Tom," Putney said. "I won't tell him nothing. Innocents!"

“Innocents,” Tom repeated. He rose from the man’s side and looked over at Dove Ed and Cash. “You got a mount, boy?”

Dove Ed couldn’t answer, staring speechless at the man sprawled on the floor of the shed. Cash shook his arm until he had Dove Ed’s attention and asked, “You got a horse?”

“Livery stable,” Dove Ed said.

Tom bent and scooped up the fallen poke and Putney’s revolver and held them out to Dove Ed. “You might need these if you’re coming with us,” he said.

“Coming with you?” Dove Ed gathered in the bag and gun without thinking.

“Would you rather stay here with him until the marshal finds you?” At last it dawned on Dove Ed exactly what he had done, and how much trouble he was in. Never mind selling stolen whiskey; he had shot a man. He, a vagrant, had shot and killed a local man over stolen whiskey. The room whirled around him as he realized that in the blink of an eye he had become an outlaw. Tears welled up in his eyes and he felt Tom, or maybe it was Cash, clap him on the shoulder and squeeze.

From down on the floor behind them, Putney said, loud, “Son of a bitch!”

They all turned to see Putney sitting bolt upright on the dirt floor of the shed, gaping in furious incredulity at the bandanna in his hand, the one Tom had pressed to his wound. Only the smallest spots of blood stained it; through his torn shirt Dove Ed could see the wound it had covered—a thin red line, no longer than his little finger, just along the outside of Putney’s rib cage.

“Shitfire,” said Tom Mulvehill.

Putney glared at him, cold hatred flying from him like froth from a mad dog. “You told me I was dying, you dirty bastard!” he said.

Tom shook his head, holding up his hands to placate the man. “No, I said Doc Ellstrom couldn’t do nothing for you,” he said. “Since the ball only grazed you, I figured there was no need to bother the doc...”

Putney heaved up to one knee, reaching with his right hand for his revolver. “I’ll kill you, you liar,” he said, but stopped when he found his holster empty. “Where’s my Whitney?”

This time Dove Ed remembered to cock the weapon before he aimed it at Putney. Confusion, fear, and pure blood lust fought for control of Putney’s face; in the meantime he held still. “Now what?” said Cash. “We leave him here, he’ll have the marshal on us fore we make the livery stable.”

“I could try shooting him again,” Dove Ed said. He was amazed at how quickly he’d gone from remorse at killing the man to wanting another chance at it. The big Whitney revolver weighed a ton compared to the Remington and he reckoned even a graze from it would prove fatal.

Tom lowered his hands and crouched down so he could see eye to eye with Putney. “You’re upset, Jacob,” he said, “And I guess you got a right to be. I thought we’d be out of town before you felt well enough to stir and then you’d be too ashamed to send the marshal after us.”

Putney’s face seemed to have settled on a sneer of contempt as a happy medium as he said, “You’re wrong, Mulvehill. I got friends in this town, and when I tell them I was set upon and robbed by three outlaws, you’ll be attending your own hanging tomorrow.”

Dove Ed cut his eyes at Cash to see the lean man looking grim. It was just as Cash predicted; they would have to kill Putney to keep him silent.

Tom let out a long sigh of weariness. He said, “I’d rather you didn’t do that, Jacob.”

“No?” Putney’s sneer deepened.

“No. See, if you set the law on us, I’m sure we’ll swing. But before I do, I’ll be overcome with remorse at my wicked deeds, and I’ll have to confess to them...all of them.” The sneer departed Putney’s face to be replaced by severe apprehension. “I’ll have to confess to the killing of Deputy Bill Dillingham in Bannack, Montana, but that I only followed the instructions of the chief assassin—one Jacob Putney.”

The battle for possession of Putney’s face ended, with horror claiming the field. His jaw flapped, but no words came forth. He slumped back to the floor of the shed since his arms and legs would no longer hold him upright. Dove Ed had never seen Putney so completely unstrung; he found it even more disconcerting than when he thought Putney was dying.

“We’ll be going now, Jacob,” Tom said. Putney did not respond, but drew up his knees, folded his arms across them, and let his head sag down to hide his eyes. Tom gestured Cash and Dove Ed out the door, keeping his eyes on the man sitting in the dirt with his shirt bloody and torn and his holster empty. Dove Ed slid past Tom, then paused outside to look back, just in time to hear Tom bid Jacob Putney farewell.

“Innocent,” Tom said, and stepped out, closing the shed door behind him.

Chapter 5

When Tom called a halt, the moon hung low in the sky, but enough light remained so they could unsaddle the horses and picket them, gather dead wood for a fire and lay out their bedrolls. Tom sent Dove Ed to look for a stream nearby and refill their canteens, then told Cash to light the fire.

“We oughtn’t to have a fire,” Cash said. “Anybody behind us, they’ll see it or find the embers in the morning.”

“No one’s behind us,” Tom said.

Cash thought he took too much for granted. “That Putney, he’s a disputatious son of a bitch. He’ll be coming back at us, once he pulls himself together.”

“Are you going to light that fire or not?” Tom stretched out, propped against his saddle, and started pulling off his boots. Cash looked at him a while, then knelt by the stack of brushwood they had collected and set to building a fire.

As he lit a match and touched it to the tinder he said, “You knew him before, in Montana?” The fire licked at the wood, growing brighter and wider. Cash waited, but the flames were starting to crackle before Tom answered.

“Never knew him before today,” he said.

Cash swiveled his head to see Tom reclining, his eyes shut and his stocking feet stretched toward the flames. The firelight still dazzled Cash’s eyes somewhat, but he thought he spied a smile playing around the corners of Tom’s mouth. He suspected that Tom enjoyed making people look like jackasses, and he resented it. After Vicksburg fell, Cash spent some months as a prisoner of war; Tom’s attitude reminded him of the smug Yankee soldiers who walked guard

duty at the camp, baiting the inmates for sport. “Then what did you mean, saying ‘innocent’ back and forth? Looked to me like you was old friends.”

From out in the darkness they heard a stumbling step, the clatter of canteens, and a curse in Dove Ed’s odd contralto accent as the boy missed his footing. A moment later the boy himself appeared in the firelight and handed back their canteens, now full. Cash accepted his without taking his eyes from Tom’s face, but Tom thanked Dove Ed and drank deep, in no hurry to reply. Cash seethed, restraining the impulse to take Tom by the lapels of his mackinaw and shake him till the answers came loose, opting instead to outwait him.

Eventually Tom raised up on one elbow and looked around at his companions. “Did you boys never hear of Henry Plummer?”

“I did,” said Dove Ed. “I thought the Vigilantes hanged him years ago.”

“They did. But before that, he ran a gang of road agents and bushwhackers in Bannack, Montana, called ‘The Innocents’.” Dove Ed looked confused, and Cash felt the same way, though he wasn’t about to let it show. “It was a joke, you see?” said Tom. “There was too many of us to remember who was in the gang, so when you met someone, you’d ask ‘Innocent?’”

“Is that what Putney was doing?” Cash said.

Tom nodded. “He thought you was one of us, but he didn’t recognize you.”

“You said you didn’t know him either.”

“We never did a job together,” Tom said, “But I remember his face, with that droopy eyelid. Must be he remembers me somewhat as well.”

Cash and Dove Ed sat mulling this over for a time, until Dove Ed said, “What about the deputy?”

“Who?”

“The deputy you said you killed on Putney’s orders.”

Comprehension dawned on Tom’s face, but he grinned and shook his head. “Bill Dillingham. I had nothing to do with that, though Putney believes I did. Better still, Putney believes I would turn him in to save my own neck—and I would, too.”

Tom settled back on his saddle and said, “That’s why he won’t come back on us, Cash. He knows if he does, I’ll come back on him.” Before pulling his hat over his eyes and folding his hands on his chest, he added, “Best get some sleep. We’ll start again at first light.”

Cash watched as Tom’s breathing became regular and even. In moments, snores issued from under the hat. He looked at Dove Ed, who shrugged, then wrapped himself in his blanket and composed himself for sleeping. Cash rose and turned his back on the fire, staring hard into the night the way they had come. They were far enough from Corinne that he could see no sign of the half-destroyed town, and he heard no sound of pursuit in that direction over the pop of the branches in the fire, the snorts of the horses on their picket ropes, the wail of coyotes calling to one another across the desert.

He stood that way a long time, thinking, unwilling to trust Tom’s blithe assurances, but at last his fatigue got the better of him. He made his way back to the fireside, now burning low, rolled himself into his blankets, and slept.

The kick at his foot came sooner than Cash expected, and he gazed through gummed lids at his tormentor. Tom Mulvehill stood at the foot of Cash’s bedroll, the cold gray light of dawn behind him, and kicked Cash’s foot again. “Reveille, soldier,” he said through a grin, which widened at the curses he earned in response. “Saddle up. We’re riding north.”

“What for?”

Tom slewed his head around, his eyebrows raised. “What for? Last night you didn’t want to stop and this morning you don’t want to start! Make up your mind, boy!” He stomped off toward his mount, hefting his saddle on his shoulder. Dove Ed was there already, cinching his saddle onto his horse, a farm animal that had seen better days pulling a wagon or plow. Cash sat up, stiff and cold and hungry, and blinked at the world to clear the cobwebs from his mind.

By the time he had risen and donned his boots and gunbelt, the others were mounted and waiting. Tom seemed amused; Dove Ed, eager and apprehensive. The boy wore Putney’s Whitney revolver tucked into the waist of his trousers and Cash figured he would wind up shooting himself in the leg if he wasn’t careful. They both watched as Cash dragged his saddle over to his mount and began to cinch it up.

Tom ribbed him to pass the time. “If you don’t step a little more lively, Cash, I swear I’ll let Dove Ed take target practice on your feet. He needs to get used to his weapon.”

Dove Ed snickered at that. “At least his feet are a bigger target than Jacob Putney’s heart.”

Cash took his time, ignoring the banter. During the night, he had reached a decision, and he wasn’t sure how to tell Tom of it. Instead he paid undue attention to his travel preparations, adjusting a stirrup here, fidgeting with his bedroll there.

At last Tom could stand no more and said, “Damnation, Cash, if the law was after us we’d be standing trial in Corinne already. Mount up, or by God I’m going to leave you here.”

There it was. Cash swung up into his saddle, settling himself comfortably before he looked Tom full in the face and said, “Maybe that’s best.”

“What?”

“I said, maybe it’s best if we part ways here.”

Thunderstruck, Tom groped for words. Cash enjoyed seeing him speechless for once, but he had forgotten Dove Ed, who said, “You’re not coming, Cash?”

Cash shook his head. “What for? Y’all don’t even know where you’re headed.”

“North,” said Tom. “I told you.”

Cash’s face hardened. “That’s right, I guess. You told me. Well, I ain’t taken orders since I left the Army, and I don’t aim to take any now.”

“Who said anything about orders?” Utter surprise colored Tom’s every word. “This ain’t orders. It’s just common sense.”

“How do you figure?”

Tom gestured in opposite directions, encompassing the rising sun and its evening destination. “West, there’s nothing but desert and the Salt Lake. East, there’s a stagecoach with an empty strongbox and a lot of people who know our faces.” He pointed expansively back in the direction they had come, indicating Corinne and beyond. “South,” he said, “There’s Ogden, and Salt Lake City. Big towns, brimming with people and life. No place for civilized folk like us.” Dove Ed snickered again, and Cash found himself quirking his mouth as well. Tom went on, “What’s that leave?”

Even as Cash admitted to himself that Tom had a point, he chafed at the notion of giving in, of letting Tom continue to think he was in charge. “I came this way because you said you had a job for us. That’s up in smoke.” He knew Dove Ed hung on every word and hesitated even now to let the boy know what manner of work they had planned to do in Corinne.

“We’re lucky it did,” Tom said. “Considering what happened to those other fellows.”

“Point is, there ain’t no other job, is there?”

Without a ready answer, Tom avoided Cash's gaze. There seemed to be nothing more to say, so Cash made to turn his horse away, although he hadn't decided where he was going either. He drew up short when he heard Dove Ed say, "What about the stagecoach in Malad City?"

"What?"

Dove Ed regarded them both, stammering as though they might reprimand him for speaking out of turn. "You said you robbed a stagecoach, didn't you?"

Cash thought back, trying to remember just what they'd said in the boy's presence. He believed he had kept that under his hat, but he couldn't recall everything Tom had said. The unexpected question, though, stirred Tom's wits back to life.

"So what if we did?" said Tom.

"There's plenty of stagecoaches through Malad City, carrying money and gold to and from the mining camps. Must be three a week."

"Where the hell is Malad City?" Cash said.

"North. Idaho Territory. I thought that's why Tom wanted to go that way."

Tom sat taller in his saddle, triumph radiating from him. Even with the promise of riches ahead, it made Cash a little ill to see him looking so smug, and to know that they would all be riding north together.

Despite Tom's blithe reassurances as they rode out, Cash turned in his saddle at regular intervals, craning his neck to watch behind them. They were passing through the flat desert country and into rising foothills, affording a broad view of the land and the road at their backs. Cash felt no surprise when he turned for what seemed like the hundredth time and caught sight of

a plume of dust on the road, coming toward them from the direction of Corinne. He called to the others, and they halted to watch the thin cloud approach.

“Posse?” Dove Ed asked, a slight hitch in his voice.

Tom scoffed at the notion. “Morning stage, more like,” he said. “Didn’t you say there was three a week?”

Abashed, Dove Ed fell silent for a moment, then perked up. “Why don’t we take it?” he said, and now he sounded eager, excited. But when Tom slapped his knee and roared with laughter, anger clouded the boy’s face. “What the hell’s so funny?” he said. Almost as an afterthought, he dropped his hand to the butt of Putney’s pistol, still stuck in his belt.

Cash sympathized with him; Tom Mulvehill could be a damned know-it-all when he wanted, but he could also shoot. Softly he said, “Take it easy, Dove Ed.”

Tom ignored the implied threat and wiped his eyes of tears. “I ain’t laughing at you, Dove,” he said. “I admire your enthusiasm. But you’ve got more to learn about the road agent business than Cash here.”

Dove Ed kept his hand on the gun. “For instance?”

“Look at the stage, yonder. Which direction is it coming from? South. Where are the gold camps? North.” He used a patient tone, as though he were explaining to a toddler why not to touch a hot stove. “That stage will be carrying mail, supplies, and passengers—workers for the camps, mostly. Probably no rich tycoons or bankers, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Cash could see the flush of embarrassment spread over Dove Ed’s fair cheeks. The dust plume had drawn closer, and even at this distance they could make out the team of six horses and the coach behind them. The Overland line was notorious for overstuffing their stages, and Cash

thought he could see people clinging to the roof of the vehicle. Even so, Tom's attitude griped him. He said, "There might could be payroll aboard, Tom."

Tom nodded, eyes still on the approaching dust. "Maybe. But even if they've a roll that would choke a buffalo, the time ain't ripe. We don't have enough men, for one thing."

"What do you mean? You took the stage in Logan by yourself."

"That was just a pissant little spur line, not a main route to the gold fields. The boys who drive these rigs would never fall for such rank trickery. Just watch."

Events soon proved Tom right. The three men pulled off the road and waited, letting the coach overtake them. Long before it drew even with them, they could all see the driver urging the team to greater speed and beside him the guard, shotgun at the ready. Amid the baggage atop the coach were four dust-coated men, passengers, each keeping hold to the roof with one hand and gripping a weapon with the other. The shades on the windows were open, allowing glimpses of the passengers inside, no doubt similarly armed. All but the driver watched Cash and his friends for any sign of belligerence. Cash made sure to keep his hands away from his own pistol.

As the swaying, rattling coach swept by, Tom touched the brim of his hat in greeting, then said, "They've got a rear guard as well." Cash and Dove Ed followed his gaze to the man sitting on the boot of the coach. He too was armed with a shotgun, which he kept pointed in their direction until the coach disappeared behind a small rise in the road. The three listened for a while as the clatter of the team and the iron-shod wheels diminished in the distance. The dust from its passage swirled around them, settling over them like snow. Finally Dove Ed broke the silence.

"God Almighty," he said.

“They was carrying payroll all right,” Tom said. “No telling how much. Maybe ten, twenty thousand. Maybe more.”

“Dollars?” said Dove Ed, and his voice cracked.

Tom grinned, and in spite of himself Cash did too. “It’s a poser, ain’t it?” said Tom. “How do you get that much money away from that many boys intent on keeping it?”

“I’ll bite,” Cash said.

“There’s ways. First off, you pick your spot. Not open, like this, but somewhere you can lay in wait close to the road.” Tom climbed back into the saddle and guided his mount back onto the road. The others followed as he continued, “Also, you got to choose your target. One without so many guns aboard.”

“I liked getting shot at even less than I liked taking orders,” said Cash.

Tom chuckled as some thought occurred to him. “In Montana, the Innocents had it down to a science,” he said when the others looked over. “The drivers and shotgun riders would warn us when a rich run was coming up, then take a cut as payment for not shooting when we stopped them. And Henry Plummer would make friends with the mine owners and bankers passing through town. When they boarded the stage, he would see them off and make them a present of a woolen scarf—so that when we held up the stage, we would look for the fellow with the scarf, because he was the one with the biggest roll!”

Cash and Dove Ed shook their heads in frank admiration of such audacity. “I don’t reckon we’ll get such help in Malad City,” Cash said.

“No, more’s the pity,” Tom said. “Still, it’s easy to guarantee that the shotgun guard won’t give you any trouble.”

“How?” said Dove Ed.

“Shoot him,” said Tom. “Once he’s dead, or even just hurt real bad, everybody else thinks twice about putting up a fight. Speaking of which, how good are you with a revolver, Dove Ed?”

“I hit Putney, didn’t I?”

“I know you can wing a man at arms’ length. I want to know if you can hit a man fifty feet away from horseback.” Tom looked around, then pointed upslope to the right, at a good-sized boulder a few yards off the road. “See that rock? Put a bullet into the middle of it.”

Dove Ed pulled Putney’s revolver from his belt and thumbed back the hammer. He took careful aim at the rock and pulled the trigger. Cash saw him flinch in anticipation of the shot, squeezing his eyes shut and turning his face slightly away from the pistol. That alone would have caused him to miss, but the pistol failed to fire. Instead it gave a hiss and emitted a puff of blue smoke. A tiny jet of flame spurted from the rear of the cylinder. Without thinking, Dove Ed turned the pistol sideways to look at it, saying, “What the hell...?”

“Hang fire,” Cash said. Somehow the percussion cap had not ignited the powder completely, most likely due to wet or sand in the load. The blue smoke warned Cash that it was still cooking; once it burned through to good powder it could discharge any time. “Don’t...”

At that moment the pistol went off. It wasn’t the sharp bang Cash expected, more of a round pop, but the sudden recoil put Dove Ed off balance. Furthermore, his horse, unused to such noises, shied away, and the boy fell heavily to the ground. Cash and Tom ducked, even though the gun had been pointed nowhere near them. They straightened up and looked at each other, then at Dove Ed, who sprawled on the ground gasping for breath.

“You okay, boy?” said Tom.

Dove Ed sat up and nodded.

“Well, I believe we’ll hold off stage robbing until you’ve learned to change the loads in your pistol once in a while.”

Cash got down and helped Dove Ed rise to his feet. Then he retrieved the fallen revolver and set about showing the boy how to clear and reload the cylinder.

Their northward progress slowed somewhat after that as they instructed Dove Ed in the fundamentals of shooting. It was frustrating work; the boy was eager enough, but could not consistently hit a man-sized target. Part of the problem was Dove Ed himself, who kept trying to incorporate dime-novel dramatics into his technique. He scowled at the rock or tree trunk selected as the target. He tried to quick-draw the pistol from his belt and nearly shot himself in the crotch. He fired from the hip, rather than aiming.

Part of the problem was Tom. Having carried a weapon all his adult life, he seemed to have forgotten how he had first learned to shoot it. Nor was he a patient tutor, berating and browbeating his pupil for his failures and making him even more self-conscious and tense. “Damn it, Dove,” he said after another round sailed high, wide, and handsome past a gnarled tree stump on the hillside. “You keep this up and we won’t have any more pistol balls left. They’ll all be in Malad City waiting for us!”

Cash wasn’t much help. He had his own misgivings about the entire enterprise, not least of which was the prospect of shooting an unsuspecting man from ambush. In principle he agreed with Tom that they hadn’t enough men to take a heavily armed stagecoach, but he balked at the idea of out-and-out murder. With no alternatives in mind, he pushed his concerns to the back of his thoughts, where they were apt to spring forward and ruin his concentration at inconvenient

moments. Instead he said to Tom, “Suppose we manage to take one of these gold-toting stages. What do we do then?”

“I been thinking about that,” said Tom. Dove Ed’s pistol boomed and Tom shouted yet again, “Squeeze the trigger, don’t pull it! You pull it and the barrel jerks up. Squeeze it and the barrel stays steady!”

He lowered his voice to continue, “If we rob it and ride out right away, we’ll have the law after us the whole time.”

“And nowhere to go, as you pointed out,” Cash said.

“Right.” Boom. “Damn it, Dove Ed, squeeze!”

“I thought I was!”

Tom shook his head in despair and let it go. “Reload. Hey Cash, you still got that dime-store watch you took from the Logan stage?”

Cash dug in his pocket for the tarnished brass watch. “It don’t work. The glass is cracked.”

“Perfect. Come on.” Tom marched toward the tree stump while Dove Ed reloaded his pistol. The stump, all that remained of a tree long since chopped into firewood by passing wagoners, had been hit two or three times by pistol balls. “Only wounded,” Tom said. “Not one fatal.”

He took the watch from Cash and hung it by the chain from the stump, then started back toward Dove Ed. “I figure we get ourselves a hideout near Malad, like a camp or something. A place we know where nobody else goes. We stash our take there, then stay in town until the heat blows over. Then we collect our takings and ride out calm as you please.”

Cash thought that over while Tom pointed out the dangling watch to Dove Ed. “There you go,” he said. “Putney’s heart. See what you can do.” Dove Ed grinned with savage glee and hurried to fit percussion caps in the cylinder, obviously pleased at the idea of plugging Jacob Putney, even if only by proxy.

“I don’t know, Tom,” Cash said. “Seems to me if we stash the take somewhere, and the law tracks us to it, they’ll search till they find the loot.”

“We could hide it in a cave,” said Dove Ed. Tom and Cash looked over at him.

“What did you say?”

“A cave, back in the hills? I know about a dozen near Da’s old farm.”

Tom grew animated. “Hell, that’s thinking, Dove! That’s exactly what I mean, Cash, a cave where we can hide the take, maybe even hide out for a while!”

“But that don’t answer my question, Tom. If they track us there, they’ll find the cave, and even the stupidest sodbuster could find the stash inside a cave.”

Tom stalked to and fro, his brow furrowed in thought, chewing his lower lip. Cash wondered if Tom had even heard him. Dove Ed finished priming his revolver but instead of firing at the pocketwatch he paused, fascinated at the sight of Tom so engrossed in the problem.

“Well, suppose we bury it. No, they’ll just dig it up. I know! We block off the cave entrance with a boulder! No, then we can’t move it. And if we can move it, they can move it. We need a lock, a lock and key.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant,” Cash said. “We rob the stage and put the money in the bank.”

“Not a bank, a safe.”

“A safe. In the cave?”

“Yes!”

“If we can drag a safe out to the cave, why can’t they drag the safe back?”

Tom threw his hands up in the air. “All right then, we make the whole cave a safe! We put a door on the cave, lock it up tight. Then even if they find the cave, they can’t get in!” His face fell as his racing thoughts kept going. “Except a wooden door wouldn’t stop them for more than a few minutes, even oak.”

His shoulders slumped and he stopped his pacing and turned to Dove Ed. “Go on,” he said, waving at the pocketwatch fifty feet away. “Kill me that timepiece.”

Even as inspiration left Tom Mulvehill, it struck Cash Joyner like a rifle bullet through a hat. “No, wait,” he said. “Suppose they do track us. And suppose they find the cave where we stashed the loot.”

“I already supposed that.”

“Yes, but then suppose they walk up to that cave and find a door, a locked door, made of iron. What do you suppose they could do then?”

Tom and Dove Ed stared at him, thunderstruck, their mouths hanging open. Dove Ed’s pistol still half-pointed at the pocketwatch, but like a compass needle it swung southward as the three men turned together to look back down the road the way they had come, back in the direction of Corinne. Back in the direction of the burned out bank, and its metal cage of a vault, with its flame and smoke-scarred iron door.

They were silent for a long time, pondering their next move. Then Tom said, “We’ll have to watch out for Putney.”

Dove Ed said, “This for Putney.” He took careful aim at the pocketwatch with the big revolver, cocked it, and fired all six rounds as quickly as he could pull the trigger and cock the hammer. When the last round was spent the three friends stood in a grey-blue cloud of sulfurous

smoke, rapidly wafting away on the breeze. Dove Ed lowered the weapon and together they strode forward to examine his handiwork.

They stopped three feet from the stump and regarded the pocketwatch, dangling untouched from the chain, turning slowly and glinting in the sunlight. Only two fresh bullet scars marked the ground near the stump.

Cash said, "Maybe you ought to wait for us outside of town."

"Yeah," said Tom. "We'll bring you back more powder and shot."

Chapter 6

When he heard the knock at his front door, Levi Dobson closed his eyes and muttered to himself, unsure as he did so whether he was praying or cursing.

Before the attempted robbery there would have been no question; as a devout Latter-Day Saint, Levi allowed neither spirits nor obscenity to pass his lips, believing that such weakness opened the door to Satan. Then, less than a week ago, the two thieves turned up on his doorstep and it seemed that Satan needed no open door. Instead he brought hellfire with him and burned down the walls themselves, and with them all hope.

The depositors of the First Zion Farmer's Bank praised Levi as a hero for resisting the gunmen, and self-righteously observed that the wicked had reaped their just reward for their villainous deeds. That first morning after the fire, they left Levi alone to recover from his ordeal and his injuries under the excellent care of Doctor John Ellstrom.

The next day was Sunday. Levi stayed home from temple, but understood that the testimony made comparisons between his trial and that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar.

The next day his depositors began to turn up on the front porch of his home, asking for their money back.

At first Teresa was able to appeal to their better nature, pointing out that Levi was still feverish and weak from the bullet wound that had broken his leg, and asking for a few days grace before forcing him from his sickbed. Abashed, the depositors withdrew, but talk began to spread. Levi heard it from Dr. Ellstrom, a decent enough fellow for a Gentile, who came to check on him each day and change the dressings on his leg and head.

“It’s not the farmers, you understand,” the doctor said. “Their homes weren’t burned. No, it’s the businessmen, calling in the money owed to them so they can rebuild. There’s a lot of talk about the ‘big-city banker’ sitting on his ‘pile of money’ instead of giving it to them it belongs to.”

Levi looked around his clean, tidy, but frugally decorated bedchamber. No ornate pictures hung from the moldings, no flocked paper decked the walls, and no thick Oriental rugs cushioned the floor. As for the “big city”, he had been to San Francisco once and Salt Lake City a couple of times, but he learned his trade in small towns like Corinne. A sharp retort rose in his mind, which he forced down with difficulty, reminding himself to show the proper humility and charity to those who might be in dire financial straits without their assets to draw upon.

“Would you be so good as to pass along a message for me, Doctor?” he said.

Over the objections of the doctor and his wife, Levi put the word about that he would hold a meeting for depositors of the First Zion Farmer’s Bank on the following evening at six. Dr. Ellstrom contended that he was still too weak to strain himself so; Teresa demanded to know how he intended to meet with hundreds of people in his bedchamber. Levi replied that he intended no such thing. Rather, he would meet them on his front porch.

The next day a crowd began to assemble in the street before the Dobson house at four. Despite the explicit nature of the invitation, some of the bolder fellows among them knocked on the door early, asking to see Levi privately. Teresa refused them all, angrily shoos them off the porch with admonitions that Levi would speak to them at six o’clock or not at all, and the choice was theirs.

“Do you know,” she said to her husband, arms akimbo, “Two of them were Saints? I expected better from the brethren.”

At five o'clock, the crowd was near a hundred. Toting a rifle, the marshal arrived, keeping an eye on the gathering from horseback. His presence did not completely reassure Levi, since at last count he had close to five hundred dollars in the First Zion Farmer's Bank.

By six, with the sun just fading from the sky, there were close to three hundred people cramming the dusty street in front of Levi Dobson's house. They filled the street all the way across, blocking what traffic tried to get by. People clambered onto porches across the street and hung from the railings so as to get a better view. Peering out from an upstairs window, Levi recognized most of his depositors, but he also spied many who were not—curiosity seekers, taking what entertainment they could, since the saloons were still forbidden from selling alcohol.

Teresa helped Levi down the stairs. With his splinted and bandaged left leg stuck out in front of him like a battering ram, he had to hop down each step on his right foot, leaning on his wife for support, and the jolting pained him terribly. By the time he reached the bottom, he was pale and sweating.

"Don't go out there, Levi," said Teresa. "Tell them to come back some other time, but not tonight."

"Please hold the door for me, my dear."

As the front door opened, a murmur went through the assembled and died away as Levi hobbled out. He had intended to address them standing in the center of the porch stairs, but he realized now what a mistake that would be. Instead, he lurched over to the railing and seized it, leaning on it to keep himself upright. The crowd fell utterly silent; no cheering now for the hero of the fiery furnace, he said to himself, then rebuked himself for his prideful thoughts.

"Brothers and sisters," he began, then cleared his throat. It surprised him how dry his mouth felt, looking at all those unsmiling faces. "This morning I sent a messenger, Josiah Byrne,

to Ogden to the telegraph office there, since ours was destroyed in the recent fire. Josiah will send a wire to my insurance company informing them of the disaster, and they will send a representative to Corinne, and when they see what has occurred, let me assure you that they will restore to you every penny you have on deposit with First Zion.” They had better, he added silently, since that’s what I pay them for. He didn’t bother to turn it into a prayer. “Further, I have sent instructions to liquidate the bank’s investments and deliver the proceeds to me so that I can disburse the cash to you.”

Quiet held for a moment as the gathering digested this speech, some turning to their neighbors and asking what the longer words meant. Then someone Levi did not see called out, “When?” and everyone turned back to Levi.

“I cannot be sure,” he said. Murmuring began again and grew louder. He raised his voice to add, “It will take Josiah a few days to reach Ogden, and a few days for the representative to reach us...”

“Bushwah!” someone shouted. Levi faltered, looking for sympathy or at least comprehension in the faces of his neighbors and finding none. A man pushed through the crowd toward him: George DeLacey, who owned the dry goods store next to the bank. After temple services, Levi and Teresa and the children sometimes took Sunday dinner with the DeLaceys, but tonight George’s face was twisted with anger and frustration. “I don’t have time to wait for some swell from Salt Lake City to make his way up here and decide if he’s going to pay you. My store is gone, thanks to you, and with it all my stock. If I’m to get more, I need money now!” The muttering from the crowd swelled in agreement, and Levi sagged against the banister, at the end of his strength. Teresa slipped her arm under his, urging him to come inside,

and the crowd grew angrier, everyone yelling questions at once. George DeLacey reached out, plucking at Levi's sleeve, still demanding payment.

A shot tore the air, close at hand, and the crowd flinched. A few screamed. Then one voice rose above the din, shouting for quiet. His rifle still smoking from the round he had fired in the air, Marshal Samuel Driggs jockeyed his horse between the people and the Dobson house, his voice rough as he cried, "All right, enough now!"

The shouting died away as the people made room for the Marshal. "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?" he said. "I know we're all in a tough spot, but that includes Brother Dobson, here. You think he keeps his money in his mattress, and he can just go inside and grab wads of it to hand out on his porch?

"You know better than that. What money he had was in his bank, same as yours, George. Same as mine. He's promised to pay it as soon as it comes, and I'd think his word should be good enough for all of you. Now go on home and let the man rest! Go on!" Driggs glared at them all, and especially the ringleaders like George DeLacey, daring them to take the issue further, but the back of the mob had already begun to break up. Without that support the groups near the front also separated and drifted away, but with many a resentful backward glance. Levi understood that he was not forgiven—only deferred.

Teresa said, "Thank you, Brother Driggs."

"Corinne can't take a riot right now," the Marshal said. "But there's only so long they'll wait, Levi."

He legged his horse around, pointing it back toward the center of town. As his parting shot, he said, "Come to that, there's only so long I'll wait."

In the days that followed the Dobsons kept to the house with the curtains drawn and loaded weapons close to hand. Teresa answered knocks at the door and when they saw her expression, it took men with more guts than George DeLacey owned to ask for money. Only Dr. Ellstrom came and went freely, pronouncing that Levi's leg was healing nicely, but that it would take time. In the gloom of the closed-up house, Levi prayed for deliverance, but as days passed without word from Salt Lake City and as callers became more frequent and less patient, his faith began to slip. The children, forbidden to play outside or attend school, became restless and fretful, and Levi found himself snapping at them when they grew too noisy.

Then, three days after the meeting on his porch, the knock came at the door. From where he lay in his upstairs bedchamber, Levi heard Teresa shush the children, then walk briskly to the front hallway. He heard her call, "Who is it?" and the murmured answer, but he was surprised to hear the door open and Teresa step outside. Through the door he could hear her in conversation; with whom, he did not know, but the voice sounded male. He sat up painfully in bed, trying to peer down the stairs. Then the door opened again and he heard someone step in with Teresa, saying, "Thank you, ma'am." Dr. Ellstrom had been by already and was not expected back, and for the last three days Teresa had chased away everyone else. Her footsteps sounded on the staircase, and she stepped into the room, Levi's shotgun in her arms and a peculiar expression on her face.

"What is it, my dear?" said Levi.

As they rode back to Corinne, Tom envisioned pulling a wagon up to the burned out bank, slinging the door in the bed and riding away, but he decided to hold that thought to himself

awhile, until they had a chance to look at it again. Dove Ed refused to wait outside of town all alone, so the three of them came down the main street near midday and stopped in front of the ashy ruins.

All around, the work of cleanup and rebuilding went on as other destroyed buildings were knocked down and hauled away, and the sound of carpentry came from places that had only been damaged. No one had time for three riders idling by a pile of ashes with an iron cage in the middle.

Looking at the cage with the safe inside, Tom Mulvehill knew he'd been right to keep his schemes to himself. The door was a three-foot by five-foot slab of black metal as thick as boiler plate from off a locomotive, with three stout bands of iron running across it to hinges the size of a man's fist. The frame supporting the hinges consisted of thick iron bars welded together, attached with rivets to the vault cage. Short of cutting through the rivet heads, Tom saw no way to separate the frame from the cage, or the door from the frame; there could be no thought of lifting it from the hinges and making off with it. His mind raced, examining the possibilities.

"If I was interested in heavy lifting," said Cash Joyner, "I'd have stayed in Logan and moved my rocks back off the road. Look at that thing! Must weigh five hundred, maybe six hundred pounds with the frame."

Tom glanced at Cash, leaning on the pommel of his saddle with an innocent expression on his face. That hayseed demeanor fooled you, made you think of Cash as an ignorant hick, when in fact he was no such thing. Since he had no good reply, Tom turned instead to Dove Ed Williams, who kept looking over his shoulder. "What's the matter, boy? You're as nervous as a long-tail cat in a room full of rocking chairs," he said.

"Just looking out for Putney," Dove Ed said, and all three of them looked around.

They saw no sign of Jacob Putney, but they did catch the eye of a carpenter working on the structure next door. He waved and called, “Hope you’re not here to make a withdrawal!”

Dove Ed looked startled and Cash gave a wry grin at the feeble joke, but Tom laughed out loud and said, “No, by God, and a good thing, too! I was hoping to have a word with the banker, though.” He paused a moment, then cocked a thumb at the ruins of the bank and said, “I trust he wasn’t, uh...?”

“No, sir, he’s at home.” The carpenter, his expression now guarded, pointed with his hammer. “Five up, one left,” he said. “Levi Dobson, you ask for, and much joy I wish you of it.” He turned back to his work.

“Thanks, friend.” Tom urged his mount in the direction the carpenter had indicated.

“Now what was that about?” Cash said. Tom shook his head, a little unsettled by the exchange himself.

They found the house without difficulty, a trim two-story clapboard with a broad porch and a waist-high whitewashed fence in front. All the shades were drawn, and the place had a somber, brooding air about it, as though the occupants were in mourning. From the main street came the sounds of industry, but around the little house the street stood quiet. The men hitched their horses to the fence rail and followed Tom as he mounted the steps to the front door, where he rapped briskly.

No one responded at first, and Tom began to wonder if the house were deserted, but as he raised his hand to knock once more, a voice came from behind it.

“Who is it?” A woman, suspicious.

Tom glanced at his companions in turn, then said, “Tom Mulvehill, ma’am, and my friends Cash Joyner and Dove Ed Williams.”

The door opened and Tom took an involuntary step back, raising his hands to shoulder level. In the doorway stood a petite woman with pale brown hair piled in a demure bun atop her head and an apron over her skirts. In her hands she clutched a double-barreled shotgun, and Tom saw that both hammers were back. The woman scowled at the three men, biting her lower lip in determination, and advanced onto the porch, pulling the door to behind her. Tom heard Dove Ed flee the porch to stand with the horses; Cash stood his ground with Tom. The tiny woman looked them over and said, "I don't know you. Are you depositors?"

Tom could only shake his head for a moment. He had been under the gun before, more times than he could remember. He had faced men who would shoot him if he showed the slightest hesitation; men who would shoot him because it was their job; men who would shoot him because they would enjoy it. Hell, they had shot at him, sometimes, and not once had he felt afraid. But the sight of those twin bores in the hands of this elfin creature quite robbed him of his voice. Tom knew she would shoot, but he didn't know why, or what might cause her to pull the trigger. What had he done to her? He felt a surge of relief when he heard Cash answer in that quiet, self-assured way of his, "No, ma'am, we ain't."

"Then what do you want?"

"Well, first thing, we'd appreciate it if you could point that somewheres else."

The shotgun lowered a fraction, though not all the way, and Tom began to get a grip on himself. He swallowed to get his heart back where it belonged and said, "Are you Mrs. Dobson?"

"I am, and my husband's laid up in bed and not to be disturbed."

"Ma'am, normally I wouldn't think of it, but it's very important we have a word with him. Not about a withdrawal," he added hastily, as the shotgun came up again.

“What, then?”

Mentally he ran through the lies and subterfuges that sprang up at the question. He rejected them out of hand. This woman could smell a falsehood and just might take a shot at one. Tom said, “Ma’am, we’d like to buy your husband’s iron door.”

She bid them stand in the hall while she consulted with her husband. “And you might as well remove your gunbelts, for I’ll not have them in my house.” She stood watching as Tom and Cash unbuckled the belts and handed them to Dove Ed. The boy edged close enough to take them, but seemed happy to remain outside while they followed the madwoman inside.

In the hall, hats in hand, they fidgeted, ill at ease without their revolvers even though the house was neat and cozy. From the top of the stairs in front of them, they could hear the woman talking in a low voice with someone, presumably her husband. To the left, a doorway led into a formal parlor of gracious but not extravagant appointment. The hallway ran alongside the staircase to the back of the house. Through a door at the end of hall, a tow-headed young boy and girl peeped at Tom and Cash, ducking back out of sight when the men noticed them.

“If I’d known I was going calling,” said Cash under his voice, “I’d of worn my Sunday best pistol.”

Tom ignored him. Mrs. Dobson was coming down the stairs, still toting the shotgun, though she showed less inclination to aim it in their direction, for which he was grateful. “Mr. Dobson will see you,” she said. “But I’d be obliged if you would please keep your visit brief, and try not to strain him.”

“No, ma’am.” They followed her upstairs.

Levi Dobson awaited them in his bed. Evidently, his wife had helped him prepare for their meeting, for he rested upright on a stack of pillows, his game leg stretched before him swathed in bandages. The other leg he kept under the bedclothes. To preserve his dignity, he had folded a blanket over his lap and donned his shirt and suit coat. His ruffled hair, and his wife standing attentively at his bedside, rather spoiled the illusion that he did business this way as a matter of course, but he gave them his best banker's smile and said, "Now, what can I do for you gentlemen?"

In the corner of his eye Tom could see Cash, his mouth hanging open at this outlandish apparition before them. He forced himself to look only at the banker's face, lest he laugh outright, and came right to the point. "Sir, we'd like to buy the iron door from your bank."

Levi Dobson shook his head. "Impossible. That door was built to my specifications expressly for my bank. It performed admirably during the recent robbery, and I intend to incorporate it into the new bank building. I could not think of parting with it."

"Are you certain? My partners and I are prepared to pay well...say, three hundred dollars?"

Dobson again shook his head, but Tom cut his eyes at Mrs. Dobson. She had propped the shotgun against the wall and stood now with arms folded and brow furrowed, staring at her husband.

"Well, I suppose we could go as high as five hundred," Tom said.

"No, sir, I'm sorry. Not if you were to offer full replacement price."

"Which is?"

"It cost me over two thousand dollars to have it made in Salt Lake City, but that is neither here nor there. It is not for sale."

Tom sighed, and settled his hat on his head. "That's all right. We don't have anything like two thousand dollars," he said. "Sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Dobson."

"Not at all."

They turned away, but before they could depart they were halted by a voice behind them. Mrs. Dobson said, "How much do you have?"

Tom looked at her and recognized the level, determined expression on her face as that of a woman who has reached a decision. From the bed the banker gaped at his wife, but she paid him no mind, still standing with her arms folded, waiting for Tom's reply. The shotgun stood forgotten by the bed, but under Teresa Dobson's gaze Tom nonetheless felt as though she were aiming a weapon at him. For the first time he knew some sympathy for the men he had held under his own gun.

The banker spoke. "My dear, what..."

She looked down at him and his voice died in his throat. Tom couldn't blame him. He cleared his throat and said, "Ma'am, it might help if you give us an idea of the amount you're looking for."

"You're mistaken, Mr. Mulvehill," she said. "We are not horse-trading here, because I'm not a horse trader. I want to know your top dollar offer right now. If it's enough, you can have the door."

"Teresa!" Dobson protested. "You can't..."

She swung to face him, arms akimbo. "Oh, can't I?" she said. "You heard what Brother Driggs and Brother DeLacey said, didn't you?" She loaded the honorific "Brother" with derision.

Dobson winced at her scorn, but he earned Tom's respect by arguing with his wife. "Yes, but even five hundred dollars won't nearly pay back all the depositors," he said.

"Of course not. But if you pay some now to DeLacey and Driggs, and a few other blowhards, they'll change their tune. Without them stirring the pot, the others will be content to wait until the rest comes in from Salt Lake, won't they?"

Dobson chewed this over, while Tom and Cash looked at each other in frank admiration, not to mention concern. They knew this would cost them more than they had planned. The banker said, "Five hundred won't go far between Driggs and DeLacey and the others."

"You're right," said his wife. To Tom she said, "A thousand would go much farther."

"Come on, Tom," said Cash. "We'll have to think of something else." He started for the door, but Tom put a hand on his chest.

"My friend is right, Miz Dobson," Tom said. "Let me be straight with you. We ain't got but twelve hundred. It's our whole stake. Now after we buy the door, we still have to buy a wagon and team to haul it. Then we'll need lumber and tools to install it, and food to eat while we're doing that. Way I see it, that's a good four hundred dollars, so you're welcome to eight hundred for the door."

"A thousand," she shot back, "And we'll throw in the wagon and team. When you get where you're going, you can sell them if you like, and you'll be ahead on the deal."

"But Teresa, we don't have a wagon and team!" her husband burst out.

"Sloan does, and I'm sure he'd give them up if you offered to forgive his delinquent payments on his mortgage." While Levi Dobson's mouth flapped open and shut, producing no coherent sounds, she said to Tom and Cash, "Levi will write up documents to that effect. You just take them out to Luke Sloan's ranch and he'll get you fixed up. Is it a deal?"

Fifteen minutes later Tom and Cash emerged into the sunlight outside the Dobson home and looked around for Dove Ed. The boy stood between the horses at the fence, and when he caught sight of them his entire body sagged in relief.

“I have never in my born days seen the like,” Cash said as they descended the steps to the street. Tom could only shake his head.

“They wouldn’t sell?” said Dove Ed. “You’re lucky to get out of there alive, you ask me.”

“Oh, they sold,” said Tom. He pulled a small bundle of papers from inside his mackinaw. “All nice and legal.”

The men swung aboard their mounts and Tom set out down the street, Cash following. Only Dove Ed hesitated. “Bank’s the other way,” he called. He legged his horse after them when they did not stop.

“First we need to get us a wagon from Sloan’s ranch,” Tom said. “Did you expect us to put the door in our saddlebags?” Cash chuckled, but there was no response from the boy. Tom pulled up short and looked behind him.

Dove Ed stood his horse in the middle of the street a few yards back, a look of sheer horror on his face. “What the hell’s the matter with you?” Tom said.

“Did you say Sloan’s ranch?” Dove Ed said.

“Yeah. We’ve got a letter from the banker, says that Sloan is to set us up with a rig and a team. Why?”

“Let’s go to the livery stable instead, see what they’ve got.”

“We can’t. Ain’t got the money for it,” Cash said.

“It’s all part of the deal,” Tom said. “Now what’s eating you, Dove Ed?”

The boy looked from one to the other of them, misery and fear in his face. He said, “The foreman at Sloan’s ranch is Jacob Putney.”

Chapter 7

“Dixon!” yelled Jacob Putney as he rode into the corral. “Dixon, hitch up the wagon. I’m taking it out to Bear River soon as I get some food in me.”

He dismounted outside Sloan’s sod-roofed barn and led his animal inside to a stall, where he set about unsaddling it. Most of the stalls were empty, since all the hands were out tending stock, but Sloan’s favorite mounts munched at their fodder. Farther down the way, Putney saw a horse he did not recognize, a swaybacked old gray that looked out of place next to the fit, sleek beasts Sloan favored. He paid it little mind and called out for the groom. “Dixon, you hear me? I need the wagon hitched up! We’re butchering a steer by the river.”

The last few days he had spent ranging the countryside around the ranch, checking on the herds, searching canyons and dry washes for strays. It was dull, dirty, tiring work, but Putney had his reasons for doing it that went beyond the wages paid by Bennet Sloan. This morning his band had come upon a steer that managed to break its leg in a jackrabbit burrow, and rather than let it go to waste, Putney set the men to butchering it while he returned to the ranch for a wagon. He planned to take his time and get a decent meal into the bargain while the others smirched themselves with blood and hair, slicing the carcass into manageable chunks. After all, why do the dirty work when you could make other men do it for you?

Better yet, why do dirty work at all when you could just take what you wanted?

The way Putney figured, nobody could keep track of all the cattle out on the range, so what was the harm if a few were never found? Talking discreetly with the hired drovers, Putney had gotten a group of like-minded men together. When opportunity presented itself, they would drive a couple of strays, mostly unbranded, to a camp in the backcountry. Once they assembled a large enough herd, they planned to take their “lost” cattle to Colorado, to sell to miners or the

Army. Until then, it meant hard work and toadying up to men like Ben Sloan, who played at being lord of the manor even though his boots had horseshit on them like everyone else's.

By this time Putney had his horse settled and his tack stowed away, but Dixon had failed to appear. "Dixon, you lazy son of a bitch," Putney grumbled, and went looking for him.

He found the man on the other side of the barn, hitching a two-horse team to a wagon. "Goddam it, Dix," Putney said, "I've been hollering myself hoarse looking for you. What the hell are you doing?"

Dixon, a slack-jawed dullard a few years past forty, poked his unkempt head up from the shaft of the wagon where he was attaching the singletree. "What's that, Mr. Putney?" he said.

"Why don't you listen, you dumb bastard? What the hell are you doing here, anyway?"

The groom gazed at the wagon and team as if he feared the question was a trap. "I'm hitching up the wagon, Mr. Putney."

"I can see what you're doing; I mean, why are you hitching up Sloan's best wagon?"

Comprehension dawned on Dixon's face. He nodded and said, "Because you said so, Mr. Putney," then went back to connecting the singletree to the traces, unaware of the flush of anger climbing Putney's cheeks.

Putney seized the front of Dixon's shirt and pulled him upright so as to stare him in the eye. He took some pleasure from the man's fearful expression; Putney's reputation around Sloan's ranch was both well-known and well-earned. He said, "Boy, you are every kind of stupid, ain't you? I don't want this wagon. I want that old buckboard so I can sling some beef sides in it. Now go get it, or I'll whip you like a broke-dick mule."

Dixon's eyes were wide and his voice high and thready as he said, "I can't do that, Mr. Putney. We ain't got that buckboard no more."

“What? Why not?”

“Three fellows came to see Mr. Sloan a couple days ago. Mr. Sloan called me into the house and told me to hitch up the old wagon, cause the three fellows needed it. I don’t know why, Mr. Putney.”

“What three fellows? From town?” Putney loosened his grip somewhat, already losing interest. Sloan often hired out wagons or horses, and sometimes sold them as well...

His attention snapped back to Dixon as the groom said, “Just that boy from Haney’s. I don’t know the other two.”

“You mean that Irish turd? He was here?” Dixon nodded but said no more; both of Putney’s fists were knotted in his shirt now, and his eyes were wild.

Putney’s thoughts were racing as Dixon hung, quite forgotten, in his grip. That was where he had seen that old gray plowhorse in the stable: it belonged to Haney’s former kitchen boy. The other two men had to be Mulvehill and his partner, and although he couldn’t imagine what they would need with Sloan’s old wagon, he didn’t really care. His only concern was how best to find and kill all three of them. Even in the red haze of rage, he knew he could not simply ride off after them and gun them down. In the first place there was the matter of a weapon; the kid from Haney’s still had Putney’s revolver, and Putney himself had to make do with the ancient pocket pistol the kid left behind. It was a poor substitute—unreliable, inaccurate, and small caliber to boot. A couple of the drovers had noticed the absence of Putney’s Whitney revolver and remarked on it; Putney gave out that he had lost it in a poker game, which he found less humiliating than the truth. At any rate, should he try to take all three of the men at once, his chances of killing them before one shot back were small. Secondly, they had at least a couple

days start on him and he had no idea which direction they had gone. He would need provisions, money, and some clue where they might be.

“Mr. Putney, sir?” wheezed Dixon. Putney glanced at him and realized he was still twisting the man’s collar into his throat. He shoved Dixon back and the groom stumbled against the wagon, holding the front wheel for support as he rubbed his neck.

“Now listen, Dixon,” Putney said. “You forget this wagon for the time being, you hear? I’m going to have a word with Sloan, and I want a fresh mount saddled and waiting by the time I come out again.”

Dixon nodded and ran to the stables, eager to be out of Putney’s sight. Putney strode from the barn toward the sprawling ranch house, fuming. Mulvehill and the others, here, while Putney chased after cattle! Well, they were traveling with a wagon, which would slow them down, and they didn’t know he was following, so he could come upon them unawares. First he would settle up with Sloan, and then he would settle with Tom and his friends.

He found Sloan in his office just off the front hall, writing at his desk. Around them the ranch house was quiet. Sloan had no wife or children, his ranch hands slept in the bunkhouse when they were not out working, and it was early yet for the cook to be preparing supper. “Mr. Sloan,” said Putney, clearing his throat. “I hear three fellows were here a few days ago, left you that gray nag in the stables.”

Bennet Sloan, a weatherbeaten man of middle age, looked up over half-moon spectacles with keen eyes of brown. His grey hair and expensive clothes spoke of his success, but the gnarled hands and tough frame told of the hard work he had done to earn it. “Yes, that’s right,”

he said. “Levi Dobson sent them out here looking for a wagon and team. They had no need of the extra horse. What of it?”

“I was wondering when they might be returning the wagon.”

“They’re not, as a matter of fact.”

“No? Where are they taking it?”

Sloan raised his eyebrows at Putney’s impertinence. “They said they had some supplies to haul, but not where they were going. What business is it of yours?”

Impatience tinged the older man’s tone, but Putney was growing impatient too. With every passing minute, Mulvehill got farther away. “Whatever business it is, it’s mine, Mr. Sloan, so give me my wages and I’ll be about it.”

They locked eyes for a few moments until Sloan threw down his pen and said, “So that’s how it is?” He reached into a desk drawer and withdrew a thick sheaf of bills. “All right. The way I reckon it, you’re due for seventeen days pay; that comes to fifty-one dollars.” He peeled a few bills off the roll, which looked no thinner without them, and held them out to Putney.

Putney did not take them. He said, “Actually, the way I reckon it, you owe me a bonus for a job well done.”

Sloan snorted and dropped the fifty-one dollars onto the desktop, then put the rest back into the drawer, saying, “Do you now? Let me tell you something, Jacob. I’ve been a cattleman for a long time, long enough to expect my hands to sell the odd stray out from under me, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let them steal my cattle and pay them extra money for the privilege.” He slammed the drawer shut and straightened up, cocking his hands on his hips.

In the front hall, the door opened. Dixon came into the room. “Got your horse saddled, Mr. Putney,” he said.

Putney ignored him and gathered up the money on the desktop, tucking it into the pocket of his coat. "Fair enough," he said. "Can't blame me for trying, can you?" He grinned at his employer.

He was still grinning when he withdrew his hand from his coat pocket. In it was the little pistol, which he extended over the desk. When he pulled the trigger, the muzzle was less than a yard from Bennet Sloan's forehead, and the pistol ball made a neat round hole in it. Sloan's head snapped back and his body collapsed into the chair behind him, rocking slightly on its rear legs before coming to rest with Sloan draped in it as though taking a nap.

Putney turned to look at Dixon, who stood with his mouth open, trying to comprehend what he had just seen. Putney shot him in the chest, and when the groom clutched his wound without falling, Putney fired again, hitting him in the throat. Dixon fell face down, making choking noises that soon stopped. In the quiet that followed, Putney listened for any sound of alarm, but the cook either hadn't heard the shots or wasn't in the house. In any event, no one came to investigate.

Putney came around the desk and pulled open the drawer from which he had been paid. He took out the wad of bills and stuffed it into his coat pocket with his paltry fifty-one dollars. He tossed the small revolver onto the desk, then went to the row of pegs behind the office door and from them removed Bennet Sloan's gunbelt, with its twin holsters that held matching Colt Dragoon revolvers. He buckled it on himself, settling the belt into a comfortable position a couple of notches tighter than Sloan had worn it, and rubbing the smooth handles of the pistols, enjoying the feel of them. He turned to the gun cabinet behind the desk and selected a repeating carbine, a pair of powder horns, and shot and caps for all three guns.

Then with one last glance around the room, he stepped over the still body of Dixon the groom and pulled the door shut as he set out after Tom Mulvehill and his crew.

Chapter 8

The second floor of Vanderwood's Store, a simple clapboard structure with an outside staircase and balcony, was given over to the town of Malad City for use as the district courthouse of Oneida County. When Sheriff Morgan stepped out of the courtroom and leaned on the railing of the balcony, he could see not only the length of Main Street but also, over the buildings across the street, the Samaria Mountains shouldering their way into the cloud-dappled sky. As mountains went they were not especially imposing, hummocks of brown and grey stone still dusted with snow higher up this early in April. They would stay snow-capped deep into June some years. Sometimes in spring the mountains would grumble and moan; no one knew why.

If the hills groaned today, though, the noise in the courtroom drowned it out. Morgan sighed at the sound of angry voices carrying through the open door behind him. He had come outside in the first place for some respite from the arguments within, arguments he had heard for months, but which were now reaching fruition. Since last fall the county commissioners had talked about reducing the rates on the toll roads north of Malad, and at last they were ready to do it. Only Bill Murphy stood in their way, but if the commissioners were the irresistible force then "Red" Bill Murphy was the immovable object.

Morgan looked right, up Main Street. Some twenty-five miles that way, the road curved around Malad Summit and came to Murphy's Bridge over Marsh Creek. Far beyond that lay the rich gold fields of Montana, which made the bridge and the road a vital part of the route to Salt Lake City. Morgan turned his head the opposite direction, as though he could see south down Main, past the saloons and dance halls, past the imposing stone edifice of the Co-op on the corner of Bannock Street, past the Salt Works all the way to the railheads in Ogden and Salt Lake.

Instead he watched the normal ebb and flow of activity on the street. The wagons by the Co-op were farmers in town for supplies. The team of pack animals heading north, heavily laden, was one of B. F. White's freight shipments headed for the gold camps; they would pay a heavy toll at Murphy's Bridge unless White sent them the long way over the Turkey Trail and through Arbon Valley. Of course, if White and the commissioners had their way today, the way over Marsh Creek would cost a lot less dear.

A furious shout from within the courtroom brought him up short, and he peered through the door into the gloom to see what was going on. He made out the powerful form of Bill Murphy, standing with his arm outstretched, pointing an accusing finger in the direction of the commissioner's table. "Half!" Murphy said, and his face was florid with rage. "You can't cut my tolls by half! You haven't the right!"

Morgan stepped inside, taking in the room at a glance. The tension had not dissipated during his brief absence; rather, the hostility had grown almost palpable. All around Murphy sat farmers, businessmen, and freight haulers who paid the tolls on Murphy's road and bridge. They sat with their arms folded and scowls directed at the big Irishman. At the front of the room sat the three commissioners in their dark suits and high collars, doing their best to appear unperturbed, but Murphy's temper was famous, and like most men he wore a revolver on his belt.

Murphy went on, "It's a god damned ambush, is what it is. Last October you all said you wanted the tolls reduced by twenty-five cents and that was too much. So I agreed that the tolls could come down by ten cents. With the traffic up and down the valley, I'd still make money during the fair weather months. But now the fair weather months have come, and you're trying to take the money out of my pocket! You haven't the right, I tell you!"

George Ruddy, the senior commissioner, held up his palms in a conciliatory way and spoke in patient tones, but his words were anything but reassuring. “In fact, Mr. Murphy, we do have the right, granted by the Territorial Legislature, to set tolls on roads and bridges. We have deferred that decision until now, since traffic during the winter months is light, but...”

“But now these bastards,” Murphy waved his arms at the men around him, “want to use my bridge again, but they don’t want to pay. What have they promised you if you’ll cut my throat for them, eh?”

Tom Daniels, on Ruddy’s right, bestirred himself. “Here, that’s not the way of it at all,” he said. He pushed himself upright in his chair, running a hand through his untidy, thinning hair. “You’ve profited handsomely from your business over the years, Mr. Murphy...”

“Mr. Murphy, is it? When you shared a drink at my table, ‘Bill’ was good enough for you, Daniels!”

The third commissioner was William Jones, thin, aged, trembling, but clear of eye and voice. He said, “Mr. Murphy, we do not arrive at this decision lightly, nor in ignorance of the facts.” His hands shook as he unfolded a sheet of paper before him and held it up to show the columns of figures written on it. “I have here a memorial detailing the profits and expenses involved in the operation of your bridge. It shows that over the years you have earned \$50,000 more from tolls than you have spent maintaining it. Is that not a handsome profit, sir? Furthermore we have receipts and ledgers written in your hand that support the figures I have quoted.” He put down the paper. “Have you an answer for that, Mr. Murphy?”

Murphy went from beet red to dead white. His hands, strong and callused from his lifetime of work, gripped the back of the bench in front of him as though he would tear it in two, and he said, “Two months ago, someone broke into the toll office and made off with some

papers. I see now that was for purpose of slandering my name and ruining my livelihood.” He looked around the room and found little support among the angry faces. He spat on the floor and said, “The man who wrote that memorial is both a god-damned liar and a dirty thief.”

Silence fell upon the courtroom as suddenly as if every man there had been struck dumb. Sheriff Morgan felt the weight of his own revolver on his hip; only an effort of will kept his hand away from it. On the other side of the room from Murphy, a man got to his feet—B. F. White, owner of the Cariboo Salt Works and Freighting Company, also ran a law office in town. He was an unctuous son of a bitch if ever Morgan saw one. He wore a clean dark suit of the latest cut and his shoes were shined, no small feat in a town as dusty as Malad City. His thick grey hair was neatly barbered and his round face clean-shaven. He gave a tight smile that did not touch his small brown eyes as he looked Bill Murphy full in the face.

Morgan knew White to be cunning in his business dealings. The man had gotten himself appointed County Auditor and Recorder last summer, and had used every connection afforded by the office to his own advantage. Still, Morgan had never credited the man with courage until now. White said, “Those figures come from Oneida County records, Mr. Murphy, and they are accurate, I can assure you. Furthermore, I am the man who wrote that memorial, and I will not stand for such language, sir.” He stepped forward, sweeping back the tail of his jacket with both hands. From where he stood, Morgan couldn’t tell whether White wore a gunbelt, but he could see that Murphy wasn’t waiting to find out. The Irishman grabbed for his pistol and Morgan lunged forward, seizing Murphy by the wrist with both hands and keeping the weapon pointed at the floor.

“No, Bill, don’t,” he said, but Murphy kept moving. He pulled Morgan back with him, still struggling to raise his arm and aim. All around them the courtroom erupted in confusion,

men shouting and bolting up from their seats, the benches sliding and overturning as they were vacated. One of the commissioners, or maybe all of them, were banging on the table and yelling for calm. Of B. F. White, Morgan could see and hear nothing; he had been jostled so that he stood face to face with Murphy. He thought Murphy could see his antagonist, though, because he kept his eyes fixed on something over Morgan's right shoulder and shouting curses.

Morgan concentrated on the gun in Murphy's hand. The man lunged against him and the muscles in his arm were hard as cables. Morgan moved one hand down, feeling the cold metal of the revolver and he clutched it, trying to twist it free from Murphy's fist. Murphy lunged again and there was a loud report. Pain exploded in Morgan's right leg and right hand, and he knew he had been shot. All at once Murphy was gone, leaving the still-hot revolver. The sudden departure of the big Irishman left Morgan nothing to lean on, and he fell over, catching himself on his outstretched left arm before he slammed into the floor.

For a moment he lay stunned, the shouting of the men in the courtroom nothing but a welter of sound. Then he gathered himself and rose up on his left knee. Fire seemed to run up and down his right leg, and his right hand stung fiercely, but he ignored them and looked about him, yelling, "Bill!" Hands reached out of the crowd, hoisting him to his feet. Despite the pain, his legs held him upright and he hobbled to the door of the courtroom, the only exit, and back out onto the balcony.

He could hear the clatter of boots on the staircase and lurched to the railing that overlooked Main Street. He had no more eye for the mountains, the buildings, or even the people of Malad who stood frozen in the streets, staring at Vanderwood's Store and wondering what the hubbub was about. Morgan's gaze fixed instead on Red Bill Murphy, running down Main Street toward the Co-op. He shouted, "Murphy! Bill! Stop!"

Murphy slowed and looked back, catching sight of Morgan at the rail of the courtroom balcony. He called back, “Don’t shoot, Morgan!”

At that moment Morgan realized he still held Murphy’s revolver, a Walker Colt as long as Morgan’s forearm. In one motion he cocked it, and pointed it at the fleeing man. He aimed low, toward Murphy’s legs, and shouted again, “Stop, Murphy!” Murphy, still yelling for Morgan not to shoot, kept running. Perhaps he hoped to reach the livery stable and his horse; perhaps he merely fled in panic, like a frightened animal.

Morgan fired. The gun bucked, kicking high with more force than Morgan expected. He brought it down and trained it again on Murphy, knowing he had missed. But Murphy staggered, slowed, then fell face-first into the dust of Main Street and didn’t move again. Morgan slumped on the balcony rail as men converged on the fallen bridgekeeper. His leg could hold him no more, and it folded under him, dropping him heavily to the plank floor of the balcony. Men from the meeting swarmed around him, yelling for the doctor.

“Have the doctor tend to Bill first,” Morgan said, but no one paid him any attention.

He looked down at his right leg, expecting to see a welter of mangled flesh in the center of his thigh. The Walker fired .44-caliber balls propelled by twice the powder of smaller weapons; the wounds it created could be fearsome. But he saw that the ball had skimmed along the outside of his thigh, breaking the skin and drawing blood, which had soaked the leg of his trousers. It hurt like the devil, but Morgan felt a wave of relief that he would not lose the limb entirely. His right hand also seemed more painful than necessary, blackened by powder burns when Murphy pulled the trigger.

Out of the forest of men standing around him, one crouched down and with a pair of scissors began to cut Morgan’s trousers away from his wound. Dr. John Sherman, a bespectacled

man of about thirty-five, worked with clinical efficiency, taking a clean cloth and a brown bottle from his satchel, pouring some foul-scented liquid from the bottle onto the cloth, then applying it to the wound in Morgan's leg. The fire there flared, and Morgan ground his teeth and tensed against the pain.

"See to Bill first, John," he said.

Sherman continued to clean the blood away from the wound, frowning at what he saw or perhaps at what he heard. He drew bandages from the satchel and set about tying them over Morgan's leg. "I did," he said. "Passed him in the street on my way here, lying in front of the schoolhouse."

The implication was plain. Morgan shook his head in sorrow and anger. "God damn it," he said. "He should be sitting here with a creased leg, not lying dead in the street, but that damned Colt...Why the hell did he run? Why did he have to run?"

As he finished tying the bandage, John Sherman sat back on his heels, his eyes searching Morgan's face. "I don't know," he said. "Why did you have to shoot?"

When he saw that Morgan had no answer, he said, "Well, never mind. You lost a little meat off the thigh there, but keep it clean and dressed and you'll mend soon enough. Here, help the sheriff to his feet." Two men extended arms and hoisted Morgan up, his torn trouser leg flapping loose. One of the men offered a shoulder to lean on, and Morgan accepted, his leg throbbing.

"Allow me to escort you back to you lodgings, Sheriff," said the man on his right. For the first time, Morgan noticed that it was none other than B.F. White. He paused, clutching the fine fabric of White's frock coat to keep himself upright.

“What did you mean, drawing on Murphy in a crowded room?” Morgan said. “You could have hit someone else, anyone!”

“Drawing, Sheriff?” said White, a half-smile quirking the left side of his mouth. He opened the front of his coat to show that he wore no gunbelt. “You are mistaken. I did no such thing.”

“I saw you. You reached for a weapon. That’s why Murphy drew on you.”

White shrugged. “There was so much confusion; tempers were running high. But I assure you I am unarmed today. By the way,” he went on, “my thanks for reacting so quickly when Mr. Murphy drew. I feel sure that he would have fired at me, and as you said, he might have hit anyone in there.”

Down the street, a wagon had pulled up to the knot of people surrounding Bill Murphy’s still body. Two men who worked for the undertaker bent and lifted the corpse into the wagon, leaving only a dark stain in the dirt to mark where he had fallen. Morgan watched, silent, reviewing his memories of those chaotic moments: of Murphy’s and White’s voices raised in accusation, of White’s sudden movement, of Murphy’s impulsive response.

Seeing his distracted state, White said, “Sheriff, there was nothing to be done about it. The man lost control of his reason and forced you into action, while you behaved in all ways in accordance with your duty.” He looked at the men surrounding them, searching for the commissioners, Ruddy, Daniels, and Jones. “In fact, since we are assembled here already, I see no reason why we could not hold a court of inquiry into the matter at once...that is, once you have been settled in your rooms, Sheriff Morgan.” The commissioners murmured agreement, nodding their heads and looking solemn.

Morgan removed his hand from B.F. White's shoulder, taking his weight on his uninjured left leg. He knew what they did not say, which was that first the commissioners would vote to enforce the changes in the tolls. Without Murphy there to argue, the proposal would pass by acclamation, and then his death would be ruled as justified and the incident would be closed. Bile rose in the back of his throat; he choked it back.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Dr. Sherman will assist me. You all have business that has been interrupted. But may I ask one thing of you before I leave?"

With Morgan already dismissed from their thoughts, the commissioners turned back to him in surprise. B.F. White's smile remained in place, although his eyes narrowed somewhat at Morgan's request.

"What is it, Sheriff?"

"From what I know of Catherine Murphy, her temperament agrees strongly with that of her late husband. It might be wise to send someone other than Mr. White to break the news to her, lest there be a similar result."

Throwing his arm over John Sherman's shoulder, Morgan limped painfully for the stairs.

Chapter 9

Driving the wagon with the vault door inside under a canvas tarp, Dove Ed knew they had entered the Malad River valley when he heard the mountains moan. The sound, a low, mournful rumbling, shuddered the air all around them though there was no wind, and the only clouds were high and light. Tom and Cash looked about in consternation. “What in the hell was that?” Cash said.

Dove Ed grinned. “Sometimes in the spring the mountains groan like that,” he said. “No one knows why.” At this distance, the gentle-seeming slopes reminded Dove Ed of a sleeping man hunkered into his quilt for just a few more minutes sleep. Dove Ed smiled again, this time at his own imagination: maybe the rumbling and moaning was the snoring of a giant starting to awaken.

Caught up in his own thoughts, Dove Ed almost failed to recognize Malad City as he crested the last hill before the town, and stopped only because Tom and Cash had reined in. He had seen the town from this viewpoint many times before, though when he rode out two years earlier, he hadn’t looked back. Two main roads joined at the center of town to form an enormous “Y” shape running parallel to the Malad River on the east, but the buildings around them were just tiny white and gray squares on the broad flat valley floor. Nothing looked familiar at first; it seemed some changes had been made since he left. Then Dove Ed spied the cluster of buildings that made up the Cariboo Salt Works and Freight Company on the southern end of Main Street at the base of the Y, and the massive stone pile that was the Co-op at the fork, on the corner of Bannock and Main. The Co-op always seemed to Dove Ed to have the face of a stern, disapproving preacher, scowling at the saloons and dance halls around it. Other structures, less

sure of themselves, huddled along the sides of both streets, and beyond them the town quickly lost all confidence and petered off into brush and rock and rangeland.

“That it?” Cash asked.

“That’s it,” said Dove Ed.

If Tom and Cash were disappointed with Malad, neither one said so. Rather, Cash turned to Dove Ed and said, “What’s the best saloon in town?”

“Now hold on,” Tom said, and the other two looked at him. “We’d be fools to ride in with the door right in the wagon bed for all the world to see.”

“It’s covered,” Cash said.

“Prying eyes got a way of seeing through tarpaulin,” said Tom. “Best if we stash it someplace and come back for it.”

“I know a place,” Dove Ed said.

He led them west toward the mountains along a well-travelled road, then turned north again. Tom and Cash could barely make out an overgrown wagon track, and they asked the boy where he was taking them.

“That way is Samaria Township,” Dove Ed said, pointing west along the road, “But nobody comes down this way.”

“I can see why,” Tom said. The path they followed wound down through a rocky, inhospitable series of hills, gullies, and washes, and narrowed to single file in places where it had eroded away. In such places Dove Ed drove the wagon gingerly, keeping the wheels away from the crumbling embankment and the team at a slow walk lest the wagon tip too far. Unlike the

valley floor near the river, the soil here looked rocky and parched despite the spring meltwater filling the streams.

At last they came to the trail's end, a collection of tumbledown hovels long disused: a small cabin, barn, and outhouse built of cottonwood logs chinked with earth, and roofed with sod. The barn looked as though it were folding into itself, walls tilting crazily around a roof collapsing between them. The cabin seemed in better condition, though the sod gaped wide in places, promising ruin within. Only the outhouse appeared sound, if weatherbeaten. Traces of the old fence lines and vegetable patches gone to weeds were evident as well.

Cash jumped down from the saddle, leaving his mount to forage as it would, and peered inside the cabin. "Might be more comfortable to sleep in the privy," he called back to the others, then stepped through the door.

Tom stopped next to the wagon and glanced up at Dove Ed. "This your place?" he said.

"My father's. I left after he passed."

"Why didn't you sell?"

"Nobody wanted to buy it."

Tom laughed and nodded before following Cash into the cabin. Dove Ed waited on the seat of the wagon. It surprised him how much the run down farm felt like home; in truth, it wasn't in much worse shape than when he had left. He remembered dropping a wooden water pail by the door of the cabin that day, and when he looked he spotted it in more or less the same place, now half-rotted but otherwise undisturbed. To his eye, no one had been here since his departure.

Cash and Tom, emerging from the gloom of the abandoned house, agreed with his assessment when he voiced it aloud. “Nobody’s been in there but critters,” Cash said, “But they been making the most of it.”

“Let’s get the door in there,” Tom said.

Grunting and swearing, they heaved the iron door out of the wagon and carried it inside the cabin. From the disintegrating roof, sunlight shone down on the wreckage of the rooms where Dove Ed had grown up. Dirt, dust, and animal droppings covered every surface; the simple furniture had warped and cracked as the weather came in. Debris cluttered the fireplace hearth and the floor around the one window, from which the shutter had come open at some point. The odor of decay permeated the entire house; something, perhaps one of the critters, had found this a good place to die. The three men wrestled the door to the far side of the room, opposite the fireplace.

“Let’s think on this,” Tom said as they manhandled the door, with part of the cage-like framework still attached, across the floor. “We’re going to need timber and tools to put the door in the cave.”

“That means saws, hammers, spades, picks, maybe a couple of cold chisels,” Cash said.

“And provisions,” said Dove Ed. “Water butts, bacon, cornmeal, beans...”

“Cartridges,” Tom said, grinning at Dove Ed.

“Pocketwatches, for target practice,” Dove Ed shot back.

“Whiskey,” said Cash.

“Amen,” said Tom.

The iron door clanged into place, resting upright against the wall. Tom brushed off his hands in a “that’s that” gesture and said, “All right. Let’s go to town.”

With the sun at their backs, falling towards the Samaria Mountains, their shadows reached into Malad City before them, Dove Ed driving the wagon and the others riding. As they approached, Dove Ed pointed out to Tom and Cash various buildings that he recognized: the salt works, the Co-op, the Wells Fargo office and corral, Peck's Hotel.

"There's Vanderwood's store. We can get provisions there, then head up to the sawmill for the timbers."

Dove Ed halted the wagon in front of the store and jumped down before he realized that Tom and Cash had not followed. He walked back to where they stood their horses, in front of the building beside Vanderwood's, a neat white clapboard structure with wide glass windows and a tall façade. They were appraising the signs on the storefront which read, "Owens and Price Bank & Saloon".

"Handy," Cash said. "Put your wages in their bank, then spend it all in the saloon."

"It's good defense to boot," said Tom. "Any man who comes in to rob the bank will probably get drunk first."

"Not always," said Dove Ed. "One time a fellow stuck up Bryce Owens, then walked back into the saloon and paid for the drinks with his loot. John Price sold him drinks until he had all the money back, then let the sheriff arrest him."

Tom and Cash chuckled. "But is it a decent place to get a drink?" Cash said.

"My pa favored it," Dove Ed said. "We could stop here on the way back from the sawmill."

Already tethering their horses in front of the saloon, Tom and Cash looked at each other before Tom said, “Dove, my boy, the last whiskey we tasted was yours, five days ago in Corinne. Before that, it’s been a thirsty couple of weeks.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a steak and a game of cards, either,” Cash said. The two of them went into the saloon without another glance back.

Dove Ed stood outside for a few moments, undecided. He looked up and down the street; around him, people went about their business, paying him no mind. Although Malad City looked much the same, things were not quite as he remembered. He wondered if he had changed much. Would people here recognize him, and would it be better if they didn’t? He couldn’t decide. He turned and followed Tom and Cash across the board sidewalk into the saloon.

Inside, the room looked familiar, even if the people in it weren’t. It seemed that the dozen or so tables hadn’t changed position even slightly since the night Dove Ed came to fetch his father home and found him apparently passed out at his favorite table in the corner. The other men had left him to sleep it off, as they had a hundred nights before; they never noticed Hugh Williams had died until his son tried to shake him awake. No one sat at that table now, and Dove Ed felt relief that Tom and Cash had chosen one closer to the ornate bar along the back wall of the room. He joined them, taking a chair that faced away from the corner table.

Cash sat with one foot propped on a chair and his hat off, enjoying the luxury of sitting in a chair after days in a saddle. Tom stood at the bar with John Price himself, both of them regarding the array of bottles on the shelves as they discussed the finer points of various libations. Come nightfall the saloon would fill to capacity, Dove Ed knew, but this early in the day, the saloon had few other patrons: a group of men near the front concentrating fiercely on

their poker game, a couple of teamsters or muleskinners from the Salt Works. No one Dove Ed recognized.

Tom returned to the table bearing a brown glass bottle and three glasses, which he distributed before pulling the cork from the bottle and pouring whiskey for each of them. Dove Ed closed his hand around his glass, but left it on the table; Cash snatched his up and drank deep the instant the glass was full, holding it out for more even before Tom finished pouring for himself.

Tom topped up both their glasses, then held his aloft, gazing at it with the light from the windows shining through it. “Boys, there’s all sorts of brown in this world,” he said, as though he were a selectman making a speech. “Chestnut brown like a good horse; brown saddle leather; muddy brown and dirt brown and dead grass brown.”

“Your eyes is brown,” Cash said, “But only ‘cause you’re so full of shit.”

Tom ignored him. “But there is no brown in the world as beautiful as the brown of a glass of good whiskey after two weeks without!” He upended his glass and drank it down in one swallow, then let his breath out in a long, happy sigh. The familiar fumes wafted across the table at Dove Ed.

“I’ll drink to that, by God,” Cash said, suiting action to words, then seizing the bottle and pouring both glasses full again. He reached across to refill Dove Ed’s tumbler before he noticed it was untouched. “What the hell, boy? Drink up!”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather have a glass of beer,” Dove Ed said. He pushed his whiskey into the middle of the table. “Here, you drink this.”

Cash and Tom glanced at each other in disbelief, then Tom guffawed and gathered in the stray tumbler. Cash just shook his head. Dove Ed rose and turned to the bar. John Price, a slim

old gent with his mustache gone gray to match his hair, was already drawing a beer from the keg under the bartop. As Dove Ed dug in his pockets for payment, Price looked him up and down, and the boy felt his face get warm.

“Williams, is it?” Price said.

Dove Ed held up a half-dollar and looked Price in the eye. “That’s right,” he said.

Price grunted and took the coin, handing back a quarter and the glass of beer. Dove Ed took it and returned to the table, where Tom and Cash were pouring another round.

“John Price recognized me,” Dove Ed said in a low voice, holding the glass of beer up to his mouth to hide it from anyone else who might be watching.

“Who?” said Cash.

Dove Ed indicated the saloonkeeper with a cut of his eyes and sipped from the beer, warm and bitter but more welcome than the burn of whiskey. “I was hoping he wouldn’t know me, but he does. What do we do now?”

Tom regarded him levelly, then raised his voice and called out, “Mr. Price, is it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“My friend Dove Ed Williams here told us you serve an excellent whiskey, and I can see he was being truthful!”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’m Tom Mulvehill, and this is Cash Joyner. Dove Ed you already know.” Dove Ed buried his face in his beer and took a long pull, hoping the panic didn’t show on his face.

“Pleased to meet you both. Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“Now that you mention it, could we trouble you for some beefsteaks? We’re all three of us a bit hungry.”

“Yes sir, in no time at all.” John Price hurried to the kitchen door and pushed through, calling, “Alice! Three beefsteaks and plenty of potatoes! Hop to it, girl!”

Smiling, Cash rose from the table and said, “Meantime...” He took his glass with him to the table full of poker players and soon had a stack of chips and a hand of cards.

Tom said, “Stop trying to hide in your beer, boy.”

“But now they know our names.” Something about the whole thing seemed wrong to Dove Ed.

“Yeah, but they don’t care, because we’ve done nothing wrong. If we come slinking into town, talking out of the corner of our mouths, trying not to be noticed, then everyone will be after us to figure out what we’re up to.” He gestured over at the poker game, then at the saloon at large. “Instead, Cash is striking up conversations with people, we’re having a quiet drink, and no one is paying the least attention to us.”

Looking around, Dove Ed had to admit that Tom seemed to know what he was talking about. He felt a little foolish and it must have shown, because Tom clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Chin up, boy. Enjoy yourself.” He got up from his chair, saying, “I’m for the privy. If Price comes back, ask him for another bottle of the same, and some water as well.” He strolled off to the back of the building.

In minutes, John Price returned, bearing plates and followed by a woman carrying utensils and a large serving bowl. They whisked around the table, setting out the places and the food: huge slabs of pan-seared beef and mountains of spuds. At Cash’s gesture, Price took his plate over to the poker game, leaving the woman to put out butter, salt, napkins and the like. Dove Ed at once reached to dish out some potatoes; he breathed in the savory aroma of the steak

and the gravy and his stomach rumbled in anticipation. As he did, he realized that the woman was looking at him curiously.

When he met her gaze, the woman said, “Here, aren’t you Dafydd Williams?” He noticed that she pronounced his name properly, and her words carried the inflections peculiar to the Welshmen of the Malad Valley. Although he couldn’t place her face, which was younger than he first thought, something about her high forehead, wide green eyes, and the delicate curls of her pale brown hair seemed familiar as well. The fair skin of her cheeks was flushed from her work in the kitchen, and she wore an apron over her simple yellow dress with the sleeves pushed up.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” she said. When she smiled at him, Dove Ed became intensely aware of his unshaven chin, his unwashed hands, and the worn state of his clothes. Most of all, he felt his mouth hanging open and he blinked, searching for something to say.

“I’m Alice,” she said. “Alice Parry. Well, I was Alice Parry; now I’m Alice Morgan.”

He got to his feet, fumbling his hat from his head and his chair back from the table.

“Pleased to meet...I mean, see you again, Miss Alice. You sure look different.”

“Is that good or bad?” Mischief gleamed in her eyes and quirked the corner of her mouth, confusing Dove Ed further. He twisted his hat in his hands until she took pity on him and said, “Never mind, I didn’t recognize you either. John Price told me it was you and I wanted to see for myself. You’ve gotten taller.”

It was true; the last time he’d seen Alice she had at least a head’s height on him. Now he had the advantage. It gave him a curious feeling to see her tilting her face to look up at him, thrilling and frightening and intoxicating all at once. He searched for something, anything, to

say. “You’ve gotten older,” he said, and when she laughed he knew he hadn’t phrased it properly. He stared at the tips of his shoes.

She took him by the elbow and turned him back toward the table. “Here, sit down and eat before it gets cold,” she said. She spooned some potatoes onto his plate for him. “Would you like some more to drink?”

When he said he would, she went to the bar to refill his mug with beer, giving him time to marshal his thoughts so that when she returned, he had thought of something to say. “Which Morgan did you marry? Cattle Morgan or Thin Morgan?”

Among the Welshmen of the Malad River Valley, shared names were common enough that some specificity was required when referring to an individual. Both Cattle Morgan and Thin Morgan bore the Christian name of Thomas, but Cattle did ranch work and sported a paunchy belly, in direct contrast to Thin. Once at a town meeting the clerk called for Brother Evans to step forward and eight men stood up. “My apologies,” said the clerk. “I meant John W. Evans.” Five of the men sat down.

Now Alice shook her head and said, “Neither one. I married Bill Morgan, but he passed away from fever more than a year ago now.”

“Oh. That’s too bad,” said Dove Ed, embarrassed again. He chewed a bite of steak and essayed a weak smile, but the silence between them stretched. Alice looked away and smoothed her apron with both hands. Behind her, Dove Ed saw Tom returning to the table from the back of the saloon.

“Is that my steak?” he said as he approached. He glanced at Alice as he passed, but before he could sit he turned a more appraising look on her and reached up to touch the brim of

his hat. “Excuse my bad manners, miss. This surely looks delicious. Do you think we could have some biscuits as well?”

“Of course.” Alice went back to the kitchen, and Tom kept his eyes on her the whole way. When she disappeared through the door, Tom nudged Dove Ed with his elbow and dug into his food.

“What?” Dove Ed said.

Tom grinned through a mouthful of steak and potatoes. “I saw the way you was looking at her,” he said. “You know that girl?”

“That’s Alice. Her ma used to look after me when I was little, after my Ma passed.”

“I expect you wouldn’t mind if Alice looked after you now, would you?”

Dove Ed didn’t like the way Tom said it, like it was a joke or something. He applied himself to his supper without answering. Tom chuckled and followed suit.

Soon Alice returned with a basket of fresh biscuits wrapped in a checked cloth, which she set on the table between them. Tom thanked her and said, “Dove Ed tells me you two grew up together. I’m Tom Mulvehill.”

He extended his hand, and when she took it he pressed her fingers gently to his lips, then looked her up and down. “You ask me,” he said, “You’ve done a sight more growing up than Dove Ed here.”

Dove Ed felt the color on his cheeks; the angry flush spread from there through his entire body. To his surprise, though, Alice did not shrink from Tom’s frank stare. Instead she gave it right back, a knowing smile on her lips. Her hand still in his she said, “What brings you to town, Mr. Mulvehill?”

“Tom, please.” When she didn’t respond he said, “We had an idea to do some prospecting. We thought we might go as far as Montana, but from what I can see we’ll do just fine right here.”

From behind the bar John Price called out to Alice. More customers had come in and the saloon was filling up. Alice took her hand back from Tom and said, “Then I’ll hope to see you both in here again soon, Mr. Mulvehill. Dafydd.” As she turned from the table, she gave a small wink in Dove Ed’s direction, then whisked away to the kitchen.

Tom pursed his lips and whistled softly. “Damn, boy, you can have all of that you want, I’ll wager.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Tom.”

“I guess you don’t. In that case, you won’t mind if I try my luck.”

Dove Ed shook his head, but his chest felt tight just thinking about it. As the evening wore on, he picked at his meal. Tom ate hugely, then took his bottle and joined Cash at the poker game. Neither man seemed eager to leave the saloon, but Dove Ed was glad to notice that neither one showed much interest in Alice, either. At last, impatient, he went over to the card table.

“Shouldn’t we be getting on, then?” he said. The players all ignored him until he repeated his question.

“Getting on where?” Cash said.

“I thought we were off to buy supplies.”

Without taking his eyes from his cards, Cash waved a hand and said, “Supplies’ll wait till tomorrow.”

Tom tossed some chips into the center of the table. “Why don’t you go across to the hotel and secure us a room, Dove Ed? We’ll be over once we’ve finished our business here.”

“Unless you’d care to play,” Cash said.

“No, someone has to keep some cash in hand for tomorrow,” Tom said. “Tell you what, though, it’ll be a while before we’re ready to sleep. Why don’t you see if Miss Alice would like to join you across the street? Maybe she can even show you the way!”

The card players around the table burst into laughter. Dove Ed, his face burning, snatched up his hat and stormed out of the saloon. He didn’t dare look around to see if Alice was watching.

Chapter 10

The rain turned the road into mud the consistency of oatmeal and made the stones alongside slippery, so there was no good place for a horse to walk. Putney's horse, splattered with mud to the barrel, stumbled a little and broke stride. He swore at it, booting it in the flanks so that it hurried forward a few steps before resuming its plodding pace. A gust of wind flung rain into Putney's face and he swore at that, too. He had been swearing a lot since leaving Corinne almost a week ago: at the weather, his horse, the morons he met along the way who couldn't remember seeing two men and a boy, one of them driving a wagon. Mostly he swore at Dove Ed, Tom Mulvehill and their friend whatever his name was, bitter oaths and promises of what he would do to them when he caught them up.

Riding away from the ranch that day with Sloan's money in his pocket and Sloan's pistols on his belt, Putney imagined the looks on the faces of Tom and the others when he shot them dead, and the idea made him smile. Approaching Corinne, his smile faded. Those three might be anywhere, in town or out, and it wouldn't do to come upon them accidentally, maybe have them get the drop on him. And if they had left town already, no telling where they might have got to. He rode into town cautiously, looking for the wagon, for Tom, for Dove Ed, or for Tom's lean friend, seeing no sign of any of them. With no better plan he headed for Haney's Saloon.

Putney took care to look the place over from outside, though the wagon wasn't there and the horses out front seemed familiar enough. Pushing through the doors, he stopped just inside and scanned the room, hands near his holsters. The hour was drawing late and the saloon filling up, but the men he sought were not among the customers. Instead it was the usual mix of

working men ending their day with a meal, and wealthier men come to talk business. Putney shouldered his way to the bar and motioned to Merle Haney.

“Evening, Jacob,” Haney said. “What can I get you?”

“Nothing, Merle. I’m looking for that kitchen boy of yours. Seen him?”

“Dove Ed?” Haney shook his head, a frown pursing his jowly face. “That lazy Mick son of a bitch disappeared three days ago without a word, left me with no one to wash dishes. Stole some whiskey, too. I checked the storeroom, and I’m short about six bottles.”

“Thieving bastard,” said Putney. He knew full well that Dove Ed had only stolen one bottle, but what did he care if Haney sold a few off the back porch and blamed the little potato-eater? “Tell you what, when I catch up to him I’ll take it out of his hide for you.”

Merle Haney grinned at the thought. “Much obliged, Jacob. But what do you want him for? What’s he done?”

“Not him. He’s with two fellows, one tall and thin, the other stout. They cheated me at cards, so I plan to ask them for my money back.”

“Was they driving a wagon and team from Sloan’s ranch?” someone said next to him. Putney and Haney glanced over to see a man dressed in carpenter’s coveralls looking at them.

“You seen them?” Putney said.

“I seen three boys like you said, a tall one, a heavy one and a kid, loading a wagon from Sloan’s,” the carpenter said. “Caught my eye, they did, ‘cause they was busting up the iron cage from the bank.”

“They what?”

The carpenter nodded. "My feelings exactly," he said. "I asked what the hell they was up to, and they said they'd bought the vault door from Levi Dobson. 'What for?' I says, and the heavy one, the older guy says, 'We're starting our own bank.'"

"Did he say where?"

"You know, I asked him that. He says, 'Wherever we put the door.' Which I took to mean, mind your own business."

Putney's eyes narrowed as he thought it over. It sounded like Tom Mulvehill all right, the sly know-it-all son of a bitch. For the life of him he couldn't think what they wanted with the vault door from a burnt-down bank, but he decided he didn't care. If they were driving a wagon burdened by several hundred pounds of iron they wouldn't be moving quickly. Even with three days head start they couldn't have gotten far. He turned back to the carpenter.

"Did you see which way they went?" he said.

That was his first lucky break; the carpenter had watched them drive north out of Corinne. Following them, it occurred to Putney how lucky it was that no one had noticed him wearing Sloan's pistols. That would have led to some uncomfortable questions for sure. He settled down for the ride, confident that in a day or two he'd catch them on the road and take care of things once and for all.

Now, three days later, that confidence had ebbed away. The rain that soaked him seemed to have washed his luck clean off. No one on the road remembered seeing the three men or the wagon, not even the proprietors of the stage stations and trading posts along the way, where Tom and his gang almost surely stopped for supplies or a meal. Putney began to swear and hadn't stopped since.

His first sight of Malad City did nothing to improve his temper, and he swore at the thought of having to hunt through some jerkwater town on the off chance that someone had seen three men and a wagon. Suppose Tom and his cronies had taken a side road and never came this far? Suppose they were in town, and Putney rode through without seeing them? Suppose it never stopped fucking raining? Well, if nothing else he'd get a hot meal, a dry bed, and a drink of whiskey. Come to think of it, the saloons would be the place to start looking; no doubt Tom would be reckoning the same way as Putney himself.

With gray drizzle falling from gray clouds, Malad City didn't look like much, just the usual houses and stores along the same muddy main street. The big stone co-op building told him he was still in Mormon country, but the dance halls and saloons told him they wouldn't stick at taking a Gentile's money if he had a mind to spend it that way. He pulled up at a livery stable on the main street at the edge of town, just up from a freight outfit and both bearing the name B.F. White's. From Sloan's roll of bills Putney paid for a day's stabling for his horse and inquired after the saloons in town.

"You can get a good drink in any of them," the groom said. "But Owens and Price there is closest, and they serve a decent steak."

Putney slogged up the street, staying to the edges to avoid the morass created by passing horses and wagons, before mounting the board sidewalk in front of the saloon. As he used the boot scraper by the door, he peered through the glass windows set in it, trying to spy his quarry. Though several tables were taken, he didn't think he'd suddenly gotten lucky, and he was right. He recognized none of the patrons. Putney pushed open the door and went in.

The place felt warm and smelled of whiskey and cooking food, a welcome change from the chill mist outside. Putney deposited his bags on an unoccupied table and peeled off his wet

gloves. He noted dispassionately the doorway on the side that led through to the bank. He still had over a thousand dollars of Sloan's money in his pocket, but it never hurt to make plans in advance should there come a day of need. With who knew how many armed men in the saloon at any given time, robbing the bank was probably a losing proposition, but with a big enough crew...

Putney shrugged off his slicker and draped it over a chair, then turned toward the bar at the back of the room, where a mustachioed geezer stood looking at him expectantly. "Care for a drink, sir?" he said when Putney caught his eye.

"Hell yes," said Putney. "Whiskey, any kind, and something hot to eat."

The barkeep nodded and went to the door beside the bar, holding it open just enough to call for food. Then he poured a drink and placed it in front of Putney. Putney slid his hand past it and lifted it to show a ten-dollar gold coin beneath, then raised his eyebrows at the geezer, who looked at the coin, then at Putney.

"Was there something else you wanted, sir?" he said in a level tone.

"I'm looking for three men," Putney said. "Friends of mine. This is just the sort of place they'd stop for a drink, and I wondered if you seen 'em." The geezer crossed his arms over his chest and nodded, bidding him continue. "An older fellow, sort of stout through the chest; a taller one, kind of scruffy; and a kid, maybe fifteen or sixteen."

The bartender stroked his mustaches, considering the money and its source. He had still to answer when the kitchen door swung open and a girl came out carrying a bowl of stew and a plate of rolls, which she set on the bar at Putney's elbow. He looked her over, and she was good to look at, young and pretty but not shy or weak. She didn't drop her gaze or flutter her eyelashes, but regarded him squarely and said, "Would you care for anything else, sir?"

Putney's drooping eyelid opened wide, and he grinned at the girl. She took a step backwards and glanced over at the old geezer. "You sure got a pretty voice," Putney said. "My friend, the younger fellow, had a way of talking just like that."

"A fair few around here do, sir," said the girl.

The geezer spoke up. "This gentleman is looking for three friends of his: a boy, a tall man, and a heavysset man. He hasn't got around to telling me their names."

"Dove Ed is the boy's name and Tom Mulvehill is the heavysset man. They're riding with a third fellow. Don't recall his name. It's important I find them."

"We've seen them in here," said the geezer.

The girl said, quickly, "But not for days. They said they had a mind to do some prospecting. In Montana, they said."

"That a fact. When'd they leave?"

The girl looked at the old man. He squinted at the ceiling, thinking. "They came in three days ago, I believe. Had themselves quite a party, slept it off over at Peck's Hotel and left the next day."

"Ain't seen them since," said the girl.

Putney nodded and reached out with his right hand to pat the ten-dollar piece on the bar. "Much obliged," he said. "That's for you."

The girl looked to the old man for approval, and he nodded his head at the coin. "Thank you," she said, and moved to pick it up.

Putney moved quicker. As her fingers closed on the heavy gold coin, his hand flashed out and took hers by the wrist. Reflexively she pulled back, but he didn't let go. She squeaked in protest. The old geezer said, "Now, here!" and flapped his hands at Putney, who ignored him.

“What’s your name, sweetness?” Putney said.

“Let me go!”

“I said, what’s your name.” When their eyes met, she went still as a stone.

“Alice.”

“I like you, Alice. You been real helpful. Just promise me one thing. If you see my friends, don’t mention you saw me, huh? I’d rather surprise ‘em.”

Alice nodded.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Putney released her arm and she drew it back, cradling her wrist. She turned away and hastened into the kitchen without looking behind her. The old geezer said, “Mister, why don’t you find someplace else to do your drinking?”

Putney picked up the spoon beside the bowl of stew. He said, “I paid handsomely for this stew; I intend to eat it.”

“No. You intend to go someplace else.” The iron in the old man’s voice brought Putney’s gaze up from his meal. He found himself looking down the wide bore of a shotgun, the barrel filed off short. A single barrel, but standing as he was less than a yard from Putney, the geezer could hardly miss, and one shot would be more than sufficient. Putney could hear the customers in the saloon scrambling to be sure they weren’t behind him.

He put the spoon down. “Little Alice accepted my legal tender for this meal,” he said. “This is robbery.”

The geezer shook his head, but the muzzle of the shotgun never wavered. “Way I see it, you offered her ten dollars as an apology. She accepted, and that’s why you’re not dead already. Now get out of here.”

Putney backed off, holding his hands away from his sides. He retrieved his slicker and his bags from the table, giving the geezer’s stare back to him, then spun and strode out of the saloon. On the sidewalk he paused long enough to don the slicker. Across the street he could see Peck’s Hotel and headed that way, back into the rain and mud. As he went he made up his mind: after he found Tom Mulvehill he would come back and rob that bank, and when he did he was going to kill that old geezer, just for laughs.

Inside Peck’s Hotel, Putney wasted no banter on the desk clerk. As he checked in he said, “I’m looking for three men came in here a few days ago, pretty drunk. One named Tom Mulvehill, a boy named Dove Ed, and another guy. You know who I mean?”

Putney took it for granted that Alice and the geezer had lied to him about Montana and prospecting; too much hard work for a man like Tom. For some reason, the saloon keeper and his cook were protecting Tom, Dove Ed and the other man, which probably meant the three had stuck around Malad City, maybe even staying in the hotel. He was eager to find out before word of the incident at Owens and Price reached their ears.

The clerk, a skinny yokel wearing a tattered waistcoat and a vacant expression, thought it over long enough that Putney repeated, “You know who I mean?”

“Yeah, they was in.”

Putney waited, expecting more. “And?”

“They was pretty drunk.”

Putney thought that blowing the yokel's head off would not help the situation much, but he was tempted nonetheless. "Are they still here?"

"Nope."

"When did they leave?"

"'Bout noon."

Gritting his teeth, Putney said, "I mean what day did they leave?"

"The next day."

"Did they say where they were going?"

"Nope." Putney pushed away from the counter, swearing under his breath. He almost missed it as the clerk added, "But I can guess."

"Oh yeah?"

The clerk's head bobbed on his skinny neck like a prairie hen pecking for seeds. "They was talking about supplies, so I guess they went to the Co-op or Vanderwood's Store."

Stomping down the hotel steps, Putney mentally added the clerk to the list of people he would shoot when he came back to rob the bank.

An hour later his list had grown long indeed. It included two ranch hands who rode by at a fast clip, splattering him with mud from the street; a matronly woman buying sugar at the Co-op who chatted with the shopkeeper while Putney fumed and waited his turn; and the shopkeeper and other employees of the Co-op who didn't even remember selling supplies to Tom and his crew. From the Co-op Putney bought powder, shot, and a box of percussion caps for his revolvers with the idea that he would return the bullets to each of them personally.

Soaking wet and hungry, he went into Vanderwood's Store, already putting proprietor A.E. Vanderwood at the bottom of the list, just to save time. To the inquiring gaze of the storekeeper, Putney said, "You seen a boy name of Dove Ed or a man name of Tom Mulvehill two days ago, maybe sell them supplies?" He looked around the inside of the general store at the assortment of tools, clothes, and foodstuffs on display, paying little heed to the man behind the counter, who judging from the fellow's fastidious appearance and graying hair was none other than A.E. Vanderwood himself.

"Dove Ed Williams?" the man said. "Sure, he was here."

Putney smiled, all discomforts and slights forgotten for the moment. "That a fact?" he said. "Alone, or...?"

"No, there was a couple fellows with him," said Vanderwood. "They friends of yours?"

"That's right. I been trying to catch up to them the last few days. We're throwing in together, doing some prospecting, but my mount went lame and I fell behind. Did they say where they might be headed?"

Vanderwood shook his head. "They bought some tools and provisions, and I thought maybe they planned to work Williams' old farm together, but they said they were after gold." He shrugged. "I told them they'd do better in Montana or maybe Idaho City."

Putney said, "Williams' farm? Dove Ed has a place near here?"

"His father's old place, out Samaria way. Nobody's worked it since Hugh died, far as I know."

"How might I find it?"

In the gathering dusk, Putney left the store with vague directions to Hugh Williams' farm and a fresh sense of purpose. Tonight he would look for a decent meal and a drink in some

establishment other than Owens and Price Saloon, then he would have a restful night's sleep before setting out for Samaria. His list was shorter as well, since he no longer planned to kill A.E. Vanderwood. Unless, of course, he got in the way.

Chapter 11

They stood together on a god-forsaken, wind-swept hillside, bare of brush or vegetation except the scraggiest, most tenacious sagebrush. Patches of snow lingered in the shade of ledges and outcroppings. The slope, already too steep for their mounts, became sheer cliff face a few yards farther up, vast slabs of rock propped askew upon one another. Three of these formed a low lintel framing a mouth of black shadow, the entrance to a cave that was dark even in the full sun of a spring afternoon.

“What do you think, Tom?” said Cash.

“It’s a god damned hole in the side of a hill, just like the last three we looked at,” Tom said.

“No it ain’t,” Cash said. “At least it’s big enough for the door.”

The search for a suitable place to install the iron door had turned out to be longer and more exacting than any of them anticipated when they set out. Dove Ed led them on a circuitous route, casting about for the canyons and draws he remembered from his childhood. He promised that the hills were riddled with any number of caves that would serve the purpose, caves that only he knew about and to which he could take them, blindfolded, but once in the badlands north of Malad City his certitude failed him. Caves were not where he remembered them. Those he was able to locate proved unsuitable for any number of reasons: too small, too well-known, too difficult to reach.

“I guess it’s a good thing we left the blindfold off,” said Cash.

After four days of unsuccessful hunting, tempers were running high, especially Tom’s. He resented being pulled away from the enticements of Malad City while he still had cash to spend. He took out his displeasure on his companions, Dove Ed first and foremost.

“What the hell did you bring us here for?” he said, after Dove Ed showed them the latest cave, which was little more than a niche between two boulders, hardly big enough for one man to crouch in. “I swear, Dove Ed, use your brains a little, or do I have to do the thinking for both of us?”

Dove Ed flushed and muttered an apology. “I thought it was bigger,” he said and rode on.

Not content to let it go, Tom said, “Oh, yeah? When you saw it last, was you an infant? Though you ain’t grown much since, I’ll say that.”

“It was back when I was a kid,” Dove Ed said.

“When you was a kid? You mean, like last week?” Tom laughed, playing it up as though he were about to fall from his saddle. “You hear that, Cash? When he was a kid, that dent in the rocks looked bigger. But now he’s all growed up, it’s got smaller.”

Cash grinned in spite of himself. Tom had that way about him, a half-joking, half-lecturing tone that made a man smile to hear it. He opened his mouth to join in the raillery. Then Cash noticed Dove Ed’s fists clenched around his reins, the angry set of his barely-whiskered jaw, and he knew what the boy must be feeling: shame, embarrassment, fury. Tom was funny, all right, until you were the one in his sights.

“He’s right, Dove Ed,” he said. “If we’re to have a cave, it should be at least five feet around, so’s we can build a stout frame in it for the door. After all, it needs to be at least big enough to hold Tom’s mouth.”

At this, it seemed as though the expressions on the faces of his companions swapped places instantaneously. Dove Ed lit up with a laugh, and Tom’s smile went out like a candle in a gust of wind. His face darkened and hardened into a scowl. Cash expected some rebuttal from

Tom, but the venom in the big fellow's voice surprised him. "And after I lay you out, Cash, we can use you to measure the length of the cave. What do you say to that?"

"Just a joke, Tom."

"You watch your mouth. That's all." Tom legged his horse into a fast trot past the others and didn't look back.

Dove Ed said, "Who put a burr under his saddle?"

Cash put one gloved finger to his lips. "Leave be. He'll settle down soon."

Tom did not settle down soon but remained touchy, though he left off his remarks at Dove Ed's expense. At the next cave he could not resist a snort of derision, and Cash couldn't blame him much; the entrance sat high in a canyon wall, with only the narrowest of ledges providing access to it. Even if they could get the door up to the cave, there was nowhere to stand while installing it. Dove Ed did not waste his breath trying to convince them, or even apologizing. With daylight failing they made camp, and after supper Cash asked if there were any other caves to choose from.

Dove Ed said, "There is one near here, but most everyone in town knows about it. I figure to skip that one."

"Hallelujah," Tom said.

"Is there nothing else, Dove Ed?"

"The others are all down Samaria way, closer to my father's house."

"How far?"

"Maybe thirty miles."

They had spent their days around Elkhorn Peak, north of Malad City. On the eastern ridge of Elkhorn lay Malad Summit, where the road north came through the hills. Tom had pointed it out and said, "This is our spot." Here the stagecoaches would be moving slowly, much easier to stop than one barreling downslope, and they had hoped to find a hideout not far away.

Now Tom sat shaking his head in disgust, swigging from a whiskey flask he kept in his coat pocket. "Boy, you are as dumb as a box of hammers, you know that?" he said.

"Shut up, Tom," said Dove Ed.

"We ride four days, and at the end of it you tell us we got to ride thirty more miles. For what? A cave that ain't even there, probably."

"It's there."

"At least I managed to bring some whiskey along," Tom said and tilted the flask up again. He lowered it and dragged his sleeve across his mouth. "Dragged us away from hot food, soft beds and willing women, to go sightseeing!"

Anger thickened Dove Ed's voice, making his accent more distinctive. "Yes, dragged ye away, whilst there was money still to spend on supplies. And that includes yer filthy liquor, ye sot!"

Cash poured a cup of coffee, dark and strong. On this point he agreed with Dove Ed in principle: if it hadn't been for the boy insisting they buy provisions and get going, he had no doubt they would have blown their entire stake on gambling, booze, and women. As it was, after two days of revelry they had a mere forty dollars to spend in Vanderwood's store and a paltry three dollars and forty-two cents after that.

Bottle still in hand, Tom pointed across the fire at Dove Ed. He said, "You swore you knew of a dozen caves a day's ride from Malad Summit. Take us right to 'em, you said. That was four days and five caves ago, and either way you look at it, you're a liar."

"Easy, Tom," said Cash, blowing on the hot coffee.

"Easy, hell! I thought the plan was to steal it and stash it: hold up the stage and hide the take behind the door until the heat blows over. That means a hideout near Malad Summit. But now what have we got? Laden with full strongboxes from a stage, with the law behind us no doubt, we have to ride thirty, maybe forty miles over broken country in order to stash our take?"

Cash had his coffee cup to his lips and so had no chance to forestall Dove Ed's retort. "You need not ride thirty miles, Tom," he said. "Only ride away from here, and be damned to you!"

"Mouthy little bastard," Tom said. "I've a mind to tan your hide."

Dove Ed scoffed. "Let me know when, and I'll give you a moment to stand up before I lick you, you with your fat gut lapping over your belt."

Tom flung his whiskey flask to the ground and sprang across the small fire at Dove Ed, who rose to meet him. They grappled wildly, hurling punches, kicks and curses at one another. It happened so suddenly that Cash recoiled, then began hollering curses of his own, because he had spilled the hot contents of his cup all down his front. He swore, wiping at his chest and lap, which felt like they were on fire. As the pain died away, he directed his curses at the two men scuffling in the dirt beside him.

"God damn it, I barely got the first sip of that coffee!"

Tom and Dove Ed paid him no heed. They had fallen to the ground, a tangle of arms and legs rolling over and back. Cash believed they would finish soon; already they had stopped

throwing punches in favor of clinging to one another, and stopped shouting in favor of breathing. Nobody seemed inclined to draw a weapon, so Cash left them to their business and retrieved his cup, to pour himself a fresh coffee. Gradually the scuffling noises died away, leaving only the panting of the two men trying to catch their breath.

“Y’all settled your differences now?” Cash said, without looking back at them.

The two returned to their places by the fire. Blood oozed from Tom’s nose and over his lip, and he pulled out a bandanna to dab at it. His clothes and hair were rumped, his gunbelt askew on his hips. Surprised, Cash looked over at Dove Ed, who showed similar signs of ill use. In place of a nosebleed, the boy wore a hectic red patch on his cheek which Cash expected would shape up into a beauty of a shiner overnight. Dove Ed kept touching it gingerly and wincing.

“Leave it be,” Cash said.

They sat in uneasy silence for a time, neither Tom nor Dove Ed meeting the other’s eye.

Cash hoped the fight would clear the air, but as they rode south the next day the two remained silent, keeping Cash between them as much as possible. Cash ignored them, paying attention instead to the country they rode through, taking note of rocky ground, marshy flats, stands of aspen or pine trees, and any streams or creeks they crossed. At the valley floor they came upon a river flooded with spring meltwater that Dove Ed said was the Little Malad. They spent half a day looking for a fording place, settling on one where the water reached almost saddle deep. The icy current rushed around them, soaked their legs and poured into their boots; their feet went numb almost instantly. Toward the center of the river the horses had to swim a short distance, and Cash feared he would have to dismount midstream. But he lay low over his

horse's neck and the animal soon found its footing once more. In that time, the swift water had carried them several hundred feet downstream.

"I'd hate to see the Big Malad," Cash said as they pulled themselves shivering from the far side. It was a feeble joke and they all knew it, but Tom and Dove Ed smiled through their chattering teeth.

"Tell you what," said Tom, "Water like that would make a posse think twice about following."

Cash nodded. "Might come in handy."

Cold and tired, they made an early camp that night and Dove Ed pointed out Samaria Mountain, still to the south and west of them. "Cave's on the north slope, near the peak," he said. "We won't reach it till midafternoon tomorrow."

Now Cash pointed back down the hill toward the horses and the dry wash they had clambered up a few minutes before. "Anyone coming up here has to climb single file, the way we did, and leave their horses down below. And that's if they even spy it at all."

"Unless they already know it's here," Tom said. "Dove Ed does; maybe somebody else does too."

They looked at Dove Ed, who shook his head. "No one knows it's here," he said, and shouldered past them to the very mouth of the cave. He disappeared inside, barely ducking his head to do so. Cash followed, noting with approval the height and width of the opening, which would easily fit the door and whatever frame they could build for it.

After the full sun of the afternoon, it took some time for Cash's eyes to adjust to the gloom inside the cave, but even before then he could tell that a large space stretched away in

front of him. The noise of his footfalls and his breathing echoed and magnified in the emptiness, much bigger than the opening had led him to believe. And yet they were not hollow and distant; the cave did not go on forever. He smelled damp earth, and a mustiness that suggested animals had once lived here, but the air did not feel close or stale. Somewhere below and ahead of Cash, Dove Ed spoke. "Watch your step."

With his vision accustomed to the dim light by the entrance, Cash could see what the boy meant. The cave floor consisted of tumbled stone and boulders, and the footing was treacherous. Moreover, four feet from the cave mouth it sloped sharply downhill to the large chamber he had heard. He picked his way over the rocks, testing his foothold with each step and wondering if snakes might lurk in the cracks and crevices. At the bottom he could just make out the pale, elongated oval of Dove Ed's face and made his way toward it. Something underfoot crunched in a way unlike sand or gravel. Cash crouched and felt around, and his fingertips came back stained with soot: the remains of an old campfire.

"There's a good draw to the air in here," Dove Ed said. "You'd think the smoke would choke you, but it rises to the top and escapes somehow."

Shadows stirring in the light from the cave mouth, and the echo of muttered curses, announced Tom's entry. "Watch your step," they called to him in unison, then looked at each other and grinned. Cash resumed his inspection of the cave, but Dove Ed sat and waited, arms folded, his back against the rock wall, to hear their verdict.

The irregular shape of the cave made it hard to guess the dimensions, but Cash estimated it to be about thirty feet long and maybe half as wide. Dove Ed sat on the only spot that could properly be called a floor, a gently sloping flat slab about eight feet around, at the edges of which the boulders piled up gradually in a series of small, uneven ledges and niches until they met and

then became the ceiling. The largest of these niches, to the left of the entryway, reminded Cash of the bombproof shelters he had dug in the trenches around Vicksburg: long as a man, and as wide, but only tall enough to crouch in. He hated getting into them. It always made him wonder if a burial crypt felt like that.

A clatter of tiny stones behind him told Cash that Tom, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, had scrambled down into the main cave. He turned to watch as Tom inspected the same pile of long-dead ashes.

“Thought you said no one knew of this place,” Tom said to Dove Ed.

“I made that fire.” Dove Ed pointed to an untidy jumble of branches and sticks that Cash had taken for animal leavings. “Even gathered a woodpile.”

“Anybody could have left that.”

“Not these.” The boy gestured at a low shelf of rock beside him, on which lay several small chips of stone. “Shoshone arrowheads I found. I left them just like that, last time I was here.”

“When was that?”

“Maybe a week after my pa passed. Two years ago.”

Tom grunted and looked about. Cash watched him, knowing what he would find and what he would think, but unsure what he would say. He suspected Tom would rather lie naked on a fire ant nest than admit he was wrong. He spoke up first.

“Not bad,” he said. “Shame we can’t use it.”

The others looked at him, Tom frowning and puzzled, Dove Ed angry and taken aback. “What? Why not?”

Cash began ticking off a list on his fingers. “First, it’s awful far from Malad Summit. You already noticed that, Tom. Second, ain’t no water close by. We’d have to get casks up that little draw, not to mention the door. Meantime, we’re leaving tracks in the snow a blind man could follow. What good’s the door if we lead the law right to it? Sorry, Dove Ed,” he said, and held up his hands in a placating gesture. “It’s a fine place to camp and all, but it’s no good to us.”

“That is so many different kinds of stupid I can’t even begin to count,” said Tom. He had his hands on his hips, shaking his head and looking everywhere but at Cash, even glancing at Dove Ed to share his disbelief. “Leaving tracks in the snow? In a week the snow’s going to melt, you ignorant cracker. Any sign we leave, meltwater and rain will wash away. And besides, you said yourself it’s better to put some distance between the summit and our hideout.”

“We can bring supplies and water up in the wagon as close as the bottom of the draw,” Dove Ed said. “Then carry it the rest of the way. Same with the door.”

“Yeah, but...”

“No buts. Christ almighty, Cash, this was your idea! Don’t go yellow on us now.”

“I ain’t yellow.”

“Quit your bellyaching then. Come on,” Tom said. “Let’s see to the horses, then fix some supper.” He started up the short climb to the cave mouth with Dove Ed not far behind him. Cash shook his head, smiling to himself and moved to follow them.

He stopped and squinted at the rock ledge where Dove Ed’s arrowheads rested. Among the chips of stone were some old wildflowers, brown and shriveled and brittle with age. The ledge itself bore spatters and stains and lumps of melted wax, as though a candle or maybe several had burned there, melting down to the very stump. And beside it, where Dove Ed had sat

with his back to the wall was a smudged inscription of small black letters, like the ones Cash had seen in various places around the cave. This one read:

In Memry of Huw + Gwendalin Williams 1868

Good By

Yr Son Duv Ed

Chapter 12

On a bench in front of the Wells Fargo depot, Morgan shifted his weight, trying to find a comfortable position for his leg. The wound from Red Murphy's pistol, though relatively minor, still throbbed even ten days after the shooting, keeping Morgan awake nights and making him limp when he walked. The doctor assured him the limp would disappear as the injury healed and recommended he keep to his bed for a few days more, but as soon as he could stand Morgan got back to work. His leg hurt like the devil at first, but he'd come through worse in his life. Fourteen years ago he had walked from Iowa City to Salt Lake, pushing a handcart in Bunker's company; compared to that, a gunshot wound in the leg troubled him no more than a horsefly bite.

Today, as was his custom, Morgan waited to greet the northbound stagecoach, due around noon. He liked to get a look at new arrivals to Malad City, and of course there would be news and dispatches from Utah, but for now it was just pleasant to sit in the late April sunshine and admire the green spreading over the hills. Wells Fargo sat on the northern end of Main Street, with no buildings across the way to block the view of the Malad River and the rolling hills beyond, and few people to interrupt his reverie. That alone made it an attractive place to spend some time, since in the past week Morgan had come to value solitude.

The drum of hooves and the clatter of ironclad wheels far down the street brought Morgan back to himself. He rose from the bench and stared down Main at the rapidly approaching stage as the driver threaded through the bustle of human, animal and wagon traffic scattering out of his way. From the speed of the coach, Morgan guessed the driver was Mart Goddard, a veteran teamster who never slowed down for trifles like busy streets or near collisions. Frowning, Morgan drew himself up and put his hands on his hips as an elderly

woman had to scurry across the roadway to avoid being run down. She turned and shook her fist, but the din of coach and team drowned out her imprecations.

They drew to a noisy halt directly in front of him, the six sweaty horses and the big weathered coach followed closely by the cloud of dust they had kicked up. “Damn it, Mart,” said Morgan, “And how many times have I told you to slow down once you pass the salt works? You almost hit Miz Evans just there!”

His angry scowl failed to dampen the grin the driver turned on him. The pits and pockmarks on Mart Goddard’s face might have come from some childhood disease, but his deep tan and constant squint gave him more resemblance to a weatherbeaten hillside, lined and carved and in danger of collapse after years of exposure to rain, wind and sun. His clothes bore the same marks of wear and seemed the same shade of brown as his skin, so that it was difficult to tell where Mart’s neck ended and his shirt began. He secured the reins and swung down from the driver’s bench, raising a cloud of dust from his shoulders as his boots hit the ground.

“Welcome to Malad City, Idaho Territory!” he called to his passengers. The side door of the coach swung open, and a group of travelers emerged with the stiff-jointed motions common to people who have spent several hours cramped in a jouncing, rattling, stuffy box. “We’ll be changing the team here for half an hour,” Mart continued, “so you’ll have some time for bite to eat or a libation if you’d prefer. May I suggest Peck’s Hotel café for the one, and Owens and Price Saloon for the other? Or you may ask this rather stern gentleman for his recommendation: he is the sheriff of this charming hamlet, Mr. Morgan M. Morgan, and yes, that really is his name. His mother suffered a terrible lack of imagination in the naming of him, you see.”

Morgan did his best to hold onto his thunderous expression during this introduction, but as soon as Goddard caught his eye the game was up. They laughed and shook hands while the passengers staggered off in search of refreshment.

“Good to see you, Mart,” Morgan said. “Got time for a cup of coffee?”

“I was hoping you’d ask. Let me get the express box seen to, and I’ll be right with you.”

With the help of the shotgun messenger, who Morgan did not recognize, Goddard swung the strongbox down to the sidewalk, then hefted it into the depot office. When he returned a moment later, he gestured down the street with his hat. “Shall we?” Morgan tried to step out briskly, but the ache along his leg forced him to slow his pace after only a short distance.

“How’s the leg?” Goddard said.

“Hurts. I guess you heard already.”

Goddard nodded. “Baldy Green’s coach came through here the day after you got shot. I saw him in Ogden. He told me the whole story.”

“Which one? Baldy tells whole stories all the time, but that don’t mean he told the right one.”

“Way I heard it, Bill Murphy drew on you in a town meeting. You took his gun away and killed him with it, but not before he shot you.”

“That’s all he said?”

“No, there was a deal more; you know Baldy. I believed about every fourth word.”

Morgan grunted and stumped on toward Peck’s Hotel. He felt Goddard’s eyes on him, searching his expression, but he had grown accustomed to that in the last few days. Every time he left his home there were curious eyes on him, eyes a good deal less friendly than Mart’s.

“For instance,” Goddard said, “I heard Bill was shot in the back. I heard he yelled ‘Don’t shoot’ and got hit in the back.”

Morgan stopped and faced Goddard, finding no more sign of a grin on his ruined face. “Is that what you heard, now? And what did you think of that?”

“Didn’t put much stock in it. Doesn’t sound much like you.”

“I’ll tell you, Mart. It’s gospel truth.”

Goddard shrugged and said, “If you did, it’s cause you had to.”

“That’s what the inquest found as well, but so far you’re the first to believe it,” Morgan said. “Gentiles say I ‘assassinated’ Murphy on orders from the Mormons. Mormons say it was on orders from B.F. White. Almost everyone says the county commissioners are behind it because Murphy wouldn’t lower the tolls on his roads. And one or two say I did it because I’m lusting after Murphy’s wife.”

Goddard chuckled grimly at the wry tone of Morgan’s voice. “Are you?”

Morgan gave him a look, and they walked on. A few steps more brought them to the door of Peck’s. As Morgan pulled himself up the stairs, favoring his injured leg, Goddard said, “So why did you?”

Over his shoulder Morgan said, “I had to.” Then he pushed open the door and went in.

They had known each other for more than ten years now, though if asked Morgan would be hard pressed to remember their first meeting. Mart Goddard said he was the driver on the return leg of Morgan’s first stagecoach trip to Salt Lake City. With no better explanation, Morgan took him at his word. “But how is it,” he said once, “that you remember me when for the life of me I can’t remember you? Do you recall the names of everyone you’ve ever hauled through Utah?”

“Hardly,” Goddard had said. “But when I saw your name on the passenger roster, how in the hell was I to forget it? Morgan comma Morgan M. There’s just one thing, though. Don’t ever tell me what the ‘M’ stands for, cause if it ain’t ‘Morgan’ I’ll never be able to remember your name again.”

However he managed to do it, Goddard made a point of saying hello to Morgan, by name, whenever he passed through Malad City, which was at least a couple of times a month during good weather. Soon Morgan made a point of looking for him when a coach was due, and by the time Morgan became sheriff, they had been friends for many years. It reassured Morgan to know that someone outside his little town knew about him, especially someone who wasn’t a Latter Day Saint.

Inside Peck’s Hotel Café this lunchtime, many of the tables were occupied, Goddard’s passengers taking him up on his recommendation for the most part. The two men took seats at a window table, and even as they unfolded their napkins Lottie Peck bustled over to pour cups of fresh coffee. “You got time for lunch, Mart?” she said. “We’ve got a fine pot pie just coming out, if you’ve an appetite.”

“Can’t, my dear,” said Goddard. “Got a schedule to keep.”

Lottie rolled her eyes and bustled off. She knew the coach schedule as well as he did, and Morgan knew from a hundred lunches just like this one that Lottie would serve the meal and somehow Goddard would eat every bite of it without missing his departure time. The man put food away even faster than he drove a coach.

“You’ve heard my news,” Morgan said. “Got any for me?”

“Mm.” Goddard slurped at his coffee, then nodded and put down his cup. From within his travel-stained coat he pulled a sheaf of crinkled papers, handbills and reward notices from the

jurisdictions along his route. He unfolded them and began paging through, glancing at each.

“The usual,” he said. “Bad men doing bad things. But Sam Driggs in Corinne asked me to show you one in particular.”

The handbill he passed over to Morgan was a typical reward flyer. In very large print it offered five hundred dollars reward for information leading to the capture and conviction of the killer or killers of Mr. Lucas Sloan. Morgan looked at Goddard, who was sweetening his coffee with copious spoonfuls of sugar.

“Why this one?”

“What? Oh, Driggs says the fellows who might have done it were seen heading north, and he wants you to keep an eye out for them. Says he’d ride up himself, but...”

Morgan understood. Marshal Driggs and his deputies were hard pressed already, keeping order in a town rebuilding after a fire. From what he’d heard, Corinne was fast rebuilding after the disaster two weeks past, but no doubt Driggs felt obliged to remain there until things got back to normal. “What am I supposed to look out for, a guy on a horse riding north?”

“Yes, actually.” Goddard swigged from his cup with every sign of enjoyment, though the brew in his cup had to taste like syrup by now. “Sloan’s foreman hasn’t been seen since the murder. Name of Jacob Putney, a mean fellow with a droopy eyelid, rides a bay horse. He might have Sloan’s ivory-handled pistols with him, or a lot of cash.”

“How much?”

“No telling, but the hands on Sloan’s ranch were due to be paid, and the money’s gone.”

“Anybody see it happen?”

“Just one. A stablehand.”

“What did he say?”

Goddard snorted. “Not much. He got shot dead in the same room as Luke Sloan.”

Morgan scanned the flyer. “There’s nothing about a stablehand here.”

“They don’t offer rewards for guys who shoot stablehands, just for guys who shoot rich ranchers.”

“It says here ‘killer or killers’. If Putney shot them both...”

“Well, now, that’s the funny part...”

All too soon, Mart Goddard and his passengers filed out and headed back up the street toward the waiting stagecoach to continue their journey northward over Malad Summit. He and Morgan shook hands in the street outside Peck’s. “No need to see me off,” he said. “Rest your leg a little, and I’ll see you in a couple weeks when I come back through.” Within minutes Morgan heard Goddard call to the fresh team pulling his coach and soon they were gone, leaving a slowly settling haze of dust over the town.

Morgan watched it out of sight, his mind turning over what he’d heard during lunch. He walked over to Owens and Price Saloon, where he found John Price presiding over his own crowd of midday patrons. When Price caught sight of him threading his way through the tables, a cloud crossed his dignified features and his smile dwindled; Morgan had seen similar reactions from people all over town in the past few days. Normally it troubled him that his presence caused such unease, but just now he did not care.

“Sheriff,” said Price.

“Hello, John,” Morgan said. “I understand you had a spot of trouble with a fellow a few days back, is that right?” During his time in bed, Morgan’s deputies, Dan Robbins and Henry

Wakely, had come to his home to keep him abreast of doings in town; he had written off the story of Price's encounter as no harm done.

Price said, "Hardly enough to speak of. I ran off a guy who got a little free with Alice, that's all."

"Alice Parry? Maybe I'd best speak with her as well."

Price hesitated, then went to the kitchen and returned with the girl. Morgan liked her, and not just because she had married his distant cousin. She was young and pretty, but didn't act childishly; when mountain fever claimed Bill a year ago, she bore her grief with surprising maturity, finding work for herself and looking after her late husband's affairs. If anything, her trials made her even prettier, but Morgan tried not to notice. She reminded him too much of his own wife, herself fourteen years dead now.

"Hello, Miss Alice," he said, then had to stop and clear his throat. "Pardon me. John tells me a man got a bit forward with you last week, had to be run off."

"Got a little rough is what," she said. Morgan appreciated the way she looked him right in the eye when she spoke. "Grabbed my wrist hard. I was afraid he would break my arm."

"Can you remember what he looked like?"

Alice said, "I remember he had one eyelid that wouldn't stay open all the way. It kept dipping down like he was winking at me."

"You remember that, John?"

"Yes." Price looked up, searching his memory. "His left eyelid, wasn't it, Alice?"

"I think so."

"Did he say what his name was?"

"No, and we didn't ask."

“How was he armed?”

“I didn’t see,” said Alice.

“He had a gunbelt on,” said John Price, “but more than that I couldn’t say.”

“Where’d he go after you roused him, John?”

Price pursed his lips and shook his head. “Looking for young Williams, I suppose.”

Morgan heard Alice’s sudden intake of breath and glanced at her, catching a strange expression on her face. Fear, maybe? Or confusion? He said to Price, “What Williams?”

“Dove Ed. You remember, Hugh’s boy, left town after the old sot...”

“I remember.” The iron in Morgan’s voice shut Price’s mouth with a snap. “I didn’t know he was back.”

“Well, you were laid up, Sheriff, and I didn’t think it that important.”

Neither had his deputies, who had failed to mention Dove Ed Williams in their daily report. “It might be. When did you see him?”

“Last week. Two or three days after you...after Red Murphy died. He came in with two older fellows I never saw before and they got drunk.”

“Not Dove Ed,” Alice said. They both looked at her. Alice’s jaw was set, her arms folded across her chest as she scowled at John Price. “Those other two did most of the drinking. Dove Ed just had beer, and precious little of it.”

“Is that right, John?”

“I suppose. When I asked them to leave, it was Dove Ed who took them out. I think they went over to the hotel.”

“Did either of you see if they drove a wagon?”

Price and Alice looked at each other, then shook their heads.

“What about pistols? Did Dove Ed or his friends wear gunbelts?”

“I don’t know.”

“They all did,” said Price.

“Did you notice if the handles were ivory on any of the pistols?”

Price laughed out loud. “Now that would have stuck in my mind. Dove Ed Williams returns to Malad City wearing ivory-handled weapons, and him the son of the biggest drunkard in the Mormon Church!”

Morgan grew very still, but if Price noticed or cared, he didn’t show it. Instead he said, “If that’s all, Sheriff, I’ve got customers going thirsty here.”

“That’s all, John.” But when Price reached for Alice’s arm, to steer her back to the kitchen, Morgan held up his hand. “I’d like a few more words with Miss Alice, if you please.”

Price shrugged and went back to the bar. Alice kept quiet, watching Morgan’s face.

He said, “This man who got rough with you, Alice. He was asking after Dove Ed Williams?”

“Yes.”

“Why? What did he want?”

“He said they were friends, but I could see that was a lie. He said not to tell Dove Ed if I saw him again.”

“Alice, you know I was friendly with Hugh Williams.” She nodded. “I want you to tell me where Dove Ed was going. Do you know?”

“His friend Tom said they were going to Montana, to try their luck at mining. But do you know, I didn’t much like Tom. He was a lot like the man with the weak eyelid.”

“Thank you, Miss Alice. I’ll tell you what. If you see any of them again, you let me know, all right?”

She nodded. They stood together for a moment, and Morgan felt he should say something more as the silence stretched between them. He cleared his throat and said, “How are you getting on then, Alice, since Bill passed? Have you enough money?”

“I’m making do,” she said. “I’ve a little money put by, and I earn some in the kitchen here.”

“Do Bill’s kin not help you out?”

“When they can. They’ve troubles of their own. I don’t like to ask.”

“Well,” said Morgan.

“It’s all right, really.” Again they fell still. Finally Alice said, “I’d best get back to work. Mr. Price keeps looking this way.”

Before he could say yay or nay, she turned in a swirl of skirts and hurried back to the kitchen. Morgan watched her go. Yes, she had grown pretty, all right. He coughed, settled his hat on his head, and went out the door.

Outside, the sun had slipped to the west, leaving Morgan in shadow as he made his way back to the jail and his office. Rather than bask in the warmth of the April day, he hunched his shoulders and tried not to shiver as a breeze chilled him. In fact he felt shaky all over; he put it down to his game leg, and getting overtired. In the office he sat in the least uncomfortable chair and propped his aching leg up before leaning back to think.

Mart Goddard’s tale made no sense to him, but he had to admit that parts of it seemed to be turning up in Malad City. Three men leave Corinne driving a Sloan ranch wagon, then

foreman of the ranch disappears and Sloan himself turns up dead. A few days after that, three men arrive in Malad City, without a wagon—one of them a boy who grew up here. Then a man much like the foreman shows up, looking for the boy and his friends, probably with no good intentions. Morgan disliked the coincidence.

“I ought to ride out to Hugh’s place,” he said to himself. “Dove Ed might have decided to camp there.”

He made as if to push himself up from his resting place, but the pain that shot down his leg came out of his mouth as a hiss through clenched teeth, and he lowered himself back into the chair. He decided it would be well enough if he set out for the Williams farm in the morning.

Chapter 13

Jacob Putney worked the lever on his rifle and drew a bead on the rider making his way down the faint trail toward the Williams farm. After several fruitless days of spying on the place, Putney was tempted to pull the trigger out of sheer frustration, but he held his fire nonetheless. There was only one rider; he wanted three. Besides, with a rifle you didn't get to see the look on the man's face when you killed him.

It was this consideration that brought Putney out of his hiding place, a cottonwood thicket overlooking the decrepit farm, and sent him creeping down the slope for a better look. He kept low to the ground, using rock outcroppings and clumps of brush to screen himself from view, coming up behind the tumbledown barn in time to hear the rider dismount in the yard between the barn and the house.

"Anybody home? Hello?" called the newcomer.

He was wasting his breath. The place had been deserted every time Putney checked on it, starting with his first visit several days ago after the tip from Vanderwood. It had taken some looking, but soon Putney came across the run down spread and found a vantage point from which to keep an eye on it. A hot, dry afternoon passed with no sign of life in the buildings below, and around dusk, with no movement or cook smoke coming from the farm, he became impatient enough to sneak down and take a closer look.

What he found was both encouraging and baffling. Fresh hoofmarks and horseshit marked the dooryard and the trail. That and the remains of a cookfire on the cabin hearth told him someone had been here recently. In the barn, the wagon from Sloane's ranch, still piled with supplies and tools purchased from Vanderwood, confirmed that he had found the right place and reassured him that they would be back; all he had to do was wait. He helped himself to a bottle

of whiskey from the wagon to keep him company while he did. Putney didn't understand why Tom and his friends had left the stuff in the first place, and didn't much care, so long as they returned for it.

No, what really confused him was the enormous cast iron door propped against the wall in the cabin. In the days that followed, Putney puzzled over it as he sat in the cottonwoods, waiting, hoping to see Tom and Dove Ed and their friend descending the trail to the farm. It didn't really matter what they intended to do with the door, since he planned to kill them before they could do it, but still...

After a full day and night of waiting, Putney, never a patient man, was beside himself. Where the hell were they? The stolen whiskey was gone and he wanted more. He wanted a hot meal and a woman, and he had more than enough money for both, but here he sat, waiting for three peckerwoods who might not show for days. The small town of Samaria was closer than Malad City, and he made it his home base, riding out to check the farm each day for signs that Tom and his boys were back, then riding back for food, whiskey, and whores. In all that time, the lone rider now exploring the farm was the first person Putney had seen down here.

Pressed against the rough boards of the barn wall, Putney listened as the stranger wandered among the buildings, finding the same traces of habitation. He heard the man's muffled voice inside the cabin calling again, "Anybody home?" and eased himself around the corner of the barn, pointing his rifle at the cabin door. The man's horse browsed idly in the yard and Putney stole around it in a wide arc, approaching the doorway as quietly as he could. Just outside, he shifted the rifle to his left hand and pulled one of Sloane's pistols with his right before stepping into the cabin.

“Don’t move,” he said, and cocked the pistol, pointing it at the stranger, who stood with his back to Putney, facing the iron door in the corner. At the sound of Putney’s voice he stiffened and held his empty hands out to his sides.

“Dove Ed?” he said.

Putney said, “Who the hell are you?”

“Name’s Morgan. ‘Member me? I used to bring your Da home of an evening, when he was deep in his cups.” The guy had the same strange accent as Dove Ed, only stronger. Jesus, a whole town full of potato-eaters, Putney thought.

He said, “What do you want?”

“I heard you were back, thought I’d come out and say hello.”

Putney advanced across the room until the muzzle of his revolver pressed into the man’s neck at the base of his skull. He propped his rifle against the wall beside them, then felt with his free hand around the man’s waist, searching for the holster and gun he knew he would find.

“What do you...?” the man began, breaking off as Putney jabbed him with his gun.

“Shut up.” He found the man’s holster and removed from it a workmanlike pistol, not fancy but well-maintained, which he tossed aside, out of reach. Then he stepped back.

“Turn around.” Moving as though his leg pained him the man obeyed, keeping his hands away from his body, and Putney swore to himself. Pinned to the front of the man’s well-worn coat was a dull silver five-pointed star.

* * * * *

From the moment he heard the familiar sound of the pistol being cocked, Morgan found himself praying, and was surprised. He hadn’t done much of it lately, since he no longer attended meeting or had a wife to make him. Twice before, men had pointed guns at him, both

of them drunks angry at being refused a drink. Morgan hadn't prayed then, just talked until the men got tired of holding up a five-pound piece of iron. And after shooting Red Murphy, he hadn't prayed then either, keeping the recollection as far from him as he could. Now he turned, his lips moving as he consigned himself to the Lord. The back of his head ached where the gun barrel had dug into his scalp, the same gun barrel he now stared down. It yawned like the mouth of a grave.

The man pointing the pistol had a whiskery, hard-bitten face, with thin bloodless lips and a nose crooked from being broken more than once. He was about Morgan's height, but wiry where Morgan was well-fleshed. The man drew back a pace as Morgan faced him and his eyes widened as they fixed on the badge at his lapel...or rather, one eye widened. The other eyelid drooped low in a disturbing parody of a wink.

"You're not Dove Ed," Morgan said.

"Shit, no," the man said. "You the sheriff?"

"That's right. May I lower my hands now, Mister...?"

The man relaxed his arm a little and the pistol lowered so that it centered on Morgan's chest rather than his head. "What do you want with Dove Ed?"

"They told me at Owens and Price that he was in town with a couple of friends. Are you Tom?"

That brought a bark of sour laughter. "Not me. Got business with Tom and Dove Ed and their friend, though."

"Oh?"

"Settling a debt. I promised Tom I'd pay him back."

"I see. May I lower my hands now, Mr...?"

“John Pursley.” The man did not holster his weapon but pointed it at the floor and Morgan cautiously dropped his hands.

“Do you always introduce yourself so, Mr. Pursley?” he said.

The grin that crossed the man’s face was an unpleasant one, made worse by the drooping eyelid. It was as though that part of his face could show no emotion at all except contempt. The man said, “Guess I scared you a little.”

“You did,” Morgan agreed, rubbing the back of his neck where the gun barrel had been. He limped across the room and bent to retrieve his own pistol. “Was that how you planned to greet Tom as well?”

He straightened up. The man had propped himself on the old table in the center of the room and crossed his arms over his chest. His revolver rested in the crook of his left elbow, not aimed at Morgan, exactly, but pointed in his general direction. It was a handsome piece, Morgan saw now, a Colt Dragoon with tracings etched into the barrel. Ivory grips peeped out from beneath the man’s hand, and there seemed to be a twin to the weapon in the holster on the man’s left hip.

“Can’t be too careful,” the man said.

Morgan rolled the cylinder of his revolver down his arm, checking to see that the loads and percussion caps were intact. He kept his head down, his hat brim hiding his face from the man’s gaze.

“So what do you want with Dove Ed?” the man asked again.

Morgan stuck his pistol into his holster, willing his hand not to shake as he did. He looked up. “A rancher name of Sloane got shot down Corinne way,” he said.

The man's eyes narrowed, the good eye now becoming as hard and lifeless as the other. His body tensed slightly. Morgan continued before he could respond, "Dove Ed and his friends came into town in a wagon from Sloane's a couple days ago. The wagon that's out there in the barn."

The man turned to stare out the door for a long moment. When he looked at Morgan again, his grin was back. "You think they killed Sloane?"

"I think they got questions to answer."

The grin widened, then became a full-throated laugh, showing the gaps at the back of his mouth where the man was missing teeth.

"This is no laughing matter, Mr. Pursley," Morgan said.

"Sorry," the man said. "I was just thinking, maybe I'll wait to pay Tom back. Might could be I won't have to."

Morgan essayed a smile that stretched his mouth without ever reaching his eyes. He cast a glance around the cabin, then started for the door. The man's revolver twitched in his hand.

"Where you goin'?"

"Town. To fetch my deputies."

"What for?" Suspicion tinged the man's voice and he rose from the table he had rested against.

"If Dove Ed and his friends come back, there's three of them and only two of us."

"Us?" The man looked confused. "I ain't no lawman."

"Of course. Only I thought you might like a share of the reward."

The man became instantly alert, even his lazy eyelid raising above half-mast to show Morgan the avarice in them. "There's a reward for them boys?" he said.

“A thousand dollars for the capture and conviction of Sloane’s killers, yes.”

The man whistled and shook his head.

“Tell you what, Mr. Pursley. I’ll go back and fetch us some help. You keep watch here, and I’ll see to it you get your share of the reward money. What do you say?”

“I say it sounds a damn sight better than paying Tom Mulvehill what I owed him!”

Morgan nodded and led the way out of the cabin. He boarded his mount and turned it to the road back toward Malad City. Before setting out he said, “Remember, Mr. Pursley, the reward stipulates ‘capture and conviction’, not ‘dead or alive’.”

“I know,” the man said. “Can’t have everything, I guess.”

Morgan urged his horse into a trot. Riding up the hill away from the Williams place he had all he could do not to look back at the man with the lazy eyelid and the two Colt Dragoons; he got the feeling the man’s rifle was pointed at his back and if he turned the man would shoot. He wondered if Bill Murphy had felt this way, waiting for a shot from behind.

He wondered about it all the way up the hill, and when he had crested the ridge and started down the other side, with the farm hidden from view, he clapped heels into his horse and lit out at a gallop for Malad City.

Chapter 14

The wind rushed down off the high peaks of the Samaria Mountains, chasing dust and dark clouds ahead of it and into the faces of the three men drawing close to the Williams farm. Eager to get out of the weather, they hunched down into their coats, jammed their hats tighter onto their heads, and urged their mounts to move quicker. Their route brought them across country rather than down the road. Once in the farmyard they dismounted and hurried to unload the horses and let them drink from the trough. The fences in terrible disrepair, they set picket stakes and tethered the animals, who rolled on the ground to get the feel of the saddles and baggage off their backs. The men dragged their gear into the ruined cabin.

Inside, the wind moaned and whistled through cracks in the walls and roof, but with it no longer directly in their faces the men straightened and sighed with relief. They set about unpacking supplies for their evening meal, lighting a small fire on the hearth, and fetching water, all with hardly a word spoken. Not until they had set coffee to boil and potatoes to fry did Tom Mulvehill say, “God damn, I could use a drink.”

Cash grunted, and Dove Ed responded not at all but with a fork stirred the pan of potatoes over the fire. From his saddlebag Tom withdrew a whiskey bottle, all but empty. He extracted the stopper and held out the bottle. “Anybody?”

Cash took the whiskey and swigged, then offered it to Dove Ed. The boy shook his head, keeping his attention on his cooking. Cash passed the bottle back to Tom, who drank it dry in two deep swallows. “That’s better,” he said, jamming the stopper in and banging the bottle on the table.

Eyes brighter now, he appraised their surroundings: the collapsing roof, the unchinked walls letting in the chill wind, the door that wouldn’t close completely, the smoke swirling out

from the choked chimney, the black vault door propped against the wall. “What I wouldn’t give to be in that saloon right now, instead of this shithole,” Tom said.

Cash ignored him. He had heard a good deal of this kind of talk in the past couple of days, and was getting tired of it.

Tom went on, “I’d get the finest meal, the best whiskey, the biggest bed in the hotel, and the prettiest woman in town to share it all with me.”

“Drinking? Whoring? We ain’t got but two dollars left. Wouldn’t buy you much of either.”

“Then I’d start at the card table. Run up a stake first.”

Cash scoffed. “I seen you play cards, Tom. Two dollars wouldn’t last you two minutes.” By the fireside, Dove Ed gave a sour chuckle. Tom glared at the back of his head.

“I’ll settle for the whiskey,” he said. “Two dollars’ll buy plenty of that.”

“What about the food, and the bed, and the whore?”

“Oh, I can sleep and eat anywhere. And who needs to pay for a woman when there’s that young lady right there at the saloon?”

Cash saw Dove Ed’s head come up, and although he didn’t look around, he stopped stirring the potatoes.

Tom went on, “I wouldn’t mind getting myself a piece of that. Besides, a poke don’t feel better just ‘cause you pay for it, am I right?”

Dove Ed stood up and turned, the fork clutched like a dagger in his hand. Tom straightened at the same moment, his own hand empty but dangling by the holster on his belt. They stared at each other, until Tom said softly, “Something wrong, boy?”

Dove Ed hesitated, then threw down the fork and brushed past Tom and Cash, heading for the door. Cash said, “Where you going?”

“Privy,” the boy said, and banged the door aside on his way out.

“Bring back the other bottle from the wagon while you’re at it,” Tom called after him.

Cash retrieved the fork, wiped it on his pants. He crouched to tend the pan. “Why don’t you lay off him, Tom?”

“Because he’s getting too big for his britches, even if he is just a little prick.” Even without seeing his face, Cash could hear the smirk in Tom’s voice. He shook his head, but let it go. Sometime soon Dove Ed would rise to one of Tom’s jibes with a gun in his hand instead of a bare fist; Cash only hoped he wouldn’t be between them when it happened.

From outside came a sharp cry, and the heavy sound of a body falling. Cash looked over at Tom, who had also heard the noise. “What the hell has that imbecile done now?” Tom said. He reached the door two steps ahead of Cash and yanked it open.

The short, flat slap of a pistol shot sounded nearby. Splinters of wood erupted from the doorjamb, spraying into Cash’s face. Almost instantly another shot followed. Tom’s heavy body collided with Cash as he recoiled from the open door, and both men fell to the dirt floor of the cabin. Cash scrambled backward, shouting, “Jesus Christ!” and clawing for his pistol. Tom put his back to the wall beside the doorway and drew his own weapon as yet another shot tore the air. They both heard the ball bury itself in the cabin’s outside wall.

Cash and Tom locked eyes. He didn’t think he was hurt himself, but Cash could see blood on the side of Tom’s face. If the injury pained him, though, Tom didn’t let on. Instead he yelled, “Dove Ed! What the hell are you playing at, boy? You could have killed me!”

The laughter that answered him did not belong to Dove Ed, nor did the voice that shouted back, "Sorry about that, Tom! Come on out and we'll shake hands, make peace!"

"Who the hell is that?" Cash said, keeping his voice low.

Tom gritted his teeth. "Putney," he said, then yelled, "Jacob? Is that you?"

"It's me, Tom! How you been keeping?"

"I'm well, thanks! And you?"

"Oh, fine! Are you sure you're all right? I didn't get a piece of you, did I?"

Tom put his hand to the right side of his neck, where a trickle of blood had soaked his collar. "Nope!" he called, and beckoned Cash over. In a murmur, he asked, "How bad is it?" Cash pulled the fabric away and found a small nick in the skin, the bleeding already sluggish.

"It's nothing," he said. "Flying splinter maybe." He scuttled along the wall, trying to find a place where enough of the chinking between the logs had fallen away to get a look outside. But night was falling, and the scudding clouds had brought with them a premature dusk. He could see nothing.

"Jacob!" Tom yelled. "Dove Ed all right out there?"

"He met with a bit of an accident," Putney said. "When he opened the privy door he hit his head on a short-handled shovel. Twice. But don't you worry none, he's got a thick head. He'll be fine soon as the sheriff gets back."

"What the hell's he talking about?" Cash said. Tom waved him to silence.

"See, you boys are wanted for the robbery and murder of Bennett Sloane down in Corinne," Putney continued. "Sheriff, he found your wagon out here and went back to town to fetch his deputies, told me to arrest you if you showed up. So throw your guns out the door and come on out with your hands up."

Cash frowned over at Tom. “Did you or Dove Ed shoot Sloane when I wasn’t looking?” he said. “I seem to recall he was breathing when we left.” Tom gestured furiously at him, mouthing “shut up” over and over until Cash subsided.

“I expect it was Putney himself,” Tom said. “But the sheriff don’t know that. If he’s telling the truth about that, we got to get out of here before they get back. Go see if there’s a back window or a hole in the wall we can use.”

Cash scrambled to the rear of the cabin, looking for any gap in the walls they could slither through. If there was a window, though, it was buried under the debris of the roof, which had sagged down in a thick tangle of beams and rotted thatching, too constricted for a man his size. He heard Tom yell, “Tell you what, Jacob. We’ll wait in here till the sheriff arrives. Then we’ll give up.”

Cash drew his hunting knife. The thatching consisted of widely-spaced wooden rafters, supporting thick bundles of straw bound with cord. If enough of the bundles were cut apart, he might create a gap wide enough to escape, then take Putney by surprise. He began to saw at the bundles and cords, turning his face from the choking dust he raised in the process. Through the front door of the cabin, the parley continued; he had to hope Tom could stall Putney long enough for his plan to work.

“No good,” Putney was saying. “You got to come out, otherwise that potato-eater sheriff will claim the reward for capturing you.” His voice took on an ironic pleading tone. “A thousand dollars for the men who killed Bennett Sloane. You can see what a thousand dollars would mean to a fellow like me, can’t you? Help me out here, Tom!”

“Nothing I’d like better. But if we was to walk out there, I believe you might just shoot us down. That would strain the bonds of our friendship somewhat.”

Putney barked out a laugh. “Might could be I’d do such a thing in different circumstances, Tom, but not today.”

“Why not?”

“The reward, I said! It’s for ‘capture and conviction’, not ‘dead or alive’! You got my guarantee on it. What do you say?”

Over the sound of rustling straw and snapping cords, Cash heard that chuckle of Tom’s he’d grown to know so well: the irritating, know-it-all laugh that so got under Dove Ed’s skin. Tom said, “I say you could teach stupid to a stump if you think I’ll surrender to you, Jacob. You want me, come on in and get me!”

Several strands parted at the same time, and now Cash had a hole about big enough for his head. Cool night air rushed in, and peering up he could make out the black clouds marching across the sky. He redoubled his efforts, trying to make room for his shoulders to follow.

“No, I think you’ll come out, Tom,” said Putney. “See, your boy Dove Ed here...” Cash heard a sound like a mallet striking a sack of grain, and the wind carried on it a feeble moan. “Your boy looks like he might be trying to make a break for it.”

All at once Cash caught his drift and froze, waiting to hear Tom’s response. He remembered Putney’s expression when they left him in the shed behind the saloon in Corinne. Cowardice mixed with hatred. Like many cowards, Putney would be vicious to those weaker than himself; Cash didn’t doubt for a moment that he would shoot a helpless prisoner.

Tom said, “No he ain’t. He’s knocked cold.”

“You’re wrong, Tom. If you don’t come out, talk some sense into him, he’s gonna get shot trying to escape.”

“So? I ain’t about to get shot for that little pissant. Kill him, for all I care.”

Cash shoved the hunting knife back into its sheath. He pulled his revolver, then with both arms reached up through the slit he had created, getting his elbows well outside. He kicked off with his legs and at the same time levered himself up with both elbows. His head and chest burst through the narrow opening, leaving his legs dangling under the sagging roof. Ominous creaking noises came from the damaged beams beneath him, and the rustling and tearing of the thatch seemed deafening in his ears.

Although he faced the farmyard, his head was still lower than the roofline outside. Cash extended his arms up toward the peak, dug into the straw bundles and pulled with all his might. Dry, sun-baked straw tore loose under his fingers and poked into his face, arms and chest but as he forced himself higher up the roof he could see Putney in the dim light of the yard below. The man had taken cover by the corner of the barn which held their wagon. At his feet lay a huddled shape, unmoving. That had to be Dove Ed.

At Putney's position a white-orange flash illuminated the man's face for a split second, and Cash thought he had shot Dove Ed. Then the noise of the shot reached him at the same moment something struck the thatch to his right, throwing bits of straw to the wind, and Cash realized Putney was shooting at him. He ducked behind the roofline as Putney fired again, and again, blowing holes through the roof but somehow not hitting Cash. More shots sounded directly under him and he knew that Tom was firing back from the doorway; he hoped Dove Ed would not be hit by accident and wondered if Tom even cared.

It came to Cash that Putney had not fired for a second or two. He cocked his pistol and did his best to remember where he had seen Putney. He would have time for one shot, two if he was lucky, and he wanted to waste no time searching for his target. Cash pulled his left arm under his chest and searched for firm purchase with his legs, then drew a deep breath and shoved

hard with his left hand. As his head rose above the roofline again, he caught sight of Jacob Putney aiming a pistol at Dove Ed's head. Cash pointed his own pistol, knowing he would be too late to save the boy.

The world lurched, and with his legs still stuck through the thatch up to his knees, Cash flailed his gun arm for balance. Below, the creaking of the roof beams resounded with the snapping of wood strained beyond the breaking point. Then the roof collapsed, carrying Cash back down into the cabin in an avalanche of straw and beams. He could hear someone—Tom, he thought—yelling, “Holy Christ!” before noise and dust and darkness overcame him.

* * * * *

“God damn!” said Putney.

A plume of dust and wisps of straw rose above the fallen house, swirling and dissipating on the wind as the noise died away. He stared at it with his mouth open in awe and appreciation, then burst out in raucous laughter.

“Did you see that?” he said to Dove Ed, but the boy still lay unconscious at Putney's feet, the blood streaming over his face growing black as the flying dust caked it.

It had been a frustrating vigil, waiting amid the cottonwood thicket for Tom and his friends to return, even with the thought of a reward to comfort him. So when he saw the three men ride up and enter the cabin, Putney made his move. He crept down to the farmyard, grabbed a spade from the wagon and hidden inside the privy to wait, peering through the cracks until he saw Dove Ed approaching. As the boy opened the door, Putney struck him square in the face with the flat blade of the shovel. His head snapped back and he reeled away from the door, stumbling to his knees, and Putney followed him out into the farmyard, where he wound up and swung with all his strength, fetching another blow to the boy's head. Putney smiled in

satisfaction at the meaty sound, the tremor of impact along the shaft of the spade like a maul applied to the skull of a steer in an abattoir. Dove Ed fell and did not move. On his belt, Putney found the revolver stolen from him back in Corinne and hefted it with pleasure.

The rest of the encounter did not go quite so well. He missed his shot at Mulvehill and had to take cover by the barn, dragging Dove Ed along as a hostage. He had Tom and the other one cornered, but that wasn't good enough; Putney wanted them dead, not captured or arrested. He had no doubt that before the sheriff returned they would try to escape the cabin and flank him. He had to look sharp, and get them to come out.

While he bantered with Mulvehill, Putney found himself staring at the roof of the cabin. It occurred to him that he could smoke them out by setting a light to the straw thatching. Either the smoke would force them out and he would shoot them, or they would burn. He frowned, wondering where he could lay hands on a torch or a brand without leaving the front doorway unattended.

A loud rending, crackling noise from the rear of the cabin drew his gaze, and a moment later he saw a face appear at the peak of the roof. Putney swore and fired his revolver at the man on the rooftop, three shots and the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. He dropped the spent weapon and drew one of Sloane's bone handled dragoons, but before he could take aim the entire cabin shuddered and the roof vanished from sight, dropping down into the room below and taking his target with it. Over the racket of cracking beams and the rattle of masonry from the falling chimney, he thought he heard cries of dismay or pain. It was a beautiful thing to behold.

Now Putney advanced, holding the pistol at the ready. Tom or his friend might be shamming, and he wanted to make sure. Along with the chimney, the roof had pulled over most of the right-side wall, so Putney avoided the front door and peered over the jumble of logs into

the wreckage beyond. He sensed no sound or movement but the soft crackle of the cook-fire in the hearth, now partially buried under the chimney-stones. Tendrils of smoke rose there, and Putney wondered if it would set the fallen thatch ablaze, or if he should help it along. He patted his pockets for his matchbox.

Then he froze, listening. From inside the cabin he had heard something, a cough, a sneeze, a word? He waited and it came again, a soft groan, a half-uttered oath. Putney stepped carefully through the shifting, settling debris, searching every shadow over the sights of his gun for the source. Amid the darkness, the smoke and dust, the chaos inside the walls were a thousand places big enough to conceal a man. Picking his way among them, Putney found Tom Mulvehill by practically stepping on him: a beam under his boot shifted and a loud groan issued from beneath it. With a start, Putney cast his gaze in the direction of the sound and saw a hand poking out from a tangle of thatch at his feet. He bent and twitched the matted straw aside.

“All right, Jacob, we’re caught,” said Tom as the wind hit his face. He lay pinned under roofing and fireplace stones, and somehow the big black iron door had come to rest on his legs. Only his head and right arm moved freely. Blood streaked his face, but not much of it; he didn’t seem badly hurt. He grinned ruefully up at Putney. “Wasn’t quite fair of you to drop a house on us.”

“The hell with fair,” said Putney. “Where’s your friend?”

Tom shrugged as best he could with a beam over one shoulder. “Under there somewhere, I guess.”

“Don’t move, while I look.”

“Whatever you say.”

Putney moved off, unconcerned. He had seen Tom's empty holster. In minutes he returned and stood atop the iron door, watching as Tom grimaced against the increased pressure on his legs.

"Found your friend," he said. "Or at least his feet, sticking out from under the roof over there."

"He alive?"

"Don't know. He didn't move when I kicked at his boots." Putney rocked up and down, from heels to toes, causing the door to bounce slightly. "Hell, I ain't even sure they're still attached to the rest of him."

Tom winced each time the door compressed his legs, but his voice stayed even as he said, "Would you mind stepping off there, Jacob?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Putney, staying where he was. "Hurts a little, huh? Not as much as a bullet along the ribs, though, I bet. Wound like that makes a man think he's dying, but you're just a little uncomfortable, huh?" He rocked a little harder, smiling as Tom pressed his lips together and turned his eyes skyward.

"What're you doing with this anyway?" Putney said.

"Using it for a bedroll, at the moment."

Putney stopped rocking. He moved a step closer to Tom, bringing more weight down upon him. "None of your sass," he said. He took another step, standing squarely on the door's edge, above Tom's chest. Sweat stood on Tom's face and his breath came in labored gasps. With his free arm he pushed up on the door, but with no leverage his efforts came to nothing. Putney felt the slight rise and fall of the iron door, Tom's lungs struggling to expand, and he

crouched to bring his face closer to the trapped man. “What’s the matter, Tom? Ain’t you got nothing to say?”

Putney held up Sloane’s pistol, sighting along the barrel into Tom’s face, pulling it back when Tom grabbed feebly at it with his free hand. He thumbed back the hammer.

“Thought it was...capture...and conviction,” Tom wheezed.

“I know. I had you all safely arrested, but when I recognized you as one of the Innocents, you resisted. Set upon me, tried to kill me. I had to shoot you. Self defense.”

“Liar!” The word burst out, carrying all Tom’s wind with it.

“Senseless, ain’t it, Tom?” He rose to his feet once more, keeping the muzzle of the revolver trained on Mulvehill’s head.

A rumbling sound reached their ears and Tom looked at the sky again, though the last daylight had faded and the clouds obscured the stars. The only light came from the ruins of the hearth, where the fire licked at the pieces of the cabin that had fallen close by. Both men paused and listened.

“Thunder?” Tom gasped.

“Horses,” Putney said.

The rumble did not die away. It went on and on, growing louder, closer: several mounts approaching, riding hard. The sheriff, no doubt accompanied by his deputies.

“They’ll be here soon,” said Putney and shrugged, then resumed his aim. “Well, Tom, no hard feelings I hope.”

In that instant, pain and noise exploded in his senses, a pistol shot from nearby that embedded a ball in the big muscle on the left side of his chest. Putney’s hand convulsed on the trigger of the dragoon, the shot howling off the iron door into the darkness, away from the

cringing Tom Mulvehill. Putney himself reeled, trying to turn and find his assailant, but his foot turned on the uneven rubble and he fell heavily. His gun flew from his grasp. He tried to reach for its twin in the left side holster but his arm would not work. With his right hand he fumbled for the gun, for some reason unable to find the butt. He looked down for it and gaped instead at the dark red stain spreading across his shirt front. His pulse roared in his ears, and through it he heard the scrape of a clumsy, dragging footstep. Into the uncertain firelight lurched Dove Ed, a smoking pistol dangling in his hand and his face a mask of dirt-caked gore, leaning where he could on the remainders of the cabin wall.

The two regarded each other, one unable to reach his pistol, the other unable to raise his, both listening as the clatter of the approaching horses reached them from the old farm road.

Chapter 15

Morgan awoke, confused, when the rising sun speared through the window of his room straight onto his eyelids. He held up a hand against the glare and sat upright, groaning at the stiffness in his back and legs from sleeping in a hard wooden chair with his feet propped on the bed. There was nowhere else to sleep; his room in Waldron's boardinghouse was Spartan in its furnishings. A narrow bed, dresser and washstand, the wooden chair. No rug softened the floor, no pictures or wallpaper adorned the walls. Morgan spent little time in his room, and when he left it only the clothes in the dresser hinted that he had ever been there.

He padded on stocking feet to the washstand and poured the basin full before plunging his face into it. The cool water made him gasp and helped clear away the miasma of sleep, but as his dreams retreated his memories advanced, memories of the breakneck ride through the dusk to the Williams farm, and of what he and his deputies had found there. Morgan pulled down the towel from its bar and dried his face, then turned to the bed and its occupant.

His face swathed in bandages and his head held in place by padded wooden blocks, Dove Ed Williams lay on his back beneath the quilt, unmoving, just the way he had been laid there the night before, his breath so shallow that Morgan had to move closer to detect the rise and fall of his chest. The flesh of the boy's face, where it was visible, was an angry, swollen purple, and Morgan knew that beneath the dressings it was even worse. Dr. Sherman had few words of reassurance. "You Welshmen have hard heads," he said to Morgan, "But not as hard as the blade of a shovel."

Morgan pulled on his boots with a soft curse. Though his own injury was healing nicely, the night in the chair had caused it to stiffen up, and he limped downstairs to the kitchen, where

Effie Waldron had already made coffee and was busy making bread. As he helped himself to a cup she looked up from her bread dough and said, "How's the boy?"

"Still asleep."

She pounded down the dough. "He gonna die?"

"Doctor said his skull ain't broke, but he took a hell of a lick to the head." Morgan shrugged. "He might, might not."

She turned to face him, aiming one flour-coated finger his way and pinning him with her blue-grey gaze, her face florid with exertion under her iron hair, bound in a severe bun. "Don't want him dying in my house, you hear?" With her other fist, she punched at the dough for emphasis, raising pale clouds of flour from the table. "You brought him in here. If he dies, you take him out."

"I'll be sure to give him your good wishes," said Morgan. He headed up the stairs, cup and saucer in hand, while the thuds and thumps of Effie Waldron making bread took on a new savagery behind him. They had carried Dove Ed to Morgan's room before Effie knew what they were about, and she would not soon forget it.

In his room, the boy lay in the bed with one eye open, but otherwise in the same position as Morgan had left him. "You awake or dead?" Morgan said. The eye twitched in his direction, and Morgan saw that the other was too swollen to open.

"Don't try to move yet," he said. "Doctor said you was to lay still and rest."

Dove Ed tried to nod his head and Morgan saw him wincing. He drank some coffee.

"Told you so," he said. The boy swallowed and closed his eye. In a moment he snored gently.

* * * * *

When Morgan returned to his room after breakfast, bearing a bowl of broth, he found Dove Ed awake once again and even sitting up slightly. The padded blocks lay askew on the bed and the pillows were pushed back to support the boy against the headboard.

“Brought you somewhat to eat,” said Morgan. “Doctor said to try soup first lest your stomach be weak or your jaw be sore.”

He held out the bowl and spoon to the boy, who took them with exaggerated care as he tried to avoid turning his head. With the same deliberate movements he spooned up the broth, brought it to his lips, and drank. Morgan could tell it caused him some pain, but the boy ate the bowlful with the regularity of a pendulum. When he had finished Morgan took the bowl and offered a napkin.

As Dove Ed dabbed his lips Morgan said, “How’s the head feel?”

“Hurts,” said the boy in a hoarse voice, barely above a whisper.

“I bet,” said Morgan. “You remember me? I knew your Da and Ma.”

The boy began to nod but caught himself in time. He said, “Mr. Morgan.”

“Sheriff Morgan, now.”

With the pain in his face and head, Dove Ed could barely move, but Morgan saw him freeze at this news. His one visible eye grew wide and the bruised skin over the other grew taut, trying to open as well. “Is this jail?” he said.

“No. It’s Waldron’s Boardinghouse.”

Some of the tension went out of Dove Ed’s face and shoulders, but his eye still roved about the room, fixing on the door and the window.

Morgan said, “You can leave if you want to.”

The boy drew back the bedclothes and made as if to swing his legs out, but before they so much as touched the floor he groaned and raised his hands to his head. Morgan went to his side, moved his legs back under the covers, and helped him sink back against the pillow.

Morgan said, "Or you can stay a while longer, till Dr. Sherman has another look at you."

"Thanks," gasped Dove Ed, and lapsed back into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

They passed most of the day in the same manner, exchanging a few words between Dove Ed's bouts of sleep. Around noontime, since the boy had kept down the broth, Morgan brought him some fresh bread softened in milk, and the boy ate every morsel with care for his teeth and jaw. Mid-afternoon, Alex Sherman stopped in and made Dove Ed hiss in pain by prying open his swollen eye. Morgan could see the white was clouded with crimson and he looked away, but Dr. Sherman pronounced himself pleased with the examination.

"The pupils are the same size, so I expect you'll heal up nicely if you don't strain yourself," he said. Morgan asked him to pass that news on to Effie Waldron, if he wouldn't mind, and Sherman winked as he donned his hat. The landlady's temper was well known throughout Malad City.

"I'll get her to prepare a poultice for that eye," the doctor said. "And I'll bill the Sheriff's office for the visit, shall I?"

Morgan pulled a fat roll of banknotes from his trouser pocket and smiled as the doctor whistled silently. He peeled off a bill and proffered it, saying, "Now, Alex, you make it sound like you don't expect payment at all."

"I expect it, just not so soon is all."

Once Dr. Sherman had clattered down the stairs on his way out, Morgan shut the door and turned to see Dove Ed slumped back against his pillows, eyes closed. He assumed the boy had passed out again until Dove Ed murmured, “Where’s my gun?”

Morgan held his peace for a moment while he settled himself in the wooden chair beside the bed, hoping the boy was falling asleep, but in the same quiet, insistent voice Dove Ed repeated, “Where’s my gun?”

“In the dresser drawer.” Morgan folded his arms over his chest. “What you want with it?”

“Show me?”

“You ought to sleep.”

“Show me, please.”

Morgan turned his palms up in acquiescence and opened the bottom drawer of the dresser. The room was small enough he could reach in without rising from the chair and withdraw the pistol, a workmanlike Whitney single-action .36 with a well-worn grip and small marks of use on every surface. The faint odor of burnt powder rose from the weapon, which hadn’t been cleaned since being fired the night before. Only when he heard the scrape of the drawer did Dove Ed open his good eye for a look. Morgan expected him to try and take the gun, and despite the fact that it was unloaded he was not about to hand it over, but the boy only nodded and said, “That’s fine.” His eyelid fluttered and his breathing grew regular.

Morgan sat and watched him sleep, the pistol now forgotten in his lap. Between the bandages and the bruises, he could see little of Dove Ed’s resemblance to his father, but then Hugh was two years in the grave now, and his features ruined by drink years before that. When he died, Hugh looked nothing like the straight-backed man who stood beside Morgan at the yoke

of a creaky, ill-made handcart, pushing their few worldly possessions and those too feeble to walk or too big with child over miles of prairie, wind-blown sand, and rocky trails from Iowa City to Salt Lake. Dove Ed's birth three weeks later bolstered Hugh's faith in his new-found church and land, but nothing could make it strong enough to survive the death of his wife nine years later. As for Morgan, his faith died long before that.

A tap at the door roused him and he realized he had been nodding off where he sat. "Come in," he said, and knuckled his eyes.

Effie Waldron swept in, a pan of poultices in her arms and a disapproving look in her eye. She took in his bleary expression and snorted. "Must be nice to sleep the day away when honest folk are working," she said. She set the pan on the washstand and Morgan caught the sharp medicinal scent of the poultices.

"I was up late," he began, but he knew his protests fell on deaf ears. To Effie Waldron, a Jack Mormon was worse than a Gentile. Gentiles were ignorant of the Truth; Jack Mormons knew the Truth but couldn't be bothered to do anything about it. And apostates like Dove Ed were the worst of all, those who had seen the Truth and rejected it out of hand.

Whatever her opinions of Dove Ed and his family, though, Effie's hands were gentle enough as she applied the medicinal cloths, still warm, to the boy's battered face. Her ministrations woke him and he flinched from the touch of the poultice. But he thanked her graciously enough so that she promised to check in on him after supper. "But keep that on your eye, mind," she said. "It may sting, but not as much as you will if I find you without it."

After she had gone Dove Ed said, "It smells like a tanning shed and stings like nettles."

Morgan smiled. “Means it’s good for you.” He noticed the boy staring at him and all at once realized that he still held the pistol. As they looked at each other, their smiles faded, but neither spoke until Morgan hefted the piece and said, “Good gun.”

Dove Ed shrugged and looked at his lap.

“I heard it did the job for you last night.”

“Who says?”

“Tom Mulvehill. He said one shot was all you needed.” Morgan watched the boy closely, gauging his reaction from the expression on his face, the set of his shoulders, the rapidity of his breath. But the boy might have been deaf for all the heed he gave. “He said somewhat more, as well.”

“What?”

“He said it’s the first time you hit what you aimed at.”

A laugh or a snort, Morgan could not decide which, forced its way through Dove Ed’s lips. Morgan turned the Whitney over in his hands, feeling the angles of the barrel, the firm resistance of the trigger and the hammer. “I’m useless with a pistol myself,” he said. “Do you suppose all Welshmen have the same trouble?”

“Is Cash all right?” Dove Ed said.

The question surprised Morgan. “He’s fine. A bit worse for wear, but he’s out at your Da’s farm with Mulvehill, probably trying to get that great bloody door out from under the house.”

At the mention of the door, Morgan noticed a subtle alteration in the boy’s demeanor, from total disinterest to the kind of studied nonchalance most often seen on stock thieves as they swore that they had bought their cattle from a rancher down the valley, you must know him,

Sheriff, tall fellow, dark hair? Seeing this boy, this son of a friend, trying to assume the same innocent mien left Morgan feeling tired and discouraged. He hooked the chair with his foot and sat astride it reversed, the Whitney dangling from his finger by the trigger guard.

When he spoke again, Morgan did his best to keep weariness and disappointment out of his voice. “That big black iron bastard that almost crushed Mulvehill. Took me and two deputies to lift it even enough for him to squirm out. Where did you ever come across such a thing?”

The boy dissembled badly. Morgan could see him struggling with the question, unsure how to answer. “Corinne,” he said at last.

Morgan waited, giving Dove Ed a half-smile of encouragement until he added, “We bought it from a bank that burned down.”

“Is that right?”

“Yessir.”

“Well what do you plan to do with it?” Dove Ed opened his mouth to answer, but Morgan held up a hand and shook his head. “Never mind, none of my business,” he said, because it was plain as if it was written on the boy’s forehead that whatever he said next would be a lie, and Morgan didn’t think he could stand to hear it.

Instead he continued, “Corinne? Is that where you met Mulvehill and Joyner?”

“Yessir.”

“And Jacob Putney?”

“Yessir.” The answer came slower this time.

“Did you know Putney killed two men in Corinne? He had stolen money and guns on him; he was on the run. How come he came here? Was he looking for you?”

“What did Tom and Cash tell you?”

Morgan thought Dove Ed looked flushed, although it was hard to tell through the bruises.

“I want to hear what you think, Dove Ed,” he said.

Dove Ed thought it over for a long while, and Morgan kept his peace and let him. “I think Tom and Putney knew each other,” he said. “From someplace else, and there was bad blood between them. Tom whipped him and took his gun.”

“This one?”

Dove Ed nodded. “I guess Putney took it personal.”

“That would do it.” Everything he had said jibed with the story Morgan got from Mulvehill and Joyner, and also with the news Mart Goddard had brought from Corinne, but a great deal was left unsaid.

“What was the bad blood over, Dove Ed?”

“I don’t know. Tom didn’t say.”

All at once Morgan decided he had had enough of cat-footing around the subject. He wanted to grab hold of Dove Ed and shake him until the truth spilled out and stained the bandages and the bedclothes. He wanted to scream at the boy, no, the man who thought he could lie to perhaps the only person in the world who cared what happened to him. He wanted to shout every profanity, obscenity, and blasphemy he had ever heard, anything to widen Dove Ed’s eyes and force him to pay attention. He fixed his stare on Dove Ed, who must have seen something of his emotions in his face, for the boy flinched and said, “I’m awful tired, Mr...Sheriff.”

Morgan rose. “All right,” he said. “I’ve work to do, anyway. I have to arrange for Jacob Putney to be sent back to Corinne.”

He had the satisfaction of seeing the boy's eye widen in alarm. "You mean he ain't dead?"

"I never said you killed him. I just said you hit him." Morgan held up the pistol. "If I show him this, is he going to tell me the same story you did?"

Dove Ed's hands plucked at the quilt in agitation. He would not look at Morgan.

"You rest," Morgan said. He dropped the weapon into his coat pocket.

On his way out of the house, Effie Waldron stopped him to ask, "Will you be needing another room tonight, or do you plan to sleep in your chair again?"

"No thank you, Miz Waldron," he said. "I don't believe our guest will be staying the night."

He left the boardinghouse, Dove Ed's gun dragging at his coat on the right-hand side. He had no intention of showing it to Jacob Putney, or of asking him any questions, since Dove Ed's bullet had killed the man stone dead. Morgan sighed and trudged away, heading for the undertaker's, where he would make arrangements for the body to be transported back to Utah.

* * * * *

He returned before suppertime. The streets were shadowed by the mountains and the aroma of Effie Waldron's cooking greeted him at the front door of the boardinghouse. Upstairs at the door to his room, Morgan hesitated, then rapped gently before turning the knob, unsure of what he would find inside.

Dove Ed sat on the bed, fully dressed. His clothes, the same ones he had worn the night before, were as clean as Effie Waldron could make them, but pale brown stains still showed on the shirtfront and collar where Dove Ed had bled on it. The boy's shapeless hat rested on the bed beside him; the bandages around his head and face no doubt made it awkward to wear. Strapped

across his hips was the gunbelt, still with its holster empty. Dove Ed rose and nodded as Morgan entered.

“Feeling better?” Morgan said.

“Yes sir.”

“Leaving, are you?”

“Yes sir.”

“Even before supper?” Morgan inhaled deeply. “Smells like it’s almost ready.”

“No sir. I put you out too long already. I ought to go now.”

“All right.”

The question hung in the air, unspoken, but Morgan refused to answer it. He waited, looking Dove Ed in the face, until the boy asked it. “What did Putney say?”

“What do you think?”

“I think Jacob Putney is a liar, no matter what he said.”

“Well, you’re wrong. He ain’t a liar. He’s dead.”

Morgan watched Dove Ed absorb this news with a slight frown, but could not decide what caused it. Was that remorse that colored his expression? Or satisfaction?

Dove Ed said, “Then may I have my gun, please?”

“What for?”

Dove Ed frowned deeper, perplexed now.

“What do you need with it? Who else do you plan to shoot?”

“I don’t plan to shoot nobody.”

“But you will. You keep company with those two roughs, with that Mulvehill and that Joyner, you will shoot somebody or be shot yourself, I promise you. You didn’t plan to shoot Putney, did you now?”

“Sure I did.”

“And maybe one day soon I’ll ride up to some run-down farm and it’ll be you with your life leaking out into your lap, did you think of that?”

“I have.” Dove Ed held his hand out. “And if I’m to be shot, I’d rather I had my gun with me when it happened. Can I have it, please?”

Morgan fished in his coat pocket, pulled out the Whitney by the barrel and held it out at arms length for Dove Ed to take. He looked away while the boy reloaded the pistol with pre-measured cartridges wrapped in waxy paper and small silver percussion caps from a pouch on his belt. The click of the cylinder and the creak of the tamping lever as he worked were the only sounds in the small room until Dove Ed slipped the revolver into his holster and said, “Goodbye, Sheriff.”

“Wait.” Morgan turned, his right hand clenched into a fist. Dove Ed eyed him warily. “Your mount’s in the livery stable near the salt works. Just tell them the sheriff’s office will pay the costs.”

“Thank you.”

“One more thing. There was a reward offered for Putney, and if anyone deserves it, it’s you. Might be a while coming, though.” He extended his arm and opened his fist. There on his palm lay five heavy gold coins etched with eagles. “They were in Putney’s pocket with a lot of folding money. Probably took them from the rancher he killed.”

Dove Ed made no move toward him. Morgan jounced the coins so they rang sweetly in his hand. “Go on, take them,” he said.

The boy held out his hand again and Morgan dropped the twenty-dollar pieces into it.

“Thanks.” Dove Ed retrieved his hat from the bed, slipped out the door and Morgan heard him go down the stairs and out of the boardinghouse. He listened to the footsteps recede down the street toward the livery stable, and then he couldn’t hear them any more. He sat down on his bed, put his hat where Dove Ed’s had been, and rested his face in his hands. When Effie Waldron looked in to say that supper was ready, Morgan told her he wasn’t hungry tonight.

Chapter 16

They drilled holes in the rock face using mallets and cold chisels, the clash of the hammers on thumb-thick rods of steel resounding from the cliffs around them and shivering into the cave. They talked little, saving their breath for the effort of striking the chisels. Every so often one or the other of them would miss his mark, chipping the rock with a dull thud or the ironwork with a clang and curse for his own clumsiness. Then the stream of blows would resume, creating an ever-changing syncopation with his companion, since they never struck precisely the same rhythm. Dove Ed tended to use faster, lighter blows while Cash took more time with each swing but delivered more force.

Starting a hole demanded the most patience and endurance, since they had to brace the cold chisel with one hand and wield the mallet with the other. The chisel was applied to the rock face; as the opposite end, mushrooming slightly from thousands of such uses, was struck with the mallet, the broad cross-shaped tip bit into the sandstone the smallest distance. The chisel would be rotated forty-five degrees and struck again. And again. And again, gradually boring a hole inches deep into the rock beside cave opening, small shards of powdered rock sprinkling out around the shaft of the chisel. When the hole grew deep enough it would support the chisel by itself, and Cash or Dove Ed would gratefully let go, shaking their hand, now tingling from the thrum of each hammer-blow.

The iron door, with its still-attached remnants of latticework cage, dictated the precise arrangement of the holes they had to drill. It stood in place, covering the mouth of the cave they had selected as their cache. The contours of the surrounding boulders prevented an exact fit, but they were able by dint of cutting certain of the bars and applying judicious brute force to others, to fit the lattice close against the stones. Then they propped it up and began drilling their holes,

into which they would drive iron staples slightly broader than the openings. The staples, spanning the bars of the cage, would secure it to the boulders as near forever as made no difference. The only way into the cave, then, would be through the iron door.

In the meantime, Cash and Dove Ed sweated and pounded and cursed in the heat of the June sunshine, stopping for an occasional dipperful of water or to catch their breath and stretch their cramped shoulders. When they did, they wondered to themselves what was taking Tom so long, then answered themselves that Tom would be back when most of the work was finished. He had that knack, they agreed, though only through exasperated glances and headshakes.

It was several days since they dragged the iron door from the ruin of the Williams farm and hauled it and their supplies to the cave. The bruises around Dove Ed's eyes were fading into a spectrum of putrid yellows and purples, and his broken nose, still swollen, encroached on the rest of his features, but the boy never complained. At least his injuries were healing; the evening he returned alone from Malad City he looked like he wouldn't last the night. Bundled in linen bandages, wan and clammy with pain, he made up his bedroll in the Williams barn and slumped atop it with hardly a word. Cash and Tom were forced to wait till morning to ask where he'd been, and got only vague answers in reply. Dove Ed spoke seldom, if at all, and they did not press him. When they did speak, it was of the task at hand.

Dove Ed had the idea of building platforms over the uneven cavern floor to give level spaces for sleeping and clearing supplies. They scavenged the Williams farm for lumber and nailed together some rude but serviceable trestles. Onto these they moved their meager stores and their bedrolls. With the wood left over they planned to build a wall to reinforce the inside of the iron lattice, which might keep out the inquisitive but would not keep out the weather.

By and by, as the afternoon wore on, Cash flung down his tools and said, "If Tom ain't coming back, I say we go in to town after him."

Dove Ed gave a last flurry of blows to the staple he was driving, then dropped his mallet and stood, passing a bandanna gingerly over his damaged, sweat-sheened face. He hooked his gunbelt from where it lay; Cash had noticed he kept it always in arm's reach, even while working. It still amazed Cash that the sheriff had given back the gun, let alone allowed Dove Ed to leave Malad City a free man. But what really put the shine on the saddle was the five twenty-dollar gold pieces he said the sheriff had given him. Lord, the look on Tom Mulvehill's face when the boy displayed those golden eagles!

"If that gimpy lawman has a purse that heavy, we're wasting our time taking stagecoaches, by God," Tom had said. Ever since being rescued first by Dove Ed and then by the law, Tom had been acting touchy, and he viewed Dove Ed's sudden largesse as a further personal insult.

"He said the reward for Putney might be a while coming," Dove Ed said. "I think it's from Putney's loot."

The idea that it was reward money griped Tom even more. "We all deserve a share," he had said. "All three of us fought the bastard. You may have shot him, but we kept him busy!" He had a point; while Putney gloated over Tom, Dove Ed had found his discarded pistol and loaded it. In the end, they shared out the money, one gold piece each for Tom and Cash, and three for Dove Ed, who after all had shot the son of a bitch.

Now Cash and Dove Ed descended the draw from the cave mouth to the small camp where they had left the wagon and horses. Tom had not returned, so they set to saddling their

mounts. “Who would have thought,” said Cash as he tightened the girth strap, “That twenty dollars could keep Tom in town for so long?”

From their camp on the thinly wooded slope of Samaria Mountain it was several hours ride into Malad City, and it had gone full dark by the time they rode in. On the way they neither saw nor expected Tom Mulvehill, and they were not surprised to find his horse tethered in front of Owens and Price. Tom, on the other hand, appeared both surprised and somewhat displeased when he caught sight of their entrance. He sat at a poker table, with a bottle of whiskey near to hand and an odd assortment of bills and coins before him. He nodded to them but kept his attention on his cards as Cash and Dove Ed threaded their way through the crowded, smoky barroom toward him.

“Hello, Tom,” Cash said. “Making us all rich men, I see.” He gestured at Tom’s pile of cash money, the smallest of the six men in the game. The others at the table ignored him except to pull their cards closer to their vests. Dove Ed did not pause, but moved past without a greeting to take an empty seat at a table near the bar.

“Yeah, I’ve got them right where they want me,” Tom said, and grinned, but his eyes flicked back to follow Dove Ed. “What brings you boys into town?”

“When you didn’t come right back we got fretful,” Cash said.

One of the players at the table laid down his hand with an air of satisfaction, and groans arose as the others tossed down their cards. Tom leaned forward and swore. “A full house? Christ,” he complained. “You’ve got some unholy luck, Jonas.” Jonas paid him no heed but gloated as he raked in his winnings and set to counting it as the cards were shuffled anew.

“I’ll see you, Tom,” said Cash. Tom stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“No, hold on a minute. I’ll join you.” He gathered up his stake and his bottle, telling the rest of the table they’d have to get along without his money and his company for a while. This announcement appeared not to trouble the others unduly; they ignored him, already intent on the deal of the next hand. As Tom stepped away, another man took his seat at the table.

“How much have you lost?” said Cash.

Tom changed the subject. “Look here,” he said, pointing with his chin at Dove Ed’s table. Alice Morgan, the serving girl, had laid a plate of food before Dove Ed, but rather than return directly to the kitchen she stood over the boy. His face rested in one of her cupped hands, tilted upward to give her a better view of his injuries. Concern etched her features as she brushed aside his hair and took inventory of his scrapes and bruises. Cash and Tom could not hear what words they exchanged, but Tom nudged Cash with his elbow and advanced on the table. He walked with a pronounced limp, favoring his right leg, which he said had been cruelly twisted when the iron door fell upon it. Cash doubted this. But while he had been knocked senseless for a time, his own hurts had been minor and he hesitated to call Tom a liar.

Hobbling up to the table, Tom said, “No kissing on the mouth, darlin. Boy’s still sore where he lost them teeth.”

Dove Ed glared over at Tom, and Alice stepped away from him, color rising in her cheeks. Her voice stayed level as she said, “I’ll bring you somewhat to drink, shall I?”

“Tea?” Dove Ed said.

“Coffee for me,” said Cash. “And another plate of that dinner?”

Alice nodded and left for the kitchen. Tom called after her, “Me too!” She gave no sign that she had heard.

“Hello, Tom,” Dove Ed said as they sat down. “Lose much?”

Tom waved a hand dismissively. “How’s the work coming?”

“Almost done, no thanks to you,” said Cash. “You left two days ago, and we ain’t stopped work since.”

“I wouldn’t of been much use to you with this leg of mine,” Tom said.

Cash raised a skeptical eyebrow, but Dove Ed spoke first. “I know you wouldn’t,” he said.

The edge in his voice drew Cash up short, and he wondered if Tom noticed it. Dove Ed was still a quiet fellow, but since the night at the cabin he had been acting different, showing an unsuspected side of himself, harder, darker. It reminded Cash of the war, and new recruits after the first time a man died before their eyes. Something went out of them then, and something else took its place. A sidelong glance showed Tom pouring a drink, his face giving nothing away. Talk at the table died. Dove Ed applied himself to his meal, Tom drank, and Cash watched the ebb and flow of customers out of the saloon. Alice returned from the kitchen and busied herself arranging plates, coffeepot, cups and saucers, then whirled away without a word.

“Didn’t you want some supper, Tom?” Cash said.

“No, you go on. Meantime guess what I found out.”

His mouth full of potato, Dove Ed said, “Not to draw to an inside straight?”

Cash choked on his coffee. Tom looked at him, then back at Dove Ed with a grin on his lips that didn’t reach his eyes. He said, “You’re a poisonous little cuss, ain’t you?”

Dove Ed used a biscuit to chase gravy around his plate.

“What’s the matter with you two, anyways? I thought we had agreed on the plan. Your plan, if I remember right, Cash.”

“My plan didn’t call for me and Dove Ed to spend life at hard labor while you drank and played poker.”

“I like that,” Tom said. “Old Tom, just boozing and gambling while his friends do all the work, the lazy bastard.”

“Don’t forget ‘losing the only money we got’.”

“It ain’t a loss.”

“You got less than when you started. I’d call that a loss.”

“It’s an investment.” Without leaning in or shifting his eyes, Tom somehow contrived to make his voice softer, conspiratorial. With the hum of conversation and activity in the saloon, no one beyond their table could have heard him. “See Jonas, there at the poker table?”

“The one with unholy luck.”

“He’s a stablehand for the stage line.”

“Then he needs the money more than you do, I guess.”

Tom pulled a disgusted face. “Just shut up a minute. Now suppose I walk up to Jonas and ask him when a stage is due, carrying gold or payroll. Suppose I ask him who’s driving, what kind of guards are aboard, and whatnot? Suppose I offered Jonas ten dollars to tell me. You think he would?”

Cash ate his meal, seeing where this was headed but knowing Tom would have to run out of steam on his own.

“Hell no, he’d have the sheriff on us is what.” Tom poked the tabletop with his index finger for emphasis. “But if lose ten dollars to Jonas, I get the chance for some friendly conversation. It just takes a little longer is all, to steer the topic around where you want it, and you got to listen to a lot of useless nonsense until then. Lord, some people do love to talk.”

“Yeah, Jonas seemed awful gabby.”

“I know his name and where he works. I know he came here from Orem three years ago. I know his wife nags him.” Tom smiled knowingly and tapped the side of his nose. “And I know he leans back in his seat when he’s holding a weak hand, because he wants to look casual.”

Cash sucked the last morsels off his spoon and refilled his coffee cup from the metal pot on the table. Then he said, “Tom, I apologize.”

Dove Ed looked up, and Tom narrowed his eyes in suspicion. Cash said, “I mean it. With information like that, there ain’t a strongbox in the Territory that’s safe from us.”

For a moment Cash thought he might have pushed it too far; Tom’s face froze and color rose from his shirt collar to his cheeks. Cash kept his expression innocent but his body tensed, waiting. Then a chortle erupted from Dove Ed and the moment passed as Tom and Cash laughed as well.

“You son of a bitch,” Tom said, shaking his head and chuckling. He tossed back a quick drink of whiskey and refilled his glass, then added a dollop to Cash’s coffee cup. Dove Ed pulled his tea back and shook his head. Tom and Cash toasted and drank, then Tom took his bottle and stood.

“Better get back to it,” he said.

Cash said, “See if you can’t find out where Jonas plays poker. Then we’ll have it licked.”

They laughed again, and Tom leaned over the table. To Dove Ed he said, “This might take a while yet. I could hang in there longer if I had another of them twenty-dollar coins...or two, if you can spare them.”

This made Cash laugh even harder as Dove Ed solemnly dug into his pocket and produced one of the remaining gold coins and handed it over. Tom bounced it on his palm as

though debating whether to ask for more, but finally he straightened, tucking the coin away. Touching his hat to the others, he turned and made his way back toward the card game, where Jonas the stablehand still sat in rapt attention with his cards.

Cash doused his laughter in his coffee, whistling noiselessly at the bite of the whiskey. “Better count those last two eagles, Dove Ed,” he said. “Tom might of talked you out of them without you noticing.”

He drained his cup to the dregs, then planted both palms on the table and pressed himself to his feet. “We’ve had a meal and a drink,” he said. “That leaves women and cards, and cards can’t dance. Shall we find ourselves a dance hall?”

Dove Ed shook his head without looking up, and fiddled with the creases in his shirtfront, plucking them this way and that. “You go ahead,” he said. “I thought to get some cake.”

“Cake?” Cash couldn’t believe it at first, until he saw Alice Parry emerge from the kitchen, and Dove Ed’s eyes following her. “All right, then. Catch up when you can, but don’t expect me to save a dance for you.”

He headed outside, shrugging into his coat and adjusting his hat. On the porch he turned and looked back into the hazy light of Owens and Price. Near the door, Tom had gotten back into his poker game, his stack of currency much healthier than before. Toward the back, Dove Ed stood talking with Alice. Cash couldn’t see his face, but the girl smiled at Dove Ed and once even laughed at something he said. With them seen to, he started off the porch, listening for the sound of bright music and laughing women to guide him.

His eyes full of light-dazzle, he did not notice Morgan Morgan farther down the boardwalk. From where he stood he could see inside the saloon, directly to the table where they had been sitting.

Chapter 17

It hurt him to smile. Of course, it hurt to do nearly everything: talking, eating, even breathing made the bruises and lumps on his face ache. Dove Ed had gotten used to that over the past few days. Smiling, though, pulled his cheeks and jaw into new shapes and sent lances of pain around his head to the base of his neck, and he realized that it was unfamiliar because he hadn't smiled in so long. Then Alice Morgan, concern etched across her features, asked him what had happened and was he all right. For that, he was prepared to endure this new pain.

Sitting alone at the bar in the Owens and Price Saloon, sipping at a glass of beer from time to time, Dove Ed watched Alice go about her work toting food and drink to the men at the tables and whisking empty plates back to the kitchen. She was good to look at, gliding among the men with her sleeves pushed up and a loose lock of hair, escaped from the ribbon at the back of her head, trailing down the side of her face. She had a flush to her cheeks and a gloss to her skin from the heat of the room or the steam of the kitchen that made her face shine in the lantern light. Best of all, Dove Ed liked her smile, which she never lost. At every table she passed a friendly word, sometimes laughing at a joke or sally, and when she did Dove Ed would smile involuntarily, then wince.

At his poker table near the door, Tom Mulvehill did mortal battle with Jonas the stablehand and ignored everything else around him. Cash Joyner had not returned, presumably because he had found a dancehall and company he enjoyed. Since his departure two hours before, Dove Ed had been sitting at the bar, drinking a little beer, watching Alice, and screwing up his courage to speak to her. As she went by on her many trips to and from the kitchen, she would catch his eye and smile or wink or wave if her hands were not too full. Whenever she did, it robbed him of the power of speech, and he would smile, then wince, then look away.

Behind the bar, John Price smirked at him from time to time, and Dove Ed knew he was being laughed at. He did his best to avoid the barman's gaze, turning to face the room, but that was no better. Whenever someone looked his way, Dove Ed got the feeling they were laughing at him behind their hands as well. At the far side of the room, Alice chatted with a trio of men, travelers off the stagecoach, whiskey or dry goods drummers to judge by their fine clothes. One of them took her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, and Alice touched her other hand to her heart. What she said, he did not hear, but it caused the three men at the table to laugh out loud. A ball of ice formed in Dove Ed's belly. He turned back to the bar and drained the last of his beer, spilling some on his shirt in his haste to finish.

The laughter grew louder, joined now by a shriek from Alice. Dove Ed looked over to see that the traveling man had pulled Alice down onto his lap and wrapped both arms around her. His companions laughed and hooted while he struggled to kiss her through her protests. No one else paid any heed. The coldness in the pit of Dove Ed's stomach vanished in the flare of anger that overtook him now, and without thinking he slammed down his glass and crossed the floor to stand behind the traveling man. John Price hissed something at him, but all of Dove Ed's attention focused on the man and his two friends, who nudged each other and sat up, amusement gone from their faces.

"Mister," Dove Ed said, and the word was like a pebble dropped into a still pond as men nearby fell silent and turned to watch, and the men near them followed suit. The ripple spread until the room held its breath.

"Mister," he said again, louder. Alice and the traveling man craned their heads around to face him, she with a frightened expression, he with an insolent one.

"What do you want?" the man said.

Alice shook her head at Dove Ed. “Don’t,” she said, “It’s all right.”

Dove Ed recalled the moment when he took aim at Jacob Putney and pulled the trigger, knowing that he had to do it or die himself, knowing that it was one or the other of them. This moment was different. He would draw his revolver and shoot the man, not because he had to, but because he hated the sneer on the man’s face and he knew how good it would feel to see it change to fear and then fade into nothing.

“What do you want, boy?” the man said again.

“He wants you to let go of that young lady, please,” said a voice. Dove Ed glanced over to see Morgan Morgan standing in the doorway of the saloon. Morgan had no gun out and had not even raised his voice, but he had the attention of everyone in the room. “Then he wants you to go to your hotel and stay there until the stagecoach leaves tomorrow. And he wants your two friends to go with you.”

The traveling man looked as though he wanted to argue, but his companions got to their feet at once and plucked at his sleeves. He let Alice up and she fled the table for the kitchen, straightening her disarrayed clothing. Each of the three men laid money on the table, then filed out of Owens and Price past the sheriff. “Good night, gentlemen,” he said as they went by. Conversations resumed as the spectators lost interest, and by the time Morgan reached Dove Ed’s side, the noise level had returned to normal.

Dove Ed remained standing next to the now-empty table until Morgan took his elbow and steered him back to the bar, nodding to John Price. “Give the boy a beer,” he said.

“I don’t want a beer.”

Price drew one anyway and put it in front of Dove Ed, who only looked at it.

“There’s no reward on that drummer,” Morgan said, “So it’s a good thing you didn’t shoot him.”

Dove Ed still wished he had. He said, “He was hurting Alice.”

John Price said, “He was roughhousing a little, is all.”

“A lot of fellows do,” Morgan said. “Alice can take care of herself.”

“And if she can’t...” Price said, and raised his right hand from below the bar. In it was a stubby shotgun, the twin barrels cut short.

Dove Ed left the glass of beer untouched and walked away, toward the front door. Morgan called after him, “Steer clear of the hotel tonight, all right?” He avoided Tom Mulvehill’s table as he went out, staring straight ahead with his jaw set. His pulse throbbed in his temples and made his bruises ache again.

Morgan, his back to the bar, watched Dove Ed stalk from the saloon. Behind him, John Price said, “Well done. That could have turned ugly if the damn fool had reached for his gun.”

Morgan nodded.

Price continued, “He’s a different sort of damn fool than his father, I grant, but he’s making up for it by starting early.”

Morgan swiveled his head to stare at the saloonkeeper. He said, “Hugh Williams was never a damn fool, John.”

Price returned his gaze evenly. “I stand corrected,” he said. “Hugh was a lazy, good-for-nothing drunk, but he was far from a fool.”

“He wasn’t born a drunk, either.” Morgan turned to face John Price straight on. The saloonkeeper folded his arms over his chest and thrust out his lower jaw as though bracing for an

attack. “When I met him in Iowa City, Hugh Williams was as devout and sober a Saint as you could hope to find. He and I pushed one of those miserable handcarts hundreds of miles, and when my wife died he pulled my weight as well. He saved my life, John, so I’d take it as a kindness if you would stop calling him names.”

He did not raise his voice or even scowl, but John Price flushed a dark red before he ground out, “I’ll see what’s keeping Alice.” Then he hurried away, through the kitchen door.

The speed with which he had vanished bemused Morgan, who wondered what Price saw in his face or heard in his voice to cause such emotion. To be sure, Morgan recognized that he had been easily angered the last couple of weeks since Dove Ed and his friends arrived in town; he glanced over at the poker table where Tom Mulvehill seemed to be suffering quite a drubbing at the hands of Jonas Stokes and his cronies. Cash Joyner, the third member of the bunch, had found his way to Nell’s whorehouse the way most Gentile travelers seemed to do. Morgan had tailed the tall southerner from Owens and Price to Nell’s, then left him to his vices and returned to take up his vigil outside the saloon.

He couldn’t have said why he was watching Dove Ed and his companions so closely, since they had so far done nothing illegal. Maybe it was due to the encounter with Jacob Putney, and Tom’s glib explanations of that episode. Maybe it was to see how Dove Ed spent his reward, or out of some sense of obligation to Hugh. Whatever the reason, he settled himself in a chair outside the saloon, turned so he could peer through the front window, and kept a dull vigil while Dove Ed and Tom indulged themselves inside. Only the boy’s confrontation with the out-of-town drummers brought Morgan inside at last.

Alice came through the kitchen door, bonnet in hand and her apron missing. John Price followed not far behind and took his place at the bar. Morgan said, "Where you off to, Miss Alice?"

She stopped beside him. "Home," she said. "Mr. Price gave me leave to go."

From her impatient manner, the way she fidgeted with her bonnet, Morgan gathered she was eager to be away, and he had a good idea why. Through the window all evening long he had seen the smiles, the glances and banter that passed between her and Dove Ed. He had witnessed for himself the lengths to which the boy would go for Alice. The thought rankled and put a bite in his words when he said, "If you're going after the Williams boy, remember what I told you. I'd think twice about throwing myself at a lad with friends like his."

Alice glared at him and whisked by. Morgan went after her, searching for the right words, but he knew that he sounded like a scold as he said, "Alice, he was ready to shoot that man, and all because of one little kiss!"

Alice marched straight on toward the door, determination written across her features. "Yes," she said. "He was." She stepped out the door and was gone. Morgan let her go. At the tables around him, men looked away and pretended not to have overheard the exchange, except for one. Over his hand of cards, Tom Mulvehill met Morgan's gaze and held it for an instant, a knowing smile creasing his broad weathered face until a coin clinked into the kitty on the poker table and drew his attention back to his game.

"Don't worry about her," said John Price at Morgan's elbow, making him start a little; in his distraction he had not heard the saloonkeeper approach. "Alice is a sensible girl. She knows you've only her best interests at heart." Price's tone was soothing. Morgan suspected he was trying to make amends for his earlier gaffe.

“I hope you’re right.”

“Besides, what have you to fear from a shaver like that?”

“What do you mean?”

His hands busy with the table he was clearing, Price shrugged with his expression, oblivious to the frown that crossed Morgan’s face.

“With Bill gone, the lass needs a husband.”

“Now, here,” Morgan said. “Bill was my cousin. It’s only right I should look out for his widow!”

Price toted the armload of mugs and glasses to the bar. He set them down and wiped his hands on his apron. “By God, you’re touchy as a bishop today! Anyone can see you’ve got eyes for Alice, and everyone says you’d make her a good match. What the hell’s the matter with that?”

“I’m twice her age, is what!” This drew a scoff from Price; they both knew at least a dozen men in Malad City with young wives, and some with more than one. “Besides, who says I’ve got eyes for Alice?”

“Nobody,” Price smirked. His earlier unease had disappeared and he seemed delighted to have put Morgan off-balance. “But if you don’t then you ought to get a pair of spectacles before you lose your sight altogether.” Hearing this, the men at the nearest table burst into laughter, which Price joined.

“Oh, go to the devil,” Morgan said. He left the saloon with their mirth ringing in his ears.

The cool night air outside the saloon soothed Dove Ed’s hurts and his temper both. He hadn’t really considered going to the hotel after the travelers, and it seemed foolish to think of it

now. The way back to the cave was a long one, easy to miss in the darkness, but he had no desire to search through the saloons and dance halls and bawdy houses for Cash, then try to convince him to leave.

The idea of the bawdy houses gave him pause. Even with the money he had given Cash and Tom, and even with what they had spent on supplies and meals, Dove Ed still had more than twenty dollars of Sheriff Morgan's money left to him. Surely that was enough to...pay for a round? He wasn't certain, but he thought he remembered hearing men speak scornfully of "two-dollar whores". Were five-dollar whores all right, or was it better to get a ten-dollar one? He knew where to find a house; even a Mormon town like Malad City had a cathouse or two. Nell's stood off the main street a few houses beyond the jail. But what did you do once you were inside? The possibilities excited and shamed him, and he started walking in the general direction of Nell's, not knowing what he would do when he got there. Wrapped in such delicious, sinful thoughts, Dove Ed did not notice the sound of running feet until they were almost upon him. He wheeled, scrabbling at his holster in alarm.

A slim form hurried toward him along the darkened street, calling, "Dafydd, wait!" and the clear voice helped him recognize the face and figure of Alice Morgan. She stopped beside him and steadied herself with a hand on his arm as she caught her breath.

"What's wrong?" he said. "Did that fellow come back?"

She shook her head, still winded. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Ain't you working?"

"I told John Price I was too upset. He let me leave early. Where are you walking?"

Dove Ed hoped the gloom of the street hid the blush he felt rising on his face. He said, "Nowhere. Just walking."

Alice said, “Will you walk with me?”

He nodded and she slipped her arm through his. When she started to walk, Dove Ed kept pace without a thought—in fact, all thoughts had fled from his mind. He could think of nothing to say, and his senses constricted to focus on two things: the burning of his face and the pressure of Alice’s arm on his.

She said, “That man in the saloon. Thank you for helping me.”

Dove Ed remained mute, letting her guide their steps and their talk.

“A lot of men grab me or pinch me. They don’t mean anything.”

Dove Ed said, “I worked in a saloon once. Nobody ever grabbed me like that.” Alice laughed, and Dove Ed felt the unfamiliar pain in his jaw that meant he was smiling again.

“John Price puts a stop to it if they get too rough,” Alice said. “What would you have done if that man didn’t let me go?”

“I don’t know.”

They walked a while before Alice said, “The sheriff told me about...what happened at your father’s farm.”

“He did?”

“He was cousin to my husband. Since Bill died, Morgan looks out for me. He said you...shot the man who gave you those.” Alice gestured at the marks on Dove Ed’s face. “He came in the saloon once, you know. Jacob Putney?”

Dove Ed averted his eyes. They were walking up a sloping street, away from the center of town, and the houses were sparser, smaller here. With fewer lights around, they slowed their pace. Alice spoke again, her voice soft.

“When you came over to help me, I was afraid you...I didn’t want you to...”

“I didn’t.” Even his own voice did not seem to be under his control. The words grated on his ears; he hadn’t meant to speak so harshly. Nothing about this night was turning out the way he had hoped.

“I know. But I saw your face, and you were staring at that drummer the same way Jacob Putney looked at me that time. It frightened me.”

“He ought not to have grabbed you.”

Alice released his arm and Dove Ed stopped as though he could not move without her to propel him forward. She turned to him. “I remember when you were little,” she said. “That’s how I knew you when you came back to town, because you looked so much the same. But tonight you were different. You’re not the little boy I knew, are you?”

Her face composed and serious she regarded him, head tilted slightly up, and he realized for the first time that he was taller than she. His heart raced, but his mind remained blank. When he tried to speak, no sound came to his lips; he cleared his throat, tried again, heard his own voice as though from the bottom of a well. “We ought to get back,” he said.

“Back where?”

His head swam. He couldn’t think. “Home?” he said. “Don’t you have to...? I mean, I could walk you...”

Alice smiled. “All right,” she said. She kept her hand clasped on his and turned off the street, pulling Dove Ed along a short path to a small house of rough-sawn, unpainted planks, a one-story affair hardly bigger than a homesteader’s shack. At the door she stopped and said, “Thank you for seeing me home. I don’t know how I would have found my way, I’m sure.” She unlatched the door and stepped halfway through. Dove Ed heard the strike of a match; saw the

flicker of a flame as she lighted a candle on a shelf just inside. When she turned back to him once more he stepped forward and kissed her.

The kiss was brief. Though Alice did not flinch away or make objection, neither did she return the kiss; her lips were warm and pliant under his and did not press back against him. Her hands remained at her sides and Dove Ed had no idea what to do with his own. He kept them half-raised, afraid to touch her, and when he drew back they would not fall but opened and closed as though in a fit. Alice reached out and took his left hand in her right. She wore a sad smile, a pitying smile he thought.

“Oh, Dafydd,” she said.

He looked down at the tips of his boots, hoping the ground beneath would open up and swallow him. When it did not, he said, “I thought...”

“It’s all right.”

“No it ain’t.” He pulled his hand away.

“Dafydd, don’t...I’m just scared, is all.”

“Scared? Of me?”

“Of what might happen to you. Hanging around men like Mulvehill and Joyner.”

“Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Putney nearly killed you! Morgan says it was all because of those men. He says they’re trouble.”

At the mention of the sheriff’s name, Dove Ed’s hackles rose and the edge crept back into his voice. “Oh does he now? What else does Morgan say?” He loaded the name with scorn, turning it into an insult.

Now Alice raised her voice in return. “He says they’ve given no good account of themselves since they came to town. He says they’ve brought with them an iron door they’ve no reason to need. And he says if they’re prospectors, then he’s Joseph Smith!”

“Well, he spews enough bullshit to be the prophet, that’s sure,” said Dove Ed. “You forget that I came with them, giving no good account of myself either!” Alice gaped at his sudden ferocity and Dove Ed plunged on. “We brought that door to guard our claim, so when we strike it rich no one can steal it. And we will strike it rich, and then Morgan Morgan can just go to hell!”

Tears had begun to stream down Alice’s cheeks and she shrank back from his tirade. When he ground to a halt, she said through her soft sobs, “He’s only looking after you.”

“I don’t need looking after. I ain’t a little boy any more, remember?”

“You’re right.” Alice stepped back inside her house, her hand on the edge of the door. She said, “But you sure as hell ain’t a man yet, either, Dafydd.” And with all her might she slammed the door shut in his face. Through the curtain over the small window he could hear her muffled weeping, but in his anger and confusion he could not bring himself to call to her or knock on the door. When the candlelight inside suddenly snuffed out, he turned and strode blindly through the darkness back toward the main street.

How he arrived at the front steps of Nell’s Dance Hall, he could not say; perhaps the music had drawn him like a moth to a lamp, unconsciously and instinctively. Now he stood outside with the music and laughter spilling out through the front door, and he looked at the signs promising “Twenty-Five Cents a Dance” and “Private Lessons” and “Every Hostess a Well-Bred Lady”. He felt in his pocket for his twenty dollars and he thought of Alice and the way her lips felt against his and he stayed where he stood.

From out of the noise and light and haze of the dance hall stepped a woman. With the glare in his eyes, Dove Ed could see only her silhouette, but from her place at the head of the stairs she towered over him, imperious. She said, “Hello there. Won’t you come inside and dance with me?”

Dove Ed shook his head. “I don’t know how to dance.”

“Why then, you can have a private lesson.”

“I don’t want to dance.”

She descended the steps, and Dove Ed saw she was shorter than himself, dressed in a blue dress trimmed with bits of lace. She drew close to him, smelling faintly of sweat and flowers. “Then we’ll find something else to teach you,” she said, and took his hand and led him up the stairs and inside.

Chapter 18

The woman who greeted Tom Mulvehill inside the door of the dancehall wore blowzy finery in gaudy hues, and a face made up to match. Everything about her said *whore*, except her voice, which said, “Care for a dance?”

“No,” said Tom, barely glancing her way. He craned his neck, searching among the dancing couples for Cash Joyner, scowling when he did not catch sight of the man at once. The din of stomping feet and strident music, and the stuffy heat of the room, did not improve his temper. Then, among the throng he spied Cash, energetically whirling a pretty young woman around the floor.

Before he could cross to Cash, the whore sidled up beside him and slipped her arm beneath his. “Then what did you have in mind, mister?” she purred into his ear.

He flinched away, finally aware of her, and yanked his arm free. “I didn’t come to dance, nor screw neither. Piss off!” He waded into the press of dancers, leaving behind him the outraged shrieks of the whore and setting a course to intercept Cash and his tart.

Cash had seen him coming, thanks to the shrill imprecations of the rejected whore, and as Tom approached he grinned and shouted, “I paid for this dance, Tom! No fair cutting in!” Then he spun away for another circuit of the dance floor, his partner’s skirts billowing out from her legs. Tom gritted his teeth and braced himself against the buffeting of the other dancers in the hall, waiting for Cash to come around again. When he did, Tom caught hold of his elbow and dragged him to a halt by main force.

“All right, Tom, if it means that much to you,” the younger man said. A huge smile wreathed Cash’s face, though he puffed mightily from his exertions. “This here is Irene, and I’d appreciate her return when you’re through.” He waved a magnanimous hand in the direction of

his partner, a petite young thing whose dark hair had flown loose from its ribbons. Irene gave no sign of caring who her partner was, and when Tom pulled Cash toward the perimeter of the room she soon found another man to sweep her back into the currents of the dance.

Cash resisted. "What the hell are you doing? I paid a quarter to dance with that girl."

"Then you got overcharged," Tom said. "Let me have ten dollars."

"I ain't got ten dollars."

Tom stared at him. "You mean to say you danced away twenty dollars?"

"Of course not. I had a few drinks and took a couple of dancing lessons first."

"Dancing lessons?"

"That's right." Cash's grin got wider, if that were possible. "Private lessons, if you take my meaning. Oh, and you'll never believe..."

Tom interrupted. "All right, how much do you have left?"

"Wait a minute, what happened to your money? You lose it all to Jonas already?" The black look on Tom's face answered his question well enough. "Then forget it; quit while you're ahead. I've got a few dollars left. Let me buy you a drink. And wait till I tell you..."

"I don't want a drink, I want to get back to that game." Impatience and agitation rolled off him in waves, preventing him from holding still for more than a moment or two. He'd been gone from the poker table maybe fifteen minutes. "Any time now Jonas might decide to call it a night."

"Oh yeah? You think if you lose some more, Jonas will hand over the strongbox? That'll save time."

"Don't get smart with me. Just give me what you've got, and I'll make it last."

“No sir. You’re just chasing your losses now. What has Jonas told you, anyway, that’s worth forty dollars?”

“Everything. Who’s driving, the cargo, how many guards. Only thing he hasn’t told me is when the coach is coming, but I can get it from him if I have a stake. Half what you got, what do you say?”

Cash shook his head. “You’re welcome to a drink. That’s all.” He turned to the bar and gestured to catch the barman’s eye. Tom slouched with his back to the bar, eyes roving back and forth as though searching each dancer and each woman for money he might be able to shake loose. Then his gaze lit on a fellow he recognized and he straightened, an idea forming in his head. Cash tried to hand him a shot of whiskey, but Tom ignored it, instead pointing out the man on the dance floor.

“See that guy?” he said. Cash admitted that he did. “Wait for me out the side door of this place. When I come out with him, just follow my lead.”

“Oh, lord,” Cash said. He tossed off one of the shots of whiskey and set the glass on the bar. “Are we going to make him play cards at gunpoint?”

“Just go.”

Cash drank down the other shot and made his way toward the door. Tom waited for him to leave, then ventured back into the turmoil of the dance, threading his way toward the fellow he recognized as the whiskey drummer who had been run out of Owens and Price. The man was not dancing so much as embracing a woman, both hands squeezing her hindquarters through her dress and his face buried in the nape of her neck. The woman, a brunette taller and older than Cash’s partner, held her head cocked away from his, an expression of profound boredom on her face.

When he got close enough to be heard over the brabble, Tom called, “Hey, mister!” The drummer’s face came up from its explorations, and Tom saw the confusion in his eyes when he realized he was being hailed by someone he didn’t know.

“What do you want?”

Tom tried to look sympathetic and said, “Didn’t I hear the sheriff tell you to stay in the hotel tonight?”

“So what if he did?”

Tom let him have his anger and belligerence for a moment, then dashed it away. “It’s no skin off my nose, but he’s coming this way. I expect he won’t be too happy to find you here.” The panicked drummer released the dancehall girl so abruptly that she staggered a little, then flounced away with a grateful smile for Tom.

“I only came in here for a dance and a drink,” the drummer said.

“That won’t cut no ice with the sheriff. Come on, there’s a side door over here.”

He steered the man by the elbow, casting glances over his shoulder at the front doorway. The drummer, caught up in his urgency, yanked open the side door and fled through it with Tom close on his heels. The light from the doorway cut a dim rectangle into the darkness outside, in which Cash Joyner’s form was visible, lounging against the wall of the dancehall. He pushed himself upright as Tom slammed the door behind them, plunging the alley back into shadows and muting the noises within.

“This way,” Tom said, and led the drummer farther down the alley, in among the sheds and privies. Cash followed, and the salesman hurried to stay close to Tom, nervously looking behind him. So distracted was he that he noticed too late when Tom set his feet in the dirt and

swung around in a wide, low arc, putting all his weight and muscle behind the fist that he then drove deep into the pit of the drummer's gut.

All the wind whooshed out of the man's lungs in one explosive grunt, and he doubled himself over Tom's arm, unable to hold himself upright. Tom took hold of his suit coat and let him fall slowly over on his side, struggling to take a breath. Keeping his head down near the drummer's ear, Tom said, "Sheriff told you to stay in the hotel, didn't he, you son of a bitch?"

The man didn't answer, his belly still too clenched to allow him to speak. Tom looked at Cash, who kept watch up and down the alley for passers-by. Taking hold of the man by his hair, Tom forced his head around to stare directly into his eyes, streaming with tears of pain and helplessness. "Answer me," he said. "Sheriff said to stay in the hotel."

The drummer nodded, gasping, "Uh-huh," the only sounds he could utter.

"But you didn't listen, did you?"

"Uh-uh."

"Well, friend, here in Malad City we take the law pretty seriously. We can jail you, or we can kick the shit out of you, or we can fine you. What do you say?"

"Fuh."

"I didn't quite catch that."

"Fuh-hine," the drummer said, the words catching in his throat as though he were choking on them.

"Fine?" Tom shot Cash a wicked smile. "You mean, fine, we can kick the shit out of you, or fine, we can jail you, or what?"

"Uh-uh! Fuh-fine! Pay!"

“That’s right, you have to pay for your mistake,” Tom said, enjoying himself. Then Cash smacked him on the shoulder with the back of a hand. When Tom scowled at him, Cash returned it and made a hurry-up gesture.

“All right, my deputy agrees; you have been sentenced to pay a fine of…” Tom felt around inside the drummer’s now dust-smirched coat and withdrew a leather billfold. He leafed through the wad of banknotes it held, keeping all but a pair of ten-spots. “…two hundred and forty dollars, and we’ll let you off with time served.” He bent down and tapped the man’s chest with the nearly-empty billfold.

“When you’ve caught your wind, get back to the hotel and stay there. In the morning, see to it you’re on the first stage out of town, understand?” Tom said. The drummer nodded, his breath beginning to come easier now.

“Good,” Tom said, and kicked him in the belly. The drummer curled up again, retching. “And next time, remember what happens when you don’t listen to the sheriff, you hear?” He strode away and Cash followed, the moans of the salesman soon swallowed up by the darkness.

“What the hell was that about?” Cash said when they had put the dancehall a block behind them. “I thought we planned to rob stagecoaches, not roll drunks.”

Tom offered him a sheaf of bills. “You want any of this?”

Cash took the money and stuffed it into his pocket without counting it, tagging along as Tom headed back toward Owens and Price, and presumably toward Jonas and the poker game.

“If you needed money so bad, why didn’t you just get it from Dove Ed?” Cash said.

“He only had but forty dollars,” Tom said, “And besides, he’s off somewhere with that piece from the saloon.”

“No he ain’t. He’s back there,” Cash said, and jerked his head behind them, in the general direction of Nell’s.

Tom stopped short and gaped at Cash.

“I been trying to tell you. He came in just a minute before you did.”

“I didn’t see him.”

Cash sniggered. “I don’t think he was there to dance, Tom.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Right hand to God. He walked in and looked around like a child picking out penny candy at the general store. Before I know it he was headed up to the rooms with a woman in a blue dress.”

“Is that a fact.”

“Hell, Tom, if you’d waited a couple of minutes he probably would have finished. You know how young boys do the first time.”

Tom pushed his hat back on his head and smiled in wonder. “I’ll be damned,” he said. “He had to learn sometime, I guess.”

“They grow up so fast, don’t they?”

They laughed, and Tom said, “Come on, let’s get back to Owens and Price. I aim to get my money back from Jonas.”

“You mean the news about the stage, right?”

“Right.”

Chapter 19

Still nibbling a biscuit from Peck's Hotel Café, Cash stepped out into the mid-morning sunlight, feeling tired but replete. With the satisfied air of a man with nowhere special to go he strolled toward the livery stable. Around him, Malad City went about its business, wagons raising dust from the street, children's voices chanting the alphabet from the schoolhouse, a blacksmith's hammer ringing on the anvil audible from several streets away. Cash drank it all in and smiled to himself. His sense of well-being lasted all the way up to the livery stable, when he stepped inside and saw Tom Mulvehill.

Where a long night of drinking, dancing, and whoring had left Cash feeling refreshed, it seemed to have had the opposite effect on Tom, whose reddened, puffy eyes and sallow complexion did not complement his sour expression. Tom was saddling his horse with the laborious concentration of a man with a thunderous hangover. He didn't look up as Cash entered, and only grunted at Cash's greeting. Cash finished his biscuit and wiped his hands on his shirt front, then went to fetch his own tack. The two of them worked in silence to ready their mounts.

Only when Dove Ed appeared in the doorway did Tom look up and smile, and the smile was not a pleasant one; it put Cash in mind of his old sergeant, a nasty piece of work if ever there was one, getting ready to tear strips out of some luckless private for turning the wrong way during marching drill. Dove Ed knew it, too, walking with his head down, meeting no one's eyes, saying nary a word, simply heading for the tack room where his saddle and gear were stowed. Tom watched him, one corner of his mouth quirked up in a sly half-smile.

"Say, Tom," Cash said, "Did the cards favor you once I left last night?"

A slight hitch in Dove Ed's stride gave the only indication that the boy had heard, but Tom swiveled his head around to frown at Cash.

"What's that?" he said.

Cash led his mount out of its stall, guiding it so that they passed between Tom and Dove Ed, who ducked into the tack room. "I just wondered how things went with old Jonas. Any luck?"

Tom cast a last glance at the doorway to the tack room, then turned a disgusted look upon Cash. "Naw," he said, "the man's got the devil's own luck. Drew to an inside straight against two pair showing. He filled it and I didn't. I'd swear he was cheating but I couldn't see how."

"Happens that way sometimes," said Cash. "But I really wondered if Jonas said anything interesting, anything we can use?"

Dove Ed emerged from the back room toting his tack and set to work saddling his own horse, his head still hung low. Cash and Tom walked theirs out of the stable into the street. Tom said, "He did, which is why I ain't shot him for a cheat yet," and swung up into the saddle. Cash did likewise and turned so his roan faced up the street, pointing the way out of town.

"Not yet," Tom said. "Got a stop to make at the Mercantile first."

"You got money left to spend? I thought you said Jonas won it all."

Tom glared, then yelled into the livery stable, "Hurry up, boy! You spent the night in the saddle, didn't you? Another ride ain't gonna hurt none!"

Cash grinned behind his hand, imagining Dove Ed's blush. To spare the boy he said, "Come on, we can go to the Mercantile while he farts around."

They walked the horses down to the big brick-walled Mercantile building, hitched them to the rail and went inside. The store smelled of clean-swept floors, leather goods, new rope and

polish. Cash tagged along behind Tom as he browsed through the merchandise, handing Cash an odd assortment of sundries: shirts, cheap dungarees, hats and caps, shovel handles, a paintbrush and a small tin of black paint. Cash toted it all up to the counter, where the clerk began to reckon up the cost on a tablet. Tom added boxes of ammunition and bags of flour, sugar and coffee as well. It all amounted to a tidy sum for things that Cash could see little need for, excepting the shells and food. Tom paid the clerk from the roll of bills in his pocket, which looked a lot smaller than it had when they took it from the drummer.

Outside, Dove Ed rode up to them as they stuffed their saddlebags with the new purchases, and they all rode along the main street heading north, out of town. None of them noticed Morgan, standing on the sidewalk before the marshal's office and watching them go.

It was a pleasant day to be horseback, but Dove Ed gave scant attention to his surroundings, letting his horse trail after the others. Instead he alternated between anger at his parting from Alice last night, shame and excitement at how the night had turned out, and irritation at Tom's crude teasing, which began perhaps a mile out of Malad.

"Cash tells me you took some dancing lessons," Tom said as his horse dropped back to come even with Dove Ed's. "What did you learn? Waltz? Two-step? Virginia reel?"

Dove Ed stared ahead, feeling his face flush.

"Was that her name? Virginia? And you reeled around with her, did you, boy?" Tom cackled.

In fact, the woman with the blue dress had said he should call her Gwen and asked for his, then surprised him by pronouncing it properly, "Duv-eth," the way Welshmen, and Alice, did. "Why don't you get out of your boots and that belt, Dafydd?" she said, reaching behind her

to undo the buttons of her dress. Feeling like a clumsy lout, Dove Ed undid his gunbelt and scuffed off his boots, his eyes never leaving Gwen as the blue dress slipped to the floor, leaving her in brief underclothes. He couldn't catch his breath. The little room felt hot and close, and he remained rooted in place, watching as she pulled back the rumpled sheets from the swaybacked iron bedstead, patting the mattress in invitation.

She saw his hesitation and cocked her head toward him, a smile on her lips. "Oh, my dear," she said. "This is your first lesson, isn't it?" She sat on the edge of the bed, her brown hair just brushing her bare shoulders, and extended one stockinged leg toward him. "Why don't you help me off with my shoes, love?"

He fumbled with the buttons on her shoes, his fingers thick as fence rails, and when both shoes were off, she leaned forward and took him by the waist. She undid his belt and his trousers and slid them down his legs, looking up at him with a mischievous smile. He noticed that her eyes were a soft brown as well before she closed them and took him into her mouth. He had never heard or even thought of such a thing, and at the unexpected warmth and pressure he felt himself clench and unclench and bend over double, gasping as she held him tight, the sensation going on and on and his legs folding up until she released him and he collapsed forward onto the bed, quivering and twitching.

Gwen pressed herself against him, her arm around his shoulders, and breathed into his ear, "That's lesson one, love. When you've caught your breath I'll give you lesson two..."

The rest of the night flew by in a blur of straining limbs, round white flesh and soft cries of pleasure, ending only as dawn lightened the eastern windows. Gwen rose from the bed and pulled on her underthings, then leaned over the bed to kiss Dove Ed on his cheek. "You're a fine dancer, love, but it's time I left you."

He lifted his face from the sweat-damp pillow. "Do you have to?"

"Aye. But if you come back, we'll dance again." She grinned and stroked his hair. "From the sounds, I'd say the dance hall is closed now, so you sleep a while, if you've a mind to." The woman went over to the chair where Dove Ed had piled his clothes and began searching through his trouser pockets. Dove Ed sat up, stopping short when he realized that he wore nothing under the sheet.

"What are you doing?"

She withdrew her hand, showing him one of the twenty-dollar gold pieces. "Just looking for a memento, love," she said. "Something to remember you by." And with that, she slipped out the door.

For some reason as he lay there, his thoughts drifted to Alice and their parting the night before. He wished it had been her in the bed rather than Gwen, but the very idea made Dove Ed flush with shame. Did he truly want her that way, or was there something more to it?

Tom's low whistle brought Dove Ed back from his reverie. "The boy's got it bad, Cash," he said. "Had his first taste and can't stop dreaming about it."

"Neither can I, if it comes to that," Cash said.

"What was it like?" Dove Ed said.

"What?"

"Your first time. What was it like?"

Caught up short, Cash glanced over at Tom, who laughed at him. "Go on, then," he said. "I will if you will."

Dove Ed couldn't tell for sure, through the tan, but it seemed to him that Cash's neck got redder. "Well, why don't you then?" said Cash. "Tell us about your first one, Tom."

“She was fat,” said Tom. “I remember that. Near as big around as she was tall. Her name was Betty—Betty the Barrel, they called her, and getting on her was like draping yourself over an upside down cauldron!” He mimed hugging an enormous ball, spreading his arms wide and hunching his back.

“Then why would you?” Cash said. He and Dove Ed stared at Tom, open-mouthed.

“Because she let me, of course!” They all laughed, and Tom said, “Plus I couldn’t afford none of the others, them first few times.”

“Wait, you went to her more than once?”

“I was cleaning stalls in a livery stable for a dollar a week. If I wanted a piece, I couldn’t be choosy.” Cash shook his head at the idea. Tom said, “Fess up, now, boy. What was your first?”

Cash took off his hat and ran the fingers of his other hand through his hair. He resettled his hat and mumbled, “I don’t remember.”

“The hell you don’t! Out with it,” Tom said.

Cash shrugged. “I don’t. After army training, they give us our pay and two days leave, and I went into town with my company. On the second day I woke up in a bed with two women, no money, and no idea how I came to be there or who they were.”

Tom laughed so long and hard that he began to cough, tears streaming from his eyes. Dove Ed and Cash joined him, less uproariously, and when Tom’s mirth subsided Cash started him up again, saying, “I went back every week until we marched out, trying to recall, but I never did find out their names.”

They rode on, the quiet broken by occasional outbursts from Tom as he thought back on Cash's tale. Once, when Tom dismounted to urinate, Dove Ed leaned over and murmured to Cash, "I don't reckon I'll go back."

"To Nell's? Or to town?"

"Nell's."

Cash raised his eyebrows. "Why not?"

His eyes downcast, Dove Ed said, "I spent too much money last night. Twenty dollars."

"Hell, Dove Ed, that's what every man thinks coming out of a whorehouse. Did you pay it willing, or did she steal it?"

Dove Ed thought about it. Gwen hadn't made a secret of it. "No, it was willing."

"Then it was worth it. A little expensive, maybe, but worth it." Fifty feet away, Tom tucked himself away and buttoned his trousers. "You ought not to mention that to Tom, though," Cash said.

"No."

Cash and Dove Ed resumed their pace, leaving Tom to climb back into his saddle and catch up, but before he reached them Dove Ed said, "I don't reckon I'll go back."

Chapter 20

The stage from Virginia City was late, so Mart Goddard sat with his cup of coffee on the porch of Murphy's Station to wait. He rocked his chair on two legs to sit with his back against the rough log wall and propped his feet on the old nail keg that served as a table, watching the business of the station go on without him in the late May sunshine.

Murphy's served as a home station for the Wells Fargo stage line, so it more closely resembled a small village than anything else. In the main building where Goddard lounged, a cook prepared meals, served drinks, sold sundries and even rented beds for travelers. Two hostlers, a blacksmith, and an apprentice occupied the cluster of buildings next door, which adjoined a corral that held the remuda of horses to pull the coaches. Goddard could see the team of six the hostlers had prepared in anticipation of today's coach, already in their tack so no time would be wasted with the change. The horses had been lively two hours ago, but they had settled down during the delay and stood tethered to the hitching post, swishing their tails against the flies. If the coach didn't arrive soon, Goddard thought, Weldon would have to cut out a new team altogether; these were losing their condition standing idle in the sun.

Directly across from him, the front door of the Murphy house opened and a pretty, dark-haired woman emerged, looking up the road for any sign of the stage. Goddard raised his cup to his lips to hide his smile; he enjoyed gazing upon Catherine Murphy, but she would brook no impropriety, not from himself or anyone. Despite the hardships visited on her, Catherine held herself with pride and dignity, and even managed to keep the station running smoothly, so she was not to be trifled with. As Goddard watched, she went to the toll house at the end of the bridge where a line of freight wagons headed north had drawn up to pay their tolls. From here he could not read the sign stating the costs, but Goddard knew it by heart. A dollar for teams of two

hauling wagons; a quarter for each additional team, pack animal, or saddle animal; and five cents for each head of loose stock to cross the Portneuf River. Stagecoaches were not charged, of course. Their tolls were included in the mail contracts and paid each year as a lump sum.

Goddard frowned at the freight wagons. They belonged to B.F. White, or he missed his guess, and B.F. White was responsible for much of Catherine Murphy's hardship. The tolls, for example, had been reduced by more than half at the last meeting of the commissioners, and the original proposal had been White's. To Goddard's mind, what occurred as a result of that proposal was also laid to White's account, even if it was Morgan who made Catherine Murphy a widow.

Their business concluded, the train of wagons groaned into motion again, raising dust as they plodded northward, taking provisions and supplies to the gold fields and the boomtowns. The heavy wagons each needed at least two teams to haul them, so with the change in tolls B.F. White saved almost two dollars per wagon, a significant amount that went nowhere but into White's pocket. Goddard watched them go and saw, far ahead of them, another plume of dust, this one approaching. In his concentration, he did not hear Catherine Murphy until she stepped onto the porch and greeted him, "Good day, Mr. Goddard."

Goddard arose, the chair rocking forward in such haste that he spilled coffee down the front of his shirt. Never that clean to begin with, his efforts to wipe it off only spread the stain farther, but at least the coffee had cooled enough that he was not burned. He lifted his hat and nodded, saying, "Stage is comin', Ms. Murphy. See there?"

She followed his pointing finger until she spied the dust cloud, little more than a smudge far up the valley, perhaps an hour's drive away. "It should have been here more than two hours

past,” she said. “I hope they haven’t had any trouble.” In addition to collecting tolls, she served as the station agent for the stagecoach line, and she liked to see the coaches running smoothly.

“In that case, we’d best hope Baldy Green ain’t drivin’,” Goddard joked. Baldy Green was known as the unluckiest man ever to drive for Wells Fargo; he had been held up by road agents no less than three times, and shot in the arm once. There were shotgun messengers who refused to ride with him for that very reason. Catherine Murphy smiled at the small joke, but the smile did not touch her eyes and soon faded away.

Mart Goddard was a voluble man at the best of times. Conversation was hard to come by when you spent the better part of each week on the rumbling, swaying seat of a Concord coach, half-choked by dust and deafened by the beat of hooves and the rattle of wheels, so he made up for it by saying whatever came into his head whenever there was enough silence. But in the presence of this pretty, self-possessed young widow, Goddard found himself with nothing to say. Instead, they both stood and watched the freight wagons recede and the Virginia City coach draw closer.

Baldy Green was not the driver, as it turned out. When the coach entered the station yard Goddard recognized Jim Boyle on the driver’s bench, with Dan Curley riding shotgun messenger beside him. Goddard grunted unhappily; Dan Curley was much given to chewing tobacco and whistling at the same time, with messy results that often affected those sitting nearby. While that might be just tolerable for short periods, it became a misery during a twenty-four hour drive. Goddard imagined he could see the spots bedecking Jim Boyle’s right sleeve, even from this distance. The coach itself seemed none the worse for the journey.

Boyle reined in his team of six in front of the corral, and the hostlers emerged from the shade of the stables to begin swapping out the lathered horses for fresh. Curley set down his shotgun and stretched, working the kinks out of his back, while Boyle dismounted and opened the door for the passengers. Atop the roof, a man extricated himself from the baggage and clambered to the ground, a Spencer repeating carbine in his fist, as the cramped and dusty passengers emerged from the confines of the coach. Goddard counted four men and two women brushing at their clothes and gazing about themselves.

“This is Murphy’s Station, last chance for a meal before Malad City,” said Jim Boyle to the crowd at large. “Stage departs in half an hour.” The passengers shuffled toward the stout log station building. Long journeys in a Concord coach took a good deal of endurance and fortitude on the part of the passengers, who had to spend hours at a time in a stuffy, swaying wooden box, pressed knee to knee with their fellows. Leather curtains were the only protection from the elements, so dust filtered in constantly along with cold, heat, or rain, depending on the weather. The drivers kept the coach moving through the night, steering by lamplight, which forced those inside to get what sleep they could sitting up. That still put them ahead of anyone who rode on the driver’s bench, or worse still, on the roof.

From long experience, Goddard sized up the half-dozen people entering Murphy’s Station. The older man with the leather satchel in hand looked to be a doctor, perhaps an itinerant sawbones returning from making the rounds of far-flung gold camps. The young couple who still smiled at each other after God-knew-how-long of a trip, they had to be newlyweds, for everyone else had spread out, taking advantage of the open space. The older woman, traveling alone, was a puzzle; maybe a schoolteacher or missionary or the like. And the two thickset fellows with heavy

carpetbags and wary expressions would be couriers, carrying quantities of gold and counting on the pistols at their hips to keep it safe rather than relying on the Wells Fargo strongbox.

“Afternoon, Jim,” Goddard called as he approached. “What kept you? Seen any trouble on the road?”

Jim Boyle hawked and spat, clearing dust from his mouth and throat before answering. “None to speak of. Rains washed acrost some parts of the road north of Yampatch, slowed us down a little, is all.” He shook Goddard’s outstretched hand, then brushed at hardened flecks of mud on his right arm, shooting Dan Curley a black look as he did. “By Christ, how does that old boy do it? I’ve got more road in my mouth than under my feet, but he manages to work up a froth and spray it over me the last forty miles!”

Curley, who had heard these complaints before, gave a tobacco-stained grin and went into the station for a drink and a meal, holding the door open for Catherine Murphy as she exited.

“Afternoon, Miz Murphy,” said Boyle.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Boyle.” Catherine carried a tablet and a sheaf of papers with her, documents for the stagecoach line. Making occasional notes with a pencil, she gave the coach a quick but thorough inspection as the hostlers hitched the fresh horses into the traces, then turned to Boyle and said, “The strongbox, if you please?”

Boyle grunted as he climbed back up to the driver’s bench, where the green-painted Wells Fargo strongbox sat, bolted beneath the seat. Catherine handed up a ring of keys and Boyle opened the padlock on the box. He offered his hand to her and assisted her up so she could inspect the contents of the box. She noted these on her tablet and said, “Mr. Goddard?”

Goddard stood on the front wheel of the coach and looked into the box, which held enough gold to make him a rich man several times over. Catherine Murphy pointed out the numbers stamped into seventeen bars of gold bullion and counted them carefully. In the past, gold shipments had been known to come up missing between lading and delivery; since then, agents were expected to record what gold passed through their stations. Should the tally change between one station and another, strong questions would be asked of all involved.

In the scant space not occupied by the gold bars, the strongbox also held bundled mail and a few small sacks of gold dust, but the dully gleaming bars constituted the bulk of the treasure. Goddard had no head for figures, but he reckoned that just one bar would be enough for him to live comfortably the rest of his life. No wonder, then, that drivers or guards might be tempted into thievery, when they would earn only a few dollars to drive hundreds of miles, with the possibility of robbery or mishap around every bend in the road. But those drivers or guards who took what didn't belong to them were always found out and wound up at the end of a rope or locked away. Goddard figured he'd rather live a long life at a smaller wage.

The count complete, Boyle slammed the lid on the strongbox and relocked it. "Well, Mart," he said, "It's all yours now." He jumped to the ground, gave his arm to Catherine Murphy to help her down, then touched the brim of his hat and strode off toward the station.

Half an hour later, with the passengers back aboard and Dan Curley beside him on the bench, Mart Goddard flicked the reins over the backs of the team, leaning forward against the lurch as the team broke into a walk, then a trot. He steered the coach over the bridge heading south towards Malad City, twenty-five miles distant. With the Portneuf River behind them, he

urged the horses to greater speed with the aim of making up for lost time. He grimaced as Dan Curley began to whistle.

The road south ran chiefly along the floor of a gentle valley, flanked on the east by Sedgwick Peak and on the west by Old Tom Mountain. Small creeks meandered across the scrubland where only the hardiest ranchers or farmers built their spreads. Mart Goddard knew the path of every streambed, the location of every marshy hole, and slowed the team to navigate these hazards. Otherwise he allowed the horses their heads, and the coach fairly flew down the well-traveled road, rattling over the hard-baked dirt and bouncing over the occasional rut. The thick leather straps, doubled and redoubled under the body of the coach, absorbed much of the sharp jounces and turned it into a greasy, swaying motion. After so many years driving, Goddard barely felt it anymore, but those new to it often became seasick from the ride.

The day was fine, with high thin clouds and sun that warmed the coach and the men atop it and made them grateful for the breeze of their passage. After dusk the ride might turn chill, but for now it was pleasant to ride through the grass and sagebrush. The passengers had rolled up the leather curtains to let the air in, and to gaze about the land as they passed, startling grouse and killdeer into flight and causing jackrabbits to turn tail and bound away. Overhead, hawks wheeled in great circles, sometimes plunging to strike at a mouse or vole. Mule deer lifted their heads in alarm then resumed their browsing through the undergrowth. Once, splashing through a stream, they surprised a heron which launched its ungainly body and flew parallel to their course for several seconds before veering away to follow the creek.

As a result of their late start, the sun was lowering toward Elkhorn Peak in the west as Oxford Peak rose ahead of the coach. The ground began to slope up as the road aimed for the gap between the two mountains, and the horses' stride faltered before settling into a new rhythm, one better suited to the long incline. Goddard thought ahead, envisioning the road: over the next couple of miles it rose three to four hundred feet as the mountain slopes closed in on both sides. Just below Malad Summit, the highest point on the road, they would change horses at a line station—an outpost just large enough to hold several teams, with a cabin for the man who cared for them. There the passengers might use the privy and take a drink of water, but the stop lasted only long enough to change out the winded beasts before continuing the journey.

As the coach slowed on the slight grade, Dan Curley and Charlie Parks sat a little taller in their perches and shifted their weapons closer to their shoulders. It was at times like these that stagecoaches were most vulnerable, with tired horses, an uphill climb, and narrow canyon walls on either side of the road. One such location near Bannack, Montana, had earned the name Robbers Roost for the sheer number of holdups that had occurred in its confines; Goddard had been robbed there once himself. Today, with sundown closing in, he felt the same sense of dread he had felt then.

“If we’re going to have trouble,” he called to Dan and Charlie, “It’ll be at that bend a couple miles yonder. Can’t see what’s coming up, and they can perch on those rocks above us and draw down on our heads. We’ll be safe till then.”

As it happened, Mart Goddard was badly mistaken.

Chapter 21

The ambush, when it came, was still more than a mile distant from the overhanging rocks that had caught Mart Goddard's attention. A pair of tree trunks lay athwart the road and a man knelt behind them, aiming a rifle at Goddard and Curley. Although the canyon floor still stretched fairly wide, at this location the roadbed was raised several feet and surrounded by thick underbrush close on either side. Should Goddard attempt to turn the coach, he risked overturning it or felling some of his team. He reined in the horses.

"What are you doing, Mart?" said Dan Curley beside him. The sight of the roadblock had caused him to quit whistling, at least. "If we stop we're sitting ducks! Ride right over him and I'll give him a taste of buckshot as we pass!"

"Don't be a fool, Dan. If I take her over those tree trunks we'll break a wheel at least, if not worse." Goddard leaned back in his seat, hauling on the big brake lever while he slowed the horses. Stopping a laden Concord coach took time and care; if he snubbed the horses too short, the coach itself might smash into them.

As they slowed, Goddard, Curley, and Parks looked around them and saw more cause for concern. In the thick sage bushes, men moved. Goddard counted at least three on the left side, plus the man out front. "Looks like three over here," Parks called from the roof of the coach, aiming his rifle to the right side.

"I saw three," Curley confirmed. He had his shotgun raised to his shoulder and swung it between targets.

Goddard nodded, keeping his attention on his task. Six, maybe seven men pointing rifles at them from concealment was long odds. He hoped no one would do anything rash. Dan Curley

would keep his head, but the kid on the roof behind him was an unknown quantity. “Parks,” he said, “Don’t you shoot if you don’t have to.”

“How will I know if I have to?” The young man sounded strained, but still collected.

“You’ll know,” Goddard said.

The road agent at the roadblock rose from behind the scant cover of the logs, his rifle at the ready. Goddard thought it was aimed at Curley, but at such a distance it would take only a heartbeat to switch targets. He took care to hold his hands up and away from his gunbelt. Curley aimed back at the man, and Goddard heard Parks’ shallow, measured breathing behind him. The road agent wore a long duster coat that covered his clothes, a hat with a wide brim, and his face was coated with something black, maybe coal soot.

“Throw down them guns,” the man said. His voice was tight with warning. On either side of the coach, Goddard heard the crackle of brush as men stepped into the open. A quick glance showed him that they were similarly attired to the first man, wearing dusters, hats, and black smudge on their faces, and they also bore long guns. Beyond them, still hidden in the thickets, Goddard made out the shapes of more men, the black barrels of their weapons poking out towards him. There could be a dozen of them there, all ready to fire if anyone made the wrong play.

“Throw down them guns, I said.” The leader approached, coming past the horses on the left side but keeping his rifle aimed at Curley.

“Best do as he says,” came a voice from the right side of the coach, one of the men who had stepped out of cover. “We don’t want to hurt anyone, but we will if we have to.”

Goddard could feel Curley and Parks looking at him to make the decision, but the truth was he had already made it, the minute he saw the roadblock.

“Throw down your guns, boys,” he said.

Inside, Andrew McCausland looked up from his book as he felt the coach begin to slow. He glanced around, seeing nothing but scrubland outside the windows. The mountain ridges seemed closer than they had an hour ago when last he looked, but he saw no sign of a town or station. The other passengers sat, dozing or engrossed in their own reading. McCausland kicked the boots of the man across from him, his friend and partner Barney Dougherty, who slouched with his hat pulled down over his eyes. Barney started, then pulled his hat up and stared at McCausland.

“We’re stopping,” he said.

“Can you see ahead?” McCausland said. His seat faced the rear; Barney faced forward. Both sat by the windows on the right side of the coach, but Barney’s position gave him a better view of anything approaching on that side. He leaned slightly to gaze out the window. McCausland saw him go tense.

“Oh, shit,” Barney said.

His soft exclamation caused the others in the coach to stir and look his way. To Barney’s left sat the McGees, a young couple, newly married, whose whisperings and hand-holding had already annoyed McCausland no end. On McCausland’s right was Dr. Heath, an older gentleman and a drinker who had offered a sip from his flask to anyone who wanted one, then finished it

himself and went to sleep. He refilled it at home stations, but it never lasted long. And beyond him sat a Miss Susan Hodgen, a middle-aged woman with a pinched, disapproving face, although that could have come from the discomfort of the ride. None of them were ideal traveling companions; for that matter, neither was Barney himself, whose long legs had always seemed to entangle themselves with McCausland's.

Right now, neither the other passengers nor Barney's feet concerned him. "What is it?" he asked.

Barney had his hand on his pistol. "There's some fellows out there pointing rifles at the driver. I see some in the bushes, too."

A frightened gasp came from young Mrs. McGee and she shrank against her husband, who looked pale as he patted her shoulder. Miss Hodgen said nothing, but her expression became even more constricted, if that were possible. Dr. Heath grunted and sat up, expelling a gust of whiskey-scented air into the cabin. "Nothing to fear, nothing to fear," he said. "These men never want more than the contents of the express box. Once they get it, they'll be on their way and so will we, I assure you. Just sit quietly. If we make a fuss, we'll only draw attention to ourselves."

McCausland exchanged knowing glances with Barney. The doctor might be right, or he might just be trying to keep the women from getting frightened, but it was possible the road agents wanted more than the strongbox. If they looked into the coach, they might decide that a young bride and a spinster were exactly the sort of company they craved, and Thomas McGee might turn out to be the sort of fool who would resist. Worse yet, suppose the gang decided to search each passenger, or the luggage? The idea made McCausland break out in a sweat.

For in their bags and on their persons, Andrew McCausland and Barney Dougherty had secreted bags of gold dust: some their own but most belonging to small-time gold panners around Virginia City who sought to ship their treasure south without paying the exorbitant fees charged by Wells Fargo. “The stagecoach company takes a percentage of any gold, dust, specie or bullion, you transport on their line,” McCausland had pointed out to any prospector who would listen. “So right from the start, you’re behind on the deal. And who’s to say if your dust will even arrive at its destination? Why, it might not even get past Robber’s Roost. Do you know what the drivers are told to do if there’s a holdup? Surrender the strongbox, of course!” Instead, he proposed to carry their gold unbeknownst to the stagecoach line, for a much smaller percentage than Wells Fargo charged, guarded personally by himself and Barney, men they knew and could trust.

As a prospector and miner, Andrew McCausland had been an abject failure, but he had always been good at convincing people to back his schemes, and this was no exception. In fact, so many prospectors had bought in on this expedition that there was more gold dust than one man could carry without raising suspicion from the stage line agent. He and Barney were each able to hide several bags of dust in their luggage, but by the time their valises weighed a hundred pounds apiece, there were still half again as many bags of dust remaining.

“It’s too bad we can’t hide it in a money belt,” Barney had said.

McCausland had hired a tailor to make broad canvas pouches that tied around the waist. With the pouches stuffed full, he and Barney boarded the southbound coach looking as though they had put on fifty extra pounds...which in a way, they had. The pouches withstood casual examination, but turned out to have unexpected shortcomings. After the first few hours, the

pouches became soaked with sweat and dragged at their trousers. The constant rubbing of the pouches chafed the skin as well. McCausland and Barney fidgeted in their seats, looking for a comfortable position. At every stage station, they went into the jakes to adjust the fit of their canvas “bellies”, and in between they tried to console themselves with the thought that a little discomfort was a small price to pay for the fortunes they carried, fortunes that belonged partly to themselves.

But now the stagecoach lurched to a halt, throwing the passengers against their seats and each other. Men’s voices came from outside, too far to make out until a voice nearly by McCausland’s ear called, “Best do as he says. We don’t want to hurt anyone, but we will if we have to.”

They all heard the driver, a sun-dried, hunched man named Goddard, respond, “Throw down your guns, boys,” followed by indistinct thumping noises that could only be firearms landing on the ground.

“Now the express box,” someone ordered. They heard the sound of movement over their heads, boots scuffing on the roof and the driver’s perch. The coach rocked on its leather sling as someone climbed aboard.

McCausland drew his revolver from its holster, holding below the windowsill so no one outside would be able to see it from the ground. Barney did the same, still peering out the window.

“Put those away,” said Dr. Heath. “This is no time for dime-novel heroics. You are risking the safety of everyone in this carriage, sir!”

“Shut up,” said McCausland. “You said they wouldn’t bother searching the passengers, but if they do, I plan to bother them right back. Does anyone else have a weapon on them?”

“Of course not,” said Heath. “I am a man of medicine, not...”

“Shut up. How about you, Mr. McGee?” said McCausland. Dr. Heath spluttered into silence, and McGee nodded and took out a small, shiny pocket pistol with mother-of-pearl grips, so new that McCausland doubted it had ever been fired.

McGee flushed when McCausland met his eyes. “I bought it for the trip,” he said. “To defend oursel...to defend Kate.” His wife clutched at his arm and hid her eyes in his shoulder. Across from them, Ms. Podgen reached into her small handbag and produced a two-shot derringer that looked more workmanlike than McGee’s fancy pistol.

To their surprised expressions she replied in a didactic tone, “I’m a woman traveling alone,” as if that explained everything, and perhaps it did.

Dr. Heath found his voice again. “You don’t expect us to fight these men, do you, two overweight gunmen, two women, and two gentlemen? We won’t stand a chance!”

McCausland turned from the window, furious. “By God, Doctor, if you don’t shut your mouth...” Heath wasn’t looking at him, but at the gun in his hand, which he had pointed at the fat old boozehound without knowing it. Whether it was the gun or his warning, Heath closed his mouth with a snap, shrinking back from McCausland and crowding Ms. Hodgen.

Without warning, a pair of gunshots roared from the driver’s seat. Kate McGee screamed and McCausland spun back to the window, firing his revolver.

“Now the express box,” ordered the head bandit, once Goddard and his men discarded their guns.

“I can’t,” Goddard said. “It’s bolted in place.”

The head bandit, the one who had stopped the stage, motioned Goddard and Curley to back away from the box, onto the roof of the coach. Then he clambered aboard himself to examine the strongbox. From their perch atop the coach, Goddard could see the gunmen on either side of the road, those in the brush and the two who had come forward. These two kept their weapons pointed toward the coach, but their attention was fixed on the leader as he crouched over the green-painted box.

“Where’s the key?” he said, yanking at the padlock.

“Station managers have a key,” Goddard said. “I don’t.” The man nodded and drew a revolver from beneath his duster. Stepping to one side, he aimed carefully at the padlock. Goddard turned his face away as he fired once, twice, and the world erupted in noise and confusion all around him.

From inside the coach, a woman screamed and two more gunshots resounded, then two more. The bandit leader hunched in surprise before leaping from the driver’s perch, firing his pistol as he did. Goddard threw himself down on the roof of the coach, trying to make himself small among the baggage there and curling his arms over his head. Dan Curley also dropped down beside him, and Charlie Parks disappeared from view, either hit or fled. The two bandits by the roadside opened fire with their long guns, and Goddard heard both rifle reports and shotgun blasts, interspersed with pistol fire from the coach.

For what seemed like forever, Goddard huddled among the luggage, hearing yells and screams, feeling the impacts of bullets as they struck the coach nearby. His throat went dry, then raw, as he shouted, “Stop! Stop!” over and over at the top of his voice. A horse shrieked in pain and the coach jerked, nearly dislodging Goddard from his precarious nest. Something punched him in the upper arm, hard, and the limb went numb.

The shots stopped. The echoes rebounded from the hillsides, then they too died away. In the deafening silence, Goddard heard the horses stamping and plunging in fear, causing the coach to twist and roll, back and forth. Close by, a man groaned. He raised his head and peered cautiously from between his curled arms; the left one did not want to bend and was beginning to throb.

Acrid, choking clouds of black powder smoke floated all around the stagecoach, wafting slowly away on the slight breeze. Goddard strained to see through the miasma, his eyes watering as it stung them. Somewhere in the cloud a man said, “God damn it!” His shape became visible as the smoke thinned: one of the road agents, just now lowering his rifle.

Behind Goddard, Dan Curley shifted, rolled over, and looked around. “Mart?” he said. “Mart? You all right?”

“I’m fine,” Goddard said, and his left shoulder sent a bolt of pain all the way through to his toes. He clapped a hand to it and the hand came away wet with blood.

Curley stripped off his bandanna and pressed it into Goddard’s hand. “Hold this on it, Mart.”

Clutching the wound in his shoulder, Goddard sat up, assisted by Curley. To the left side of the coach he saw a bandit, his pistol drawn, standing like a statue. To the right side he saw two bandits; one was still pointing his rifle at the coach, while the other hung onto the harness of the lead offside horse, trying to calm it and thus settle the others. The horse's harness mate was down, crying piteously, but the others seemed to have taken no hurt.

"You in the coach!" yelled the bandit with the rifle. "You hear me in there?"

A man responded. "We hear you! Don't shoot! We hear you!"

"Throw out your weapons! Else we'll kill everyone in there, and everyone out here as well!"

Below him, Goddard could hear the murmur of voices. With a voice trained to be heard over the clamor of galloping horses, he yelled, "Do as he says, you damned fools, or they'll start shooting again!" The voices stopped, and a moment later two pistols sailed out the window toward the bandit with the rifle, landing in the brush with a crackle. Similar noises came from the other side of the coach.

"Now open the doors and come out of there!" ordered the bandit with the rifle.

At the head of the team, the second bandit had settled the horses enough that they would not try to bolt, though they still stamped nervously. The bandit drew a hunting knife from his belt and cut the harness of the injured horse so that it no longer dragged on the singletree. Then he set about cutting free the other horses, holding their bridles so they would not bolt. The door of the coach swung open.

"Keep your hands raised," said the bandit with the rifle. "Come on out."

The first person out was a thickset man in a disheveled suit: one of the couriers, Goddard reckoned. He stepped forward as though dazed and made no effort to turn and help the others as they disembarked. Next came the newlywed couple, the husband first. Once on the ground he turned back to aid his wife and Goddard saw that he was speckled with blood, although he moved well enough. His wife all but fell from the coach into her husband's arms. She was splattered with gore even more liberally than he, and Goddard swore, thinking she had been shot. But her husband raised her to her feet and they too staggered away from the open coach. The doctor came next, and assisted the spinster in his turn. Each of them had some small amount of blood upon their clothing but neither showed any sign of injury.

Having helped the woman down, the doctor addressed the bandit with the rifle. "You have killed the other man, his partner," he said, nodding to the heavysset courier who had sat down by the roadside, head in hands. "Although that fellow there started the shooting. You'll want to look closely at them both, and their luggage as well, I'll wager." With that the doctor took the spinster by the arm and escorted her out of the line of fire to the roadside, well away from the courier. The newlyweds joined them and they huddled together, heads down. Goddard could hear the young wife weeping.

The bandit with the rifle went to the coach door and peered in for a moment. Goddard heard him breathe a curse. Then he stepped back and gestured at Goddard and Curley. "Come down from there," he said. "Step lively."

"You go down first, Curley," Goddard said. "Then Charlie, and then..."

Curley shook his head. "Charlie caught a load of buckshot," he said, pointing to the rear of the coach. "Went down over the boot. He's dead."

Goddard took a step and looked down at the rear luggage boot of the coach. Charlie Parks lay there, crumpled into the canvas cover that was dappled with his blood. Beside him stood the third bandit, who held his pistol at his side and stared at the dead man, then looked up at Goddard, all but his eyes obscured by the lampblack smeared over his face. Goddard had never seen such an empty expression. He shut his eyes and looked away, waving Curley off. He took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. "Go on, Dan," he said.

Curley descended the side of the coach, clambering down the large rear wheel, then offering his hand to help Goddard, whose left arm refused to work. From the feel of it, he thought the big bone in the arm might be broken, and he hoped it would heal cleanly; not much call for a one-armed stagecoach driver. He moved slowly, leaning on his good right arm and on Curley's shoulder, then jumping the last few feet to the ground. He gasped and swore when he landed, jarring his injured arm, and he sagged against the doorframe of the coach as his vision darkened and swam.

When his eyesight cleared, he realized that he was looking through the door into the coach, and at the dead man inside. The side panels of the coach bore big, splintered holes where rifle bullets and buckshot had struck. How the rest of the passengers had escaped injury, Goddard could not fathom, but perhaps the dead courier had taken the bullets meant for them, for he had been hit more than once. He might have survived the wound to his harm that nearly matched Goddard's, but any of the others would have killed him: one in his midsection, one in his chest, and one in his head that was probably responsible for the besmirched condition of the other passengers.

It was a horrifying sight, but Mart Goddard found his eyes locked on the man's gut, where the bullet had penetrated his waistcoat and shirt, leaving a thumb-thick hole. From it trickled not blood, but a trail of glittering, golden dust.

Chapter 22

The buzzards had found the horse by the time Morgan arrived. He saw several circling over the road long before he reached the abandoned coach, and when he came in view of the ambush site he could make out the hunched forms of several more perched atop the dead horse. He hoped they had not gotten into the coach itself. The foul birds tore at the carcass as the posse rode down from Malad Summit, six horsemen carrying rifles and two men riding on a wagon sent to recover the bodies of the murdered courier and the stage guard. Not until Morgan hollered and waved his arms wide did the buzzards give up their feasting, spreading their wings and lifting their ungainly bodies into the air, where they joined their fellows wheeling and circling in the sky.

The scene was much as Mart and Dan had described: the logs blocking the road, the coach stripped of treasure, the dead horse the only one remaining from the team of six. Morgan dismounted and went to the coach door, opened it cautiously lest a buzzard be caught inside, but he found only the two dead men. Flies buzzed around them. He whistled at the wagon driver and beckoned him over. "Get these men onto the wagon and get started back to town," he said. The man nodded, and Morgan stepped aside to let him and his assistant work.

The passengers had shut the dead inside the coach to keep the coyotes and buzzards from getting at them before setting out on foot for the line station at Malad Summit. The trip took them more than three hours, what with two women and a wounded man among them, so when they reached the station it was already full dark. They prevailed upon the station agent for shelter and sent him riding to Malad City to report the robbery, but with one thing and another it was close to dawn before Morgan and his posse returned to the station and broad daylight before they reached the coach.

While the teamsters loaded the bodies into the wagon, Morgan gathered his men. “Cast about for any sign of the robbers, on both sides of the road,” he said. “Dan, William, see if you can find where the trees were cut. Henry, George, look for where they hid their mounts. Nat, come with me.” They set about their tasks. Morgan walked north along the road, the way the coach had come, scanning the ground for tracks, with Nat Ireland trailing behind holding the reins to Morgan’s horse. Finding signs provided little challenge, since the robbers had made off with the five surviving horses from the coach team, but Morgan hoped to find more than hoofprints.

“There was blood on the coat of one of the robbers,” Dr. Heath had told them when the posse reached the station. “I could not see where he was injured, nor how badly, but someone’s bullet found the mark.”

Morgan had spent as little time as possible questioning the stagecoach passengers and crew, but there were details he needed to know. “How much did they get?”

Dan Curley spoke up. “There was 18 bars of bullion in the strongbox,” he said, “Plus about eighty ounces of dust.”

Morgan whistled, doing the sums in his head. It was a rich haul, no doubt about it. Three hundred and fifty pounds of gold bars...it staggered the imagination, but more important, it would slow down the road agents to transport such an amount.

“That ain’t all.” Mart Goddard sat at the station’s rough table, stripped to waist, his left arm bandaged and held in an improvised sling. Dr. Heath had treated the wound where the ball had entered one side of the muscle and passed all the way through. For a miracle, the bone was not broken. Mart might keep the limb, if it didn’t fester.

His face lined with exhaustion and sorrow, Goddard said, "There was two fellows carrying dust with them. One of them's dead. The other's over yonder." He nodded at a man who sat apart from the others, his clothing disarranged and his head in his hands. "You might ask him how much more they got from him and his partner."

Morgan crossed the room to stand before Andrew McCausland, who looked indecently clean compared to his fellow passengers. He bore the same travel-stains as they, but no blood marked his face or shirt, sitting as he had been across from Barney Dougherty. Black powder smudged his right hand, deposits from his own pistol shots, and tear streaks ran from his eyes. Apart from that, he looked whole.

"Mr. McCausland?" said Morgan. The man did not look up. "How much were you carrying, sir?"

No response.

"Mr. McCausland," said Morgan, putting some bite into his voice and touching the man on his shoulder. "Can you tell me how much dust they took from you and your partner? I'll do my best to retrieve it, sir, but I have to know what to look for."

McCausland said something Morgan could not hear. Morgan crouched down next to him and asked him to repeat it. At last the man stirred himself and muttered, "Five thousand ounces."

Morgan stood, scarcely trusting what he had heard. "You mean you and one other man were carrying over three hundred pounds of gold, and not even in a strongbox?" No wonder they had opened fire on the bandits; that amount of wealth was worth defending for sure, but if they had restrained themselves, there might have been no gunplay at all, and the treasure

undiscovered. On the other hand, it meant that the bandits would be burdened with nearly seven hundred pounds of gold dust and bullion, which would slow them down considerably, and if one of them was wounded...

And so Morgan cast back and forth across the road until he found what he was looking for. He pointed it out to Nat Ireland. "Looks as though Dr. Heath was right," he said. "Blood trail here. Not much, but it'll give us something to follow besides the horses."

Ireland nodded. He was a rancher recently arrived in Malad City who had been in Owens and Price Saloon when the station agent burst in looking for Morgan, and had volunteered for the posse as soon as he heard the man's news. Morgan liked his bluff, open face and his eagerness to pitch in for his new neighbors. "Likely we'll see more of it as we go," Ireland said. "His clothes won't hold much blood before it starts to stain the ground."

One of Morgan's deputies, Henry Wakely, rode up out of the sagebrush, his younger brother George close behind. "Found where they tied some of their mounts," Henry called. He pointed back west of the road. "A wash a couple hundred yards yonder."

"Some?"

"Three, maybe four."

Morgan frowned. Mart Goddard and Dan Curley had both put the number of assailants at six, maybe seven. "They must have split in two groups," he said. The last of his party galloped up, Dan Robbins and William Woodland. "What have you found, Dan?"

"It looks like they drug the trees from that creek bed a half mile that way," said Robbins, Morgan's second deputy. He was a younger man who thought he knew his job better than he

actually did, so Morgan looked to Woodland for confirmation. Woodland had a ranch just south of the Malad Summit; he had spotted the posse as it passed his home and rode out to offer his help. Morgan was glad to have him, because he was a canny tracker who knew the area as well as anyone.

Woodland said, "I'd guess they felled the trees a couple days ago and brung them close to the road. Leaves on the limbs was just shriveling up and the cuts was fresh."

"How many men working on the trees, do you think?"

"Say three or four. Hard to tell, with the tracks on top of one another and the drag marks over that."

Morgan considered. Two groups, each of three or four men, sounded about right. But why would they keep separate from one another until after the robbery? He knew from the passengers that three men approached the carriage while the others covered them from the bushes. The three had cut loose the five remaining horses and taken the bullion from the strongbox, the dust from the couriers. Beyond that all he had was supposition, because the road agents had forced the passengers to move the body of the dead guard inside with the dead courier, then set all the passengers walking south towards Malad Summit with dire warnings against turning back or dawdling too long. Morgan had his doubts about those threats as well, but they had worked well enough.

"Why didn't they kill you, Mart?" he had asked before taking leave of Malad Summit. "They're going to swing for the courier and for Charlie Parks, and they got to know that. So why didn't they kill you all and save the trouble?"

“I’ll tell you, Morgan, I think they didn’t mean to kill anyone,” Goddard said. “That courier spooked when they shot the lock off the strongbox, and he touched off the fight. But I got a look at the one who killed Charlie, and I do believe he was about to cry.”

“Cry?”

“Yes sir. Stood there staring at Charlie laying atop the luggage boot with buckshot in his chest, and damned if his eyes weren’t welled up. Now might could be it was powder smoke in his eyes, or lampblack from his face. But I think he was a young fella who never thought to kill Charlie at all.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Nary a word. His friends, they did all the talking. But his face said it all.”

The posse rode north, following the road but watching for sign that the road agents had turned aside. Nat Ireland’s prediction bore fruit; they found blood droplets more frequently the farther they rode. William Woodland spotted a new trail cutting northeast across the valley, but declared that it was headed toward nothing at all and he thought it was a bluff, maybe three horses turned loose and spooked so they would run and break trail. Dan Robbins disagreed and the two of them rode off, following the tracks while the rest of the posse continued along the road. A couple of hours later they returned, leading two of the horses from the team in their wake. The third had gone a different direction, Woodland said, and they hadn’t wanted to waste time chasing it. For a wonder, Dan Robbins stayed mum on the subject.

The sun was reaching its zenith in a cloudless sky when the posse crossed a creek bed and stopped to let the horses drink. Robbins made as if to ride on before anyone else, but Morgan, watching Woodland and Ireland examine the ground, called him back. “You see anything, Nat? William?”

Nat Ireland, who had guided his horse east along the creek, shook his head. William had ridden along the creek as well, but in the opposite direction, upstream. He pointed at an indistinct mark in the damp sand and rock of the bank. “I believe they’ve left the road,” he said. “Hoping the creek will hide their tracks, but the creek’s too low and they’ve too many horses to conceal every mark. Couple weeks ago, this would still be deep with snowmelt.”

Morgan said, “Where’s this creek begin?”

“Up in the hills behind Cedar Mountain.” Woodland indicated a gap between the hills to the northwest.

“They’re making for Arbon Valley,” Morgan said. “Then north to Fort Hall.”

They rode up the narrow valley, three on either side of the creek bed, hoping to cut the trail if the robbers left it. William and Nat stayed closest to the stream so they could watch for sign there. Morgan put Robbins on the far southern end of the line, expecting the robbers would turn north. Following the creek, they rode in silence as quickly as they dared, each man craning his head toward the earth, searching for some hint, some indication. To Morgan’s intense disgust, it was Dan Robbins who found it—a blood trail, on the south side of the creek.

“Now how did you all miss them leaving the creek?” Morgan said.

Nat shrugged. William said, “Nobody said these boys was stupid. They must have sent their spare horses ahead like they did by the road, then come out of the wash at a rocky place.” He looked over at Robbins, who sat with a smug smile on his face. “That’s a good catch, boy.” Robbins’ grin grew even wider.

“Why leave the creek now?” Morgan said, to hide his irritation. “If they want to get to Fort Hall, they’re taking the long way around.” Southward led back into the hills around Elkhorn Peak, and from there...

Morgan swore. The others looked at him, curious.

“They’re not headed to Fort Hall. They’re not going north at all. They’re headed back to Malad City.”

They pressed on, with Morgan urging them to move faster. If the robbers reached the road on the west side of the mountains, their tracks would blend in among the dozens of others, making it well-nigh impossible to follow them. Morgan’s only hope would be to find someone who had seen them, a slim chance at best. No, they had to catch up to the gang soon, while their trail was still fresh.

The going grew rougher as they rode up into the hills. On either side the slopes steepened, forcing the posse to ride single file along the floor of a narrow canyon, the creek that had carved it all but dried up. The riders threaded their way among stunted trees and loose rock, confident at least that their quarry had not turned aside. They approached a rise that led through a saddle between two ridges, and Morgan thought that at the top, if they were lucky they might catch a glimpse of the robbers somewhere ahead of them. The altitude would give them a

splendid view of the countryside, ahead and behind. It did not occur to him that the opposite might be true until he heard the shot.

Somewhere off to his right came a dull thwack, like a thrown rock striking a boulder. Almost immediately after, the canyon echoed with the rolling peal of a rifle shot. The sound had barely registered in Morgan's mind when there was a second, and a third. Behind him, someone yelled, and he heard scrambling from the posse as they turned their horses and rode for cover. Morgan did the same, sending his mount for the nearest clump of pines. The trees weren't thick enough to stop a rifle ball, but they would screen him from view. Even as he reached them, Morgan heard a buzz by his ear, like an angry hornet, and the echo of the shot. He hunched low in his saddle, knowing it would do no good, but helpless to prevent himself.

Once in the trees, Morgan flung himself from the saddle and looked around for his posse. He saw Dan Robbins doing the same a dozen yards away, and Nat Ireland farther to his right side. The others were either fled or hidden from sight. Morgan wiped his brow with a trembling hand; he was breathing hard, as though from a fast run.

"Is anybody hurt?" he called. "Henry? William? You still with us?"

"I'm sound," said Woodland from a clump of trees near Nat Ireland. Similar calls came from Henry and George Wakeland farther down the canyon, who had been at the tail end of the posse. Morgan sighed with relief; to lose a man now would severely hamper the posse and perhaps force them to turn back.

"Did anyone spy where those shots came from?" he said.

“There’s smoke by that boulder at the top of the ridge,” Ireland said. “I counted seven shots. I expect he’s reloading right now.”

Morgan admired the man’s presence of mind. He hadn’t thought to count; his only thought had been to preserve his own skin. He made his way to the edge of the clump of trees behind which he sheltered and peered cautiously through the branches, searching for the boulder Ireland described. A hundred fifty or two hundred yards distant, he spotted the smoke cloud, gray against the blue sky. It had drifted on the wind, thinning as it went, but it pointed back towards the boulder that the bandits had used as a firing position. Stare as he would, Morgan could see no one there now, but Ireland likely had the right of it. From that vantage point, the robbers could keep the posse from moving up the canyon for as long as they cared to.

“What are we waiting for?” Dan Robbins called. “That old boy couldn’t hit the ground with his hat, if he had seven chances and missed us all. Let’s get up there!”

“You stay right where you are, Dan,” said Morgan. “I just got over being shot. I don’t care to catch another dose right yet.” He craned his neck, searching the ridgeline for any sign of the robbers. “Can anyone see them? My angle’s not the best.”

“I see something moving up there,” Nat Ireland said from his vantage point on the other side of the canyon. “Looks like he’s crouched down behind that boulder.”

“Where? I don’t see nothing,” said Dan Robbins. Without warning he ran, crouched over, toward Ireland’s position. Morgan nearly hollered at him but instead held his breath until the youngster made it to Ireland’s side, not wanting to draw fire from the robbers. In any event, no one shot at him, though Morgan could see from the vexed expression on Nat’s face that he was telling Robbins exactly what kind of a fool he was. The young deputy ignored his remonstrations

and stared up the hill, hoping for a glimpse. Ireland pointed and Robbins nodded, raising his rifle to his shoulder.

“No, dammit,” Morgan called over, and Ireland put a hand on the rifle barrel and pressed it down.

“I can hit him, sheriff,” Robbins protested.

“And if you don’t, he fires back at your gunsmoke and maybe his partners join in. He’s behind a rock and you’re behind a scrubby little tree. Whose chances do you like better?”

Morgan said.

“There’s another one,” Ireland said, pointing. This time Morgan could see, silhouetted against the sky, a rifle barrel poking over the rocks, and the unmistakable shape of a wide-brimmed hat just edging into view. A moment later, he spied a third, just as a series of shots came from a new position. The posse hunkered low and Morgan counted the shots this time, even as the rifle balls whined off stones or clipped branches over his head. The rifleman fired a total of thirteen times before silence fell on the canyon once more. Morgan rose from the ground where he had flattened himself and looked around for the others.

“Anyone hit?” No one was. Morgan said, “What do you think, Dan? Still want to charge straight up that hill?” Robbins scowled at him but said nothing.

They sat and watched, sweating in the sun without a wind to cool them. All remained still for nearly an hour, until Morgan heard someone scrambling across the canyon floor behind him. He turned to see William Woodland, bent nearly double, coming towards him. Woodland made

the most of every tree or mound of rock but did not stop until he had joined Morgan. “Well, sheriff, what do you think?” he said by way of greeting.

“I think we’re stuck here,” Morgan said. “We can’t get up that hill, and I’m not going back.”

Woodland nodded. “Not here we can’t. But back the way we came there’s a draw, out of sight of the ridge. It’s too steep for horses, but we could climb it on foot. It comes out on the ridgeline right about there.” He pointed to a spot to the east of the pass where the robbers were dug in.

“You think we can outflank them?”

“God willing and the creek don’t rise.”

Morgan gauged times and distances in his head. “It’ll be nigh unto dark when we reach the ridge,” he said. “Maybe dusk if we hustle. We’ll take...four. You and me, Henry Wakeland and Dan Robbins. George and Nat can stay here and keep their attention.”

Woodland said, “I’ll send George up. You go get the boy.” He turned and scurried back down the canyon the same way he had come. Morgan gave a soft whistle, and when Robbins and Ireland looked his way he waved them over. While they started across the canyon floor, Morgan covered them, aiming his rifle at the ridgeline and cocking the hammer. None of the robbers opened fire, nor even raised their heads, and soon the deputy and the rancher reached Morgan’s clump of trees.

He said, “Dan, are you still keen to reach the top of that hill?” He saw the confusion in their eyes, turning to excitement in Robbins’ and consternation in Ireland’s as he explained, “Because that’s where we’re going.”

Three hours later, with the sky still ruddy in the west, the four men gathered just short of what William Woodland assured them was the pass where the robbers lay. They were red-faced and sweaty from their labored climb, and George Wakeland passed around a cloth-covered canteen full of water so that everyone could take a drink. “From here,” Woodland said, “I don’t reckon they’ll be much in the way of cover. We leave here, chances are they can see us.”

“Spread out, stay low, and move fast,” Morgan said. He accepted the canteen and took a deep swallow, then handed it back, pretending not to notice how Wakeland’s hands trembled putting the cork back in. He checked the chamber of his rifle to make sure he had a round ready, and the others followed his lead. Morgan tried to think of something else to say, but words abandoned him and he simply looked them each in the eye, then nodded.

They rose up and scrambled the last few feet to the top of the ridge, running flat out toward the pass. Someone, probably Robbins, fired a round even though there was nothing to shoot at that Morgan could see. He held his own rifle chest high, swinging the barrel back and forth in search of a target, but saw nothing: not horses, not men, not a campsite. He plunged on, down to the pass itself where he could see the canyon below them, Nat Ireland and George Wakeland breaking cover and riding up to join the fray, alerted by the errant gunshot.

Ahead, in the lee of the boulders that had defied them all afternoon, Morgan at last made out a man’s shape, unmoving, legs splayed out in front of him and back to the rock. He raised his rifle and fired from a distance of perhaps ten yards and saw a puff of dust rise up from the rock,

but the bandit never moved. To Morgan's left, Woodland and Robbins, spotting other targets, also let fly, but not fire came in return. Morgan rushed up to the form before him, slowing to a trot, then a walk, letting the rifle sag as he came to a stop at the feet of the bandit.

Slouched against the boulder was a bundle of rags and straw in the rough shape of a man, a scarecrow clad in dungarees, shirt and coat, a wide-brimmed hat jammed atop the burlap sack that it used for a head. Enough of the hat jutted over the rocks to be seen from the canyon below, as did a black-painted broom handle, propped at such an angle as to resemble a rifle barrel. Morgan stared at the dummy, speechless. Dan Robbins swore as he approached one of the other scarecrows and discovered the ruse, for these were the only sentries defending the hilltop. In the dying light Morgan could just make out tracks leading south, heading for the road and Malad City, tracks left by the robbers' horses as they had abandoned their position and left their straw-stuffed comrades to cover their retreat.

Chapter 23

Dawn cast a paltry grey light over the hills, but the valleys and canyons still held darkness in their recesses, darkness that made every bush and stone look the same as the ones before and after it, the same as the ones ten miles ago and ten miles ahead. The horses plodded along, heads drooping, and the riders atop them sagged in their saddles, sometimes closing their eyes for minutes at a time then jerking upright when they lost balance. If the riders grew too still, the horses would slow and finally stop, browsing among the sage for forage. But always Tom Mulvehill would come up behind them and bark, “Keep moving, god damn it!” and they would knock the sleep from their eyes and put spurs to their horses’ flanks, trotting for a few steps before falling back into their reveries.

Tom never seemed to doze, though they had ridden all night after leaving the dummies to stand rear guard. He let Cash and Dove Ed lead a pack horse each, then rode ahead to scout their track. When they caught him up, he would show them the path he had chosen, then let them ride on while he watched the back trail for any sign of their pursuers. As the night dragged on, Tom worried that he would scout the trail, but no one would follow because they had all fallen asleep. He worried that the posse had seen through his ruse at once, and would fall upon them at any moment. He worried that Cash had lost too much blood and wouldn’t endure the journey to the cave, he worried that one of the horses would stumble and break a leg, he worried they were hopelessly lost and he worried a thousand other things that could go awry. Too many things already had.

Although the robbery had largely gone according to plan, the mishaps infuriated Tom even to think about. The passengers opening fire, Cash catching a stray round, the posse finding their trail despite every trick Tom used to elude them—and now a night ride through the

winding, trackless hills that made up the western slopes of Elkhorn Peak. Let Cash and Dove Ed drowse if they had to; Tom planned to keep alert every second until the treasure was secure behind the iron door. And what a treasure! Tom was surprised and gratified to find so many gold bars in the strongbox when it was finally opened, but to chance upon such a trove of gold dust as well, unsecured? He tried to do the sums in his head and failed, ciphering never being his strong suit, but this was more gold than he had ever heard of in one place...supposing, of course, that they managed to evade the law.

His horse shied left to avoid Dove Ed's, which had slowed again. Tom reached over and brought a gloved hand down on the horse's rump with a sharp smack, causing it to lurch forward. Dove Ed grabbed for his reins to keep his seat and looked around at Tom, who said, "Look alive, boy! Once we get over the river you can rest!"

Dove Ed nodded and resumed his pace without speaking. Tom frowned. The boy hadn't spoken a dozen words since the holdup, only going about his tasks with downcast eyes and sullen determination. At first Tom tried to praise him for his actions during the robbery, but Dove Ed would hear none of it, which griped Tom's nerves. Cash, more concerned with the bullet scrape along his left ribs, did little to help, so the three of them concentrated on putting miles between themselves and the derelict coach.

Now, with the sun rising and light coming back into the valleys, Tom felt his spirits rising as well. There had been no trace of the posse since the afternoon before, and though he knew they would follow, he believed the dummies had delayed them sufficiently. He grinned to himself, imagining the looks on the faces of the lawmen when they discovered that they had been buffaloed. A few shots down the valley to keep their heads down, then propping up the dummies

and riding at breakneck speed down the far side of the slope—Tom couldn't wait to boast of the exploit over a glass of whiskey.

But first, they needed to reach the cave. Once through the hills, they planned to follow the road south toward Malad City, blending with the other travelers to conceal their tracks, then taking a side trail unobserved. From there they could approach their fortified cave without fear of discovery and the posse would never know which tracks were theirs. They would essentially disappear. The first order of business, though, was to escape the maze of canyons, an endless succession of mounded hills covered in sagebrush, brown grass, and stones. Despite his assurances that he knew the mountains, Dove Ed had soon admitted that he hadn't the faintest idea which way was best, so Tom had taken on the chore of picking the route. He had no more idea which way to go than Dove Ed did, but he stubbornly pressed on, taking them down more than one blind canyon or valley that twisted back on itself, then backtracking to find another way.

By this point, Tom could only tell which way was east thanks to the sunrise, but he reassured himself that if he didn't know where he was, how could the posse?

When they crossed the road, they were so bleary with exhaustion that Tom nearly missed it: a narrow, rutted, little-used wagon track running roughly north and south down the floor of the valley. They had emerged from the confusion of hills gradually, barely noticing that the land grew flatter and the horizons wider. Tom called to Dove Ed and Cash, who had ridden over the road without stopping. They reined around and stared at the wheel ruts for a time as though trying to remember what it was called. Then Cash gave a thin whoop, and even Dove Ed smiled a little as they started south, their pace increasing with the journey's end in sight.

After a time, though, Tom looked behind them and scowled. They rode three horses and led two others, all of them heavily burdened with the dust and bullion taken from the stagecoach. The road here barely deserved the name, leading as it did to the middle of empty rangeland. The most recent tracks on the road, besides their own, looked days or weeks old, hoofprints made when the ground was wet and since baked hard by the sun. He pointed this out to the others.

“Anybody cuts our trail, they’ll have no trouble following us,” he said. “I thought this road was well-traveled so we could lose our tracks among many.”

“Closer to town, it sees more traffic,” Dove Ed said, a trifle defensively.

“Well, we ain’t going closer to town, are we?” Anger crept into Tom’s voice. He felt exposed, out in the open with a king’s ransom and a posse searching for him, and a trail that led directly to him. All the optimism of the past hours deserted him and left him enraged at the thought of coming so close, only to be betrayed by carelessness. “For Christ’s sweet sake, a blind man could see the trail we’re leaving!”

“We could drag sagebrush behind us,” said Dove Ed. “Wipe out our tracks.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant!” Tom shouted. “Drag some bushes behind us, to kick up a dust cloud they’ll see for miles! Drag some bushes behind us, so if they somehow miss our tracks or the manure the horses drop or the blood Cash is spilling everywhere, they can look around for the scrape marks from the god damned bushes! I swear, do I have to think of everything or can you limp-dicked sons of bitches please pitch in?”

“Shut up, Tom,” said Cash. Tom stopped, mid-rant, and turned on Cash.

“Don’t you tell me to shut up, you shit-kicker,” Tom said. He pointed his finger at Cash’s face. “The way I see it, I’m the only reason we have this treasure right now. It was my plan, my idea, and my improvising that’s got us this far, and I’m not gonna see it thrown away now!”

“Well, if they don’t find any of those traces you was talking about, they’ll certainly hear your mouth,” Cash said. His face, drawn and pale with pain, showed none of his usual affability. The courier’s bullet, which struck him in the side, had glanced off a rib and taken a chunk of meat with it, and although it had stopped bleeding for the most part, the broken rib had to be excruciating. But Cash rode through yesterday and last night without complaining; these were the first words he had spoken in hours, and he gritted his teeth as he spoke. “And the way I see it, if you hadn’t tried to shoot the lock off the express box, that courier would never have shot me in the first place. It might be your plan, but it’s your screw-up as well, Tom. So quit belling like a branded calf and let my ribs kill me in peace!”

“By God, they won’t get the chance,” Tom said and laid a hand on his pistol. Cash did the same, hissing at the pain of the sudden movement. Before either of them could draw, a shotgun blast tore the air nearby and both men startled, their quarrel forgotten as they looked for the source of the attack.

Dove Ed sat his horse a dozen yards away, his double-barreled shotgun leveled in their direction. One of the barrels still smoked from the round he had fired into the air. The echoes of the shot returned, thin from their journey to the distant hills.

“Do you think the posse heard that?” he said. Fatigue darkened his eyes and etched his mouth in a severe grimace. Tom and Cash stared at him, dumbstruck. “Are they close enough, do

you think? While you blather at each other, they're coming, and if they catch us they'll hang us, so what do you prefer, to stay and have it out, or continue on? I'll tell you plain, I'm going on."

"He's got a point," Cash said. "Ain't nothing we can do about the tracks now, Tom, except ride on."

"Maybe that's so," Tom said. "But it's only postponing the inevitable."

"Perhaps not," Dove Ed said. "I may be a limp-dicked son of a bitch, but I think I have an idea."

They made all the haste they could, riding south under a cloud-studded blue sky. Strong breezes rolled across the valley floor, plucking at their hats, their clothes, the manes of their tired mounts. They began to see signs of human habitation—a distant range shack, a broken wagon wheel discarded by the roadside, a few cattle—but to their relief they saw no other people, no one to report their passage to the law. On their left, the hills encroached again. To their right stretched the valley floor, windswept grasses and brush broken by a line of trees that betokened a creek or riverbed. This they noted with approval as it swung nearer the road, but they did not make for it yet.

The miles crept by, and as Dove Ed promised, signs of traffic on the road did in fact increase, although their own trail still stood out plainly against the old marks. Dove Ed rose up in his saddle, staring ahead for the landmarks he remembered and hoping he hadn't got it wrong in his mind as he had the cave. When he spied the weathered post, tilting askew at the joining of

two roads, he breathed a sigh of relief and turned his mount onto the smaller side road that led west.

“This is it,” he informed his companions. “The river crosses the road a few hundred yards from here.”

They turned their beasts down the smaller track and shambled along it to a crossing where a sturdy little bridge spanned the river they had paralleled. Here Dove Ed led his horse and the pack animal behind it down the bank and into the river, allowing the tired creatures to drink. Tom and Cash followed suit, even dismounting to replenish their canteens and drink deeply as well. Feeling at least a little refreshed, Dove Ed started downriver.

Tom called, “They’re likely to notice we’ve left the road. It didn’t fool them before.”

“Just wait,” said Dove Ed.

The river ran wider and swifter than the little runoff creeks to the north, which reassured them all, but Tom was right: this was nothing more than another road, down which the posse would soon follow. For the time being, though, they enjoyed the shade from the trees lining the bank and the coolness of the breeze over the water. Another mile’s riding and Dove Ed pointed out a cluster of buildings, far up the western slope of the valley. “That’s Waldron’s,” he said. “We’re close. Keep an eye out.”

Soon they spotted what Dove Ed had promised: a small herd of range horses, grazing the meadow alongside the river. They stopped and plotted their next move. Dove Ed got ropes from his saddlebag and gave one to Tom while Cash took the reins of both the pack horses. Then Tom

and Dove Ed rode up out of the riverbed, splitting to the left and right of the herd. Cash came behind them, slower.

Tom and Dove Ed walked their mounts toward the herd, doing their best to keep from spooking them. The range horses caught sight of them and raised their heads attentively, assessing the newcomers. Dove Ed dangled a loop of rope from his right hand, swinging it with the sway of his own horse, ready to throw as soon as he came close enough. On the other side of the herd Tom did the same. When he judged that he was as close as the herd would let him ride, Dove Ed dismounted, rope in hand.

He moved across the meadow toward the horse he had chosen, a scruffy-looking bay, murmuring soft reassurances as he went. From his pocket he took a small pouch of sugar, the last of their supply, and shook some into his palm, which he held out before him. The herd, alert now and ready to bolt, watched his every move. The bay's nostrils flared as it caught a whiff of the sugar, and it stamped in indecision. Dove Ed froze. He clucked his tongue and beckoned with his handful of sugar. The bay stepped nearer, tempted, and Dove Ed continued his quiet mutterings until the horse came up and nuzzled at his hand. He let it have one taste, then withdrew his hand long enough to slip the loop of rope over the bay's head. Before it could rear back he held out his hand again and let it finish the sugar.

Suddenly the horse shied, nearly yanking Dove Ed off his feet. He threw his weight on the rope as around him the herd spooked and scattered in all directions. Through the mass of plunging bodies Dove Ed saw Tom, still aboard his horse with his rope gone taut, struggling to calm another of the range horses while the others fled. Cash rode up with the pack horses in tow as Dove Ed brought his captured range horse under control. He gave the rope to Cash, then went

back to his own mount and stripped off all his gear: saddle and bags, blanket, and lastly the bit and bridle.

When he returned, he accepted the rope back from Cash and set about saddling his new mount. Nearby, Tom did the same, transferring his kit from his old horse to the one he had roped. Cash, meanwhile, dismounted with care for his damaged ribs and drew his hunting knife. He bent over the front feet of his horse and began prying at the mare's shoes. One by one, he extracted the nails and removed the horseshoes from her hooves, stowing them in his saddlebags. He did not move quickly, so when Dove Ed was finished saddling up, he drew his own knife and went to work on the pack horses, taking their shoes as well. Between them, the process took only a few minutes. Tom finished saddling his horse but declined to join them at their task, instead scanning the land around them.

With the final horseshoe packed into the saddlebags, Dove Ed and Cash climbed back into their saddles. "Shame we couldn't get more than two," Cash said. The work had left him pale and sweaty with pain. "My mare's about done in."

"No time," said Tom. "Rancher might spot us any second. We'd best be off."

They rode down the meadow in the direction the range horses had taken. Behind them, the two worn out horses trotted in their wake, bewildered, but glad to be shed of the weight they had borne the last day and a half. As the men rode further from them, they stopped and bent their heads to graze. The three men headed directly for the pack of horses at the far end of the meadow, which had not fully settled from their earlier fright. The herd spooked again and broke into a gallop, wheeling out of the path of the strangers.

Dove Ed, Tom, and Cash paid them no mind but broke formation, each man heading southwesterly but each choosing a different route, with Dove Ed and Tom leading the pack horses. They made no effort to keep each other in sight, instead trying to create as confusing a track as possible before steering for a point in the hills that they had already chosen. Dove Ed grinned as he thought of the posse, dogging their tracks right up to the meadow, where the hoofprints would become jumbled in with those of the range horses but would not emerge. Instead, five horses leaving completely different tracks would come out of the pack in several different places, each heading a new direction. The range horses would add to the confusion, running their own way and obscuring the new trails. Even if the posse puzzled out what had happened, they would never discover which way their quarry had gone. By next day's sundown, Dove Ed expected that the treasure would be safely hidden in their cave.

He experienced a momentary pang of conscience at the thought of stealing horses from Waldron's ranch, but after all, they had left two others behind that were almost as good, so what cause did Caleb Waldron have to complain? Then Dove Ed thought of the gold that weighed down the pack animal he led, and he vowed to himself that he would make it up to Caleb somehow. There was no more need for robbing now, not with more gold than their own combined weight! Dove Ed tried to imagine what he would do with his share: maybe buy a ranch of his own, with hands to work it and horses and stock of his own. Maybe open a store, or even a saloon...no, not a saloon, he decided, because he didn't want Alice to work in a saloon ever again, with men grabbing her or joking with her. A store would be a respectable profession for a man of means and his wife.

Then Dove Ed thought again of the robbery, the sound of shots and yelling, the horses screaming and rearing, the confusion and fear. He thought again of the double barreled-shotgun

and how it felt as he raised it to his shoulder. He did not remember yelling, but when it was over his voice was hoarse, so he must have. He saw flashes of gunfire; he saw the driver and the guards moving. He pulled both triggers, the shotgun punching him and almost flying from his hands, and he spun halfway around from the recoil. When he turned back, no one still stood atop the stagecoach, and one of the guards had fallen down the luggage boot to sprawl on the road. Dove Ed stood, the shotgun forgotten, and walked toward the rear of the coach. Around him the sounds of shooting died away, Cash and Tom cursed and shouted orders, but on the ground ahead of him lay a dead man, his work shirt peppered with red blotches.

Dove Ed rode on, up into the hills to meet with Tom and Cash. The pack horse still toiled under the weight of the treasure, but Dove Ed no longer imagined respectable professions.

Chapter 24

Climbing the stairs outside Vanderwood's store, Morgan could hear the murmur of conversation coming from the men already assembled inside. On the first floor below him, the store was dark, already locked up, but lamplight streamed from the open door ahead of him where the commissioners met. He climbed slowly, although his leg no longer pained him; he did not look forward to this meeting. At the top of the stairs he paused, removed his hat and smoothed his hair before stepping through the door.

The conversation died away as he entered, the other men turning to face him. He recognized most of them: the three Oneida County commissioners, B.F. White, and Charles Pearson who ran the Wells Fargo office in Malad City. They stood in a circle, chatting with a man Morgan did not know, a tall, prosperously-dressed man with tidy hair and a beard cut square where it met his chest. His brown eyes regarded Morgan with wit and intensity, in a way that called to mind an Army officer inspecting his troops. Morgan nodded to him and received a nod in return.

As if the nod had been a signal, the small group dispersed, with the commissioners, George Ruddy, William Jones, and Tom Daniels, moving behind the table at the front of the room while White, Pearson, and the stranger took seats along the wall. Ruddy gestured for Morgan to sit in the chair placed directly before the commissioner's table, the way witnesses were seated during court trials. Morgan sat, holding his hat in his hands. Although the room was mostly empty at this time of night and the open door let in the breeze, it felt stuffy and close in the warmth of the June evening and he wanted to tug at his collar and tie. He let it be.

“We are met tonight,” George Ruddy said, “To learn from Sheriff Morgan what progress he has made concerning the robbery of the Wells Fargo stagecoach that occurred just north of Malad Summit last week, and to offer what assistance we can.” Ruddy, whose name belied his wan, thin countenance, loved pomp, officious language, and the sound of his own voice, which was one of the reasons he had been made senior commissioner. Although this was not an official meeting, he nevertheless spoke as though every word was being recorded by a court reporter for all posterity. He went on, “We are joined by Mr. B.F. White, attorney at law; Mr. Charles Pearson of the Wells, Fargo Stagecoach Company; and Mr. Henry O. Harkness, representing Mrs. Clara Murphy and the stage station at Murphy’s Bridge.”

Morgan turned to look at the stranger, who returned his gaze evenly. Word was that Harkness and Murphy had been business partners in the past, and that he was a shrewd businessman, but Morgan had not heard of his arrival in town. What was he doing here, at this thinly-disguised disciplinary meeting? Pearson was here because it was his line that had been held up; White was here to advise the commissioners regarding the law and also to keep his hand in anything of import in Malad City. But why would White chat and sit so cordially with the man who now represented the interests of Red Murphy’s widow, when it was White himself who had instigated Murphy’s death? Harkness was an unknown quantity, and he made Morgan more nervous than he already was.

George Ruddy did not have a gavel, so he cleared his throat to regain Morgan’s attention. “Sheriff Morgan, can you tell us what you have discovered since your posse returned empty-handed two days ago?”

Fuck all, Morgan thought but did not say. After losing the trail at Waldron's ranch, they had cast about for another two days, searching for useful sign, and found only vague traces. When rain squalls had passed through, they had given it up as a bad job and returned to Malad City with precious little to show for their efforts: three crude manikins and their "weapons", broom handles painted to resemble rifle barrels. Morgan recalled the snickers he had heard when these were taken into the jailhouse, but they had yielded his only results worth reporting.

"I have learned that the dummies used as decoys during the holdup were assembled from pieces of clothing acquired here in town," he said. "The shirts, hats, and dungarees came from the Mercantile, and Vanderwood admits that he stocks brooms with handles like the ones we found. Both places have paint for sale. No one in either store remembers who might have bought these things."

He stopped. After a long moment of silence, Tom Daniels said, "That's all?"

"You asked what I've discovered, and that's it. No one has been heard boasting in the saloons; no one has been spending more money than they ought; no one has turned up with gold dust or bars of bullion, not here in or in Samaria either."

Daniels said, "That seems precious little, nearly a week after the robbery, Sheriff." He said it as though he suspected Morgan of grave stupidity, or at least of shirking his duties.

Morgan knew that his anger was visible. He could feel his face burn with it, but he kept his composure. He did not suspect Daniels of stupidity; he knew it for a fact that the man was pure fool, and he did not wish to give the man the satisfaction by a loss of temper. "Yes, sir, it is."

“So you have given up, is that it?”

“No sir. I would like to ask that we commission the printing of handbills, to be distributed in the towns surrounding us, describing the theft and offering a reward for information about the men responsible.”

The commissioners looked sideways at one another, as they always did when it came to a question of money. None cared to be the man who approved an outlay of funds that would have to be explained to parsimonious voters come an election. Before any of them could comment, Morgan gave the pot another stir: “If there are insufficient funds for such a reward in the county coffers, perhaps a private citizen might come forward and provide them,” he said. He turned to look at B.F. White as he did, including Charlie Pearson in his statement.

The implication was not lost on the two. White returned his gaze stonily, his arms folded across his chest, but Pearson rose from his seat. “While it is the policy of the Wells Fargo company to offer a reward in such cases, I’m afraid I cannot approve one until I have heard from the directors,” he said, a tremor in his voice. The loss of such a vast amount reflected poorly on him, and Morgan believed that his job might be in jeopardy because of it. He would not make any bold decisions, lest they backfire on him further. “I expect to hear from them shortly,” Pearson concluded as he sat back down.

B.F. White spoke up. “I’m sure they, and the commissioners as well, would prefer to hear that the thieves had been apprehended by local authorities instead,” he said, his eyes boring into Morgan’s. “After all, why else do we have a sheriff and deputies on the county payroll?” The commissioners faced Morgan once again, the ball back in his court. No flies on B.F. White, Morgan thought.

“If it is a question of sufficient funds,” Henry Harkness said, “Then I will advance five hundred dollars toward the capture and conviction of the thieves.” He stepped to the commissioner’s table, taking his pocketbook from his jacket as he did so. “I trust that will be adequate to be going on with?” From the pocketbook he pulled a thick sheaf of banknotes, wet his thumb, and counted off five hundred dollars. The commissioners stared at the proffered money, then George Ruddy cleared his throat.

“That will do splendidly,” he said. “Mr. Jones, please draft a receipt for Mr. Harkness.” William Jones, who served as county treasurer, opened the ledger on the table in front of him, dipped a pen into the inkwell, and set to writing. When he had finished, he blotted the paper and handed it to Harkness, who folded it and tucked it back into the pocketbook.

“Very well,” Ruddy said. “Sheriff Morgan, I trust this will suffice to begin with the handbills you propose?” He handed across to Morgan a twenty-dollar note. “We shall require an accurate accounting of your expenditures. I suggest you call upon Mr. Jones—Printer Jones—at once so that no further time is wasted. Thank you, gentlemen. We are adjourned.”

Everyone rose from their seats and gathered their hats, talking quietly to one another. Morgan stood before the table, still holding the crisp bill. The commissioners ignored him, as though they hoped to avoid any more contact. By the door, B.F. White shook hands with Henry Harkness before stepping out into the night. Morgan stuffed the money into his pocket and made his way to the door.

“Mr. Harkness,” he said. The man turned to him, settling his bowler on his brow. Morgan could read nothing in his expression. “Let me thank you for...”

Harkness raised a hand to stop him. “Mr. Morgan,” he said in a level tone, “Let me be clear. I put up that money not for you, but for the town. I’m not happy to be here, and I’m less happy about the reason for it.”

Morgan flushed and dropped his eyes, but could think of nothing to say that wouldn’t sound like excuses. Harkness went on, “If it were up to me, we would not be posting handbills. We’d be raising a posse of volunteers to go out and find the murderers and bring them to trial. But that’s for the sheriff to decide, isn’t it?”

Morgan nodded, curtly. “Perhaps you ought to run for sheriff yourself, if you’ve such clear ideas what needs doing.”

A small smile raised the corners of Harkness’ mouth. “Perhaps I ought,” he said.

Morgan turned and stepped through the door. Over his shoulder he called back, “I wish you joy of it.”

Although the hour had grown late, Morgan found Printer Jones still awake. He grumbled at the intrusion, but set about the task at once, the prospect of a quick job with quick payment silencing him in the end. Morgan assisted him, taking each damp sheet as it came off the press and draping it on the overhead lines that crossed the room to dry. Soon the small shop was filled with the astringent smell of ink and the handbills fluttered on every inch of the lines.

“Let them dry overnight and collect them in the morning,” said Printer Jones. “Post them now and they’ll smear, and no one will see them in the dark anyway.”

Morgan paid the man, and raised his eyebrows by requesting a receipt. “For the county fathers,” he said. He knew that come morning, the news would get around that the commissioners no longer trusted the sheriff to give an accurate accounting. He sighed and thanked Jones as he left the shop. Behind him the printer locked up. The light dimmed as he snuffed each lamp and went upstairs to bed, leaving Morgan standing on the sidewalk in darkness.

Down the street, music and laughter from the saloons and dance halls reached his ears, and he turned to walk towards the light and noise. Around him, the rest of Malad City lay still and dark, the respectable citizens all asleep. Morgan realized that for the last ten years, he had seldom gotten to bed before midnight, often because he had business in those same saloons and cathouses. Although he had been charged with keeping the peace in their town, he spent little time among those “respectable citizens.” He had long since quit attending the temple, his faith tarnished with the patina of long experience. So what did that make him?

He contemplated the possibility that within a few months, he might not be sheriff anymore, and was at once relieved and terrified at the prospect. What does a man do with himself, if he has nothing he must do? Morgan had moved west with the Mormon handcart companies to help build Zion. He had expected to work the land with his brethren, to make the mountains bloom and the church to flourish. That dream had taken sick on the long, arduous trek. It had weakened as he watched the town grow in ways he had never anticipated, and it had died as he saw what his brethren were capable of.

At the center of town, Morgan propped himself against a post on the front porch of the hotel, across from Owens and Price. He took out his tobacco pouch and shook some into a square

of paper, then rolled the paper tightly. He put the cigarette to his lips, lit it, and let it burn down while he thought. The journey west had cost him his wife, many friends, and even his faith, but he could imagine living nowhere else. Without the duties of his office holding him in place, he could see what more the country held than one small town that didn't even rate a railway spur. His mouth quirked with a wry half-smile. The stage company was short one shotgun messenger now; perhaps he could get Mart to put in a good word for him?

Lost in his reverie, Morgan stood and smoked while men came and went from the saloon, their numbers dwindling as the night wore on. They walked off laughing or singing, some of them silent and some stumbling a little, but he paid them no mind. Only when the lights went out in the tall windows did he come back to himself and look about. Across the street, John Price let Alice Morgan out through the front doors, then locked them behind her as she went up the sidewalk.

Without thinking, Morgan found himself crossing the street toward her. As he caught up to her, he called her name, not wishing to startle her. She looked back, her eyes wide and searching the darkness.

“Dove Ed?” she said.

He didn't know what reaction he had expected, but the name brought him up short, as did the tone of her voice, at once apprehensive and eager. “No, it's Morgan,” he said. “I wondered if I might walk with you as far as your door.”

Alice's face became guarded, a polite smile on her lips. “You fair gave me a start, Sheriff,” she said. “But I'd be glad of your company.” She waited, and when he reached her side she turned and they walked up the street together.

Now that he was beside her, Morgan found himself completely at a loss for words. In his wild musings, he realized he had half-imagined asking Alice to come with him when he left Malad, to leave behind the conventions and hypocrisies that kept them both tied to the place. Her husband was gone, and his wife; what else forced them to remain here? But her exclamation brushed those visions away like smoke from his eyes. He remembered watching their byplay through the windows of the saloon, the night Dove Ed confronted the whiskey drummer and wondered if there had been more than friendliness on her part as well. Why then, would she be afraid at his approach?

“Were you expecting Dove Ed tonight, then?” he said, trying to keep his voice light. He watched her face, but she gave nothing away.

“Oh, not especially. Only it’s been a few days since I’ve seen him and I thought...”

“Ah.”

“Have you seen him about?” Alice asked, and Morgan thought she had forced herself to sound offhand.

“No, nor his friends either,” Morgan said. “Did he say anything to you about their plans? Were they travelling on to Montana, perhaps, or farther west?”

“No, nothing like that.” She gave a sudden shake of her head and pressed her lips together.

“Like what, then?”

“I only...it seemed to me that they had come to town to stay, is all.”

Morgan thought that likely as well. They had come to Malad City toting that massive iron door and then made their camp at the Williams farm. They had bought supplies in town as though they were setting up housekeeping, supplies they could have bought elsewhere if they were planning to continue on...

Supplies like clothing and tool handles and paint?

Morgan's gut knotted as his mind began to race. He had followed the men around town, watching their movements, as they went to Vanderwood's and the Mercantile, but he had paid no attention to what they acquired. That had been several days before the holdup, and he thought it was the last time the three had been seen in town. The posse had followed more than three horses, but those could have been pack animals...

"Morgan? Are you all right?"

He gaped at her, suddenly aware that they had stopped walking in the middle of the street. His mind, crowded with the preparations he would have to make, and whether it would be better to ride up to the farm at once or in daylight, and what to tell the county commissioners, could not form words for a long moment. He stammered something incoherent, and her expression grew fearful.

"Morgan?"

He shook himself. "Forgive me. I was woolgathering, I'm afraid," he said. He took her arm and resumed walking towards her home, at a somewhat faster pace. "Let's see you home, and then I must be off to bed. As it happens, I have a full day tomorrow."

Chapter 25

Cash awoke and felt for the key, even before opening his eyes. The key, a massy brass appurtenance, dangled from the leather thong around his neck and lay against his right shoulder. He fumbled for it and lay back against the bundle of clothes that served as his pillow with his hand clenched tight around the key. Every inch of him ached. His head throbbed with last night's whiskey, his neck and spine felt twisted from another night on the paltry straw pallet. His entire left side burned, and the broken ribs made breathing an effort, but he thought it was better than the day before. For some reason, even his toes hurt. Perhaps he'd barked them in the dark, stumbling to the privy. The rough logs of the lean-to roof loomed close over his head, and he thanked god he hadn't sat up quickly this morning. He bore an angry red scrape at his hairline from the last time.

Sunlight filtered into the shelter through the flap of canvas that served as the door; the morning was well advanced. To his left, Tom Mulvehill lay on his back, snoring, an arm flung over his face and an empty whiskey bottle not far away. To the right, Dove Ed's pallet was empty, his blanket folded at the foot. Cash heard movement outside--the boy tending to the horses—and smelled woodsmoke. He lay looking up at the fire-blackened logs over his head and debated going back to sleep, but the thought of coffee made him stir, feeling around him for his boots.

He emerged into the cool morning air and stretched, wincing at the pain in his left side as the bandage tugged at his wound. That would need changing today, a chore he dreaded. But the injury seemed clean enough, with no corruption, and the fevers of the first few days were past. The rib would heal, and his strength was returning, although he tired easily and grew impatient with his infirmity.

Cash plodded to the fire, where the coffeepot indeed sat, steam rising from the spout, and seated himself on one of the log drums that served as furniture. He poured a cup from the pot, hot and black, and set it aside to cool a little while he pulled on his boots. When he bent to adjust his trouser cuffs, the key slithered out of his shirt to dangle before his face. Cash tucked it back into his shirt and looked around for Dove Ed. He didn't have to look for Tom; the snores made his location plain.

They had made their camp on the Williams property, next to the ruined cabin that had nearly been their end. The lean-to, a shack-like affair open on one end with a roof that sloped to the ground on the other, they constructed with wood they scavenged from the wreckage and covered with tent canvas to keep the weather out. Lacking a corral, they picketed the horses at night with enough line to let them graze. Over the past few days they had begun to erect a crude corral fence, but Tom's disinclination to work and Cash's injuries hampered the project, which remained half-finished.

Cash caught sight of Dove Ed in amongst the horses, scooping measures of grain into makeshift feeding troughs. The horses jostled for room before putting their heads down to eat. Dove Ed spoke to each of them in a soft voice that did not carry even as far as the fire. When he had finished his chore, the boy came back to the lean-to, gathered up the canteens, and walked off toward the stream where they drew water. He said nothing and barely even glanced at Cash as he did.

Cash sipped at his coffee, still hot enough to sting but the heat soothed his chest and loosened the knot between his shoulders, and the strong flavor fortified him enough that he felt able to fetch their frying pan and breakfast makings from their stores. They kept such things in

the only remaining corner of the cabin that still gave shelter. The lean-to had hardly enough space for the three of them to sleep, let alone keep their food safe and dry. Cash cut up some bacon into the pan and put it in the coals to fry. Then he set about mixing biscuit dough. By the time the bacon was ready and the biscuits were sizzling in the grease, Dove Ed returned bearing full, dripping canteens. The smell of the bacon and coffee even penetrated Tom's torpor. He flung the canvas door aside and lurched to the fire to get his share of the meal. They ate and drank in silence, though not a comfortable silence. Rather, the quiet carried the flavor of hard feeling and disagreement.

The tension arose the moment they carried their loot into the cave and shut the iron door on it. Tom locked it with the brass key they had gotten from Levi Dobson, jiggling it a little when it did not turn easily. Then he stepped back and looked at the others, bouncing the key on his palm. "Well boys," he said, a tired smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, "We have done it."

They raised no cheer, too tired, too hurt, to feel much of anything beyond relief. Cash's wound burned like fire, and the bandage they had applied so hastily was red and wet. Exhaustion pulled at him so that only the rock he leaned against kept him upright. They had ridden for another day and a half after eluding the posse at Waldron's ranch, taking a winding route through the hills so as to keep their trail obscured. Now Cash wanted nothing so much as to lie down and sleep. Dove Ed looked as though he felt the same. Only Tom seemed to have spark still in him.

"Come on," he said. "No use hanging around here. Let's get back to camp. I can use a drink or three." He started down the hill to the draw where they had left the horses.

"Why do you get to hold it?" Dove Ed said.

Tom stopped and turned. Cash lifted his head, surprised at the bite in the boy's voice. Dove Ed stood before the iron door, his jaw set and his eyes challenging. His right arm hung loose by his holster, not poised for a draw, but near enough. Cash forced himself upright, away from the rock wall. His vision swam.

“What's that?” said Tom.

“We've only the one key. How come you're the one to hold it?”

Tom stared at the boy, the key still clutched in his right hand. No one spoke as the moment stretched. Cash wondered if the world had frozen between breaths, and that the only movement was his heart pounding. He wondered if Tom would drop the key and reach for his pistol. He wondered if Dove Ed would draw his in time if he did. He wondered if he could even pull his own weapon, or fire it, and for that matter he wondered who he would fire at. But Tom kept his hand wrapped around the big key and said, “Why not me?”

“Why not me?” Dove Ed said. “Why not Cash? We've all equal claim on it.”

“Maybe not,” said Tom. “We wouldn't be here if wasn't for me.”

“And if you hadn't started the shooting, Cash wouldn't be shot, and neither would those two back at the coach, and we wouldn't be on the hook for murdering them.”

“Does that bother you, boy?” Tom said, sneering. “We'll hang as much for the robbing as for the killing, believe you me, so what's the difference? It didn't bother you so to shoot Jacob Putney, as I recall, so why stick at it now? In fact, why don't you shoot me down and take the key if you're so keen to have it?” He spread his arms to the sides, away from his weapon. “Go on, if you've got the stones for it, Dove Ed.”

The oiled click as Cash cocked his pistol surprised all of them, including Cash. He held the revolver barely at waist level, pointed between Tom and Dove Ed but mostly at the ground. The weight of it dragged against his wrist and arm. "Give me the key," he said, his voice rasping from his dry throat. Tom and Dove Ed gaped at him, Tom's arms still extended in mock contrition.

"Give me the key," said Cash again. "That way you'll always know where it is. I won't be going far anytime soon, so at least you know I won't run off with it. And if I die, you can shoot it out then when it won't bother me anymore, but right now you're killing me, just standing here gassing at each other. So give me the key and let's go get some sleep, god damn it."

They had found a scrap of leather thong and tied it to the key, and Cash hung it around his neck, and they remounted and rode back to their camp at the Williams farm, where Cash allowed himself to collapse. Each morning, when he struggled up out of sleep, he felt the key for reassurance that the other two had not killed each other yet, and each night as he lay down on his straw pallet he felt for the key and wondered if he would ever wake up again.

So far, he had. But the enmity between Tom and Dove Ed simmered just below the surface, like fast current beneath calm waters. They stepped around each other, speaking only when necessary, and then with as few words as possible. Tom drank himself to sleep most nights and Cash drank with him, hoping to keep his temper in check. Dove Ed made himself scarce at night, retiring early or caring for the horses. Cash had little chance to speak with him alone, and when he did, Dove Ed would grunt or shrug and turn away.

Finishing his coffee Cash said, "Dove Ed, help me with these bandages, will you?"

Together they unwound the bands that swaddled his middle, using warm water to soften and loosen them where they were caked together. To take his mind off the pain, Cash said to the air at large, “We’ve run low of bacon and flour, and the whiskey is gone.”

He let it hang there, hissing as the last layer peeled away. He looked down at the wound, a groove perhaps two inches long, filled with scabbed-over tissue and seeping fluid. The scabs had torn some when the cloth was removed, but the flesh around it was pink and cool to the touch, showing no sign of corruption. Dove Ed tore scraps from a shirt to make a linen pad, and secured it with strips made by tearing the sleeves lengthwise. As Cash worked his arms, getting a feel for the tightness of the dressing, he said, “Guess I’ll ride into town for supplies today, then. We’ll need new bandage-makings as well.”

Dove Ed said, “No. I’ll go.” At the same time Tom said, “Don’t be a damned fool.”

They stopped and looked at each other, taken aback. Then Tom said, “You’ve got blood on those clothes and you can’t hardly raise your arm. That might raise suspicions. Besides, I’ve a craving for a card game, a steak, maybe female companionship.”

“Just as long as you don’t tell everyone about the holdup,” Cash said. The small joke would normally have earned at least a smile from Tom, but he didn’t rise to the bait.

“I’ll go,” said Dove Ed again.

“Female companionship for you, too?” said Cash. Dove Ed colored and avoided his eyes.

“Are you sure you want to leave us alone, boy?” said Tom. “After all, I might assassinate Cash and make off with the key before you got back.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Cash said. “Both of you go. I’m tired of the sight of you. I’ve half a mind to shoot you both down just to get a minute’s peace. So if I’m not going into town, then both of you had better. Get a decent meal and a drink. Play some cards. Buy a dance at Nell’s. But whatever you do, do it somewhere else. “

Shaking his head at them he arose from his seat beside the fire, bloodstained shirt in hand and a dark scowl across his face. They stared at him, dumbstruck. “Have you forgotten that we’re rich?” Cash stormed. “There’s more gold and money hid back in that cave than any one man can spend in a lifetime, but we need to keep our heads on straight so we can live to try. In a few weeks the heat will die down, and we’ll divide it up and go our separate ways if you like. Until then, why don’t you both shut the hell up and ignore one another, or by God...”

Cash trailed off as he realized that they were no longer staring at him, but beyond him. He wheeled and followed their gaze to the wagon track that led back to the road. A rider, whose face he could not discern, was making his way down the rutted trail at a leisurely pace. Cash squinted, trying to make out the man’s features. Behind him, he heard Dove Ed draw in a breath.

“That’s Morgan,” he said.

Apprehension clenched Cash’s gut. The sheriff, here, meant only one thing. His hand reached for his pistol and gripped only air; his gunbelt lay beside his bed in the lean-to.

“Easy,” said Tom Mulvehill. His voice stayed steady and even, deadly calm. “He wouldn’t come to take us all by his lonesome. So don’t make any suspicious moves unless I do. Dove Ed?”

“What?”

“Get back to those horses and make like you’re just tending them, but turn them so the brands ain’t visible. Can’t let those stolen ones be seen.”

Dove Ed scrambled to his feet, and Tom said, “Easy, boy. Slow and steady.” The boy walked off in the direction of the horses.

“Cash, you might want to put on a fresh shirt before the man gets here,” Tom said, and poured himself more coffee.

Cash headed for the lean-to. He reached for the tent flap and flicked it aside, stared at his bedding, still rumpled from his night’s sleep, before rummaging in Tom’s gear. He came out, buttoning the clean shirt over his bandages. His gunbelt he left where it lay, wishing he dared strap it on. But neither Tom nor Dove Ed wore theirs, and he thought it might be noticeable if he put it on now. He didn’t know what they would do if the sheriff drew on them. He tucked the shirttails into his trousers, trying to keep the pain from his face.

“That’s mine,” Tom said, nodding at the shirt.

“I didn’t think you’d mind,” Cash said, “Since we just tore up my last clean one to make bandages.” Tom grunted and sipped at his coffee.

Together they watched the sheriff approach. Cash racked his brains, trying to think if they had forgotten anything that could point to their guilt. Tom seemed to have thought of everything, but the ball of ice in his belly did not thaw, even when the sheriff rode closer and they could see the smile on his face. The man rode at his ease, one hand raised in a genial wave, and dismounted by the corner of the ruined cabin to tie his horse.

“Morning, boys,” he called.

“Morning, sheriff,” Tom said, and Cash echoed him, hoping his face looked as placid as Tom’s. “Can we pour you a cup of coffee?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” said the sheriff.

Cash bent to fetch a cup from beside the fire. As he did, the key slid out of his shirt to dangle in front of his face.

Chapter 26

Morgan watched the man fumble with the key that hung around his neck by a string or thong, tucking it back into his shirt without standing up first. He had some difficulty making it stay put so that he could pour some coffee into a tin mug. When he straightened up, his face was red and wore a thin sheen of perspiration. He offered the mug to Morgan with a set expression, almost a challenge, but Morgan took it with a nod and thanks, his own smile firmly in place.

The Williams farm looked much as it had during his last visit: the tumbledown buildings, the ruined cabin still scarred by fire, the fallow, overgrown garden plots, the wagon and horses. The only additions, the lean-to and the incomplete corral fence, were slapdash affairs, hastily erected and impermanent. A pick and shovel, handles weathered from use and exposure, leaned against the fence near where it ended as if waiting for someone to return and continue the work. Still, Morgan said, “Looks like you boys are settling in pretty well.”

From his seat by the fire, Tom Mulvehill said, “That ground’s stonier than we figured, and we didn’t reckon on the cabin falling in. But as long as the weather’s mild, I don’t mind sleeping under canvas.”

“I’ve slept in worse,” said Morgan.

Tom nodded. “Worst part is the snoring.”

“How do you know?” said Cash Joyner. “You’re the one does it all.”

They shared a chuckle, and Morgan took a drink of coffee. Tom said, “What can we do for you today, sheriff?”

“I came to have a word with Dove Ed, but I thought I’d see how you all were getting along since that business with Putney.” On the ride out to the farm, Morgan had racked his brain for a plausible excuse for his visit before settling on a show of fatherly concern. He shot a glance toward Dove Ed, out among the horses, and let his voice drop lower. “Has he recovered, do you think? From the beating and...?”

“Oh, he’s right as rain,” said Tom. “He’s got a hard head, that boy. He was shook up for a time, but I’ll tell you, he’s a harder worker than Cash or me.”

“Harder than you, anyway,” Cash said.

“Go to hell,” Tom said, and grinned. “So, sheriff, what’s this I hear about a stagecoach robbery?”

Morgan took a long pull at his coffee to hide his surprise at the question. Mulvehill had more than his share of brass, assuming he was in on the holdup. But it was exactly the sort of thing a curious rancher might ask of a lawman in a casual conversation. He noticed that Cash Joyner had also chosen that moment for a long swallow of coffee. “I don’t know,” Morgan said. “What have you heard?”

Tom shrugged. “Just that there was a holdup north of town, a man shot. I wondered if you had caught the road agents, is all.”

“No,” Morgan said. “They knew their business all right. We lost them in the hills.”

“Too bad.”

“Yes.” He put down his empty mug and looked over to the group of horses. “Thanks for the coffee. I’d better speak to Dove Ed and start back.”

At once, Cash turned and walked toward the horses, saying over his shoulder, "I'll get him for you. You stay put." He cupped a hand to his mouth and shouted, "Dove Ed! Come over here! Man wants to talk to you!"

Tom picked up the coffeepot, made a long arm to refill Morgan's mug. Only a trickle, sludgy with grounds, came out of the spout. "Damnation," he said. "Didn't know we were that low. I'll brew up some more."

"No need," Morgan said. Fifty yards away, Dove Ed met Cash halfway to the horses. They exchanged a few words, and Dove Ed looked Morgan's way with an expression he could not read. The boy handed a horse brush to Cash, who took it and headed over to the horses. Dove Ed came on alone, his eyes on the ground. Tom busied himself with the coffeepot and the water and set the pot on the fire just as Dove Ed came up.

"Hello," Morgan said. The boy nodded but did not speak. A muscle in his jaw twitched, as though he were clenching his teeth. With the swelling and bruises gone from his face, Dove Ed looked boyish once again, but something in his eyes had hardened since Morgan saw him last. "It's good to see you, Dove Ed."

Hands behind his head, completely at his ease, Tom said, "The sheriff here has been telling us about the great stagecoach holdup, Dove Ed. He says the bandits got clean away, isn't that so, sheriff. Say, how much did they make off with, anyway?"

"A fair piece," Morgan said. "But they shot three men in the process. That concerns me more than the money."

“Well, that’s dangerous work, stagecoach driving,” said Tom. “A man does that needs to expect trouble from time to time.”

“That seems uncharitable, Mr. Mulvehill.”

Tom spread his arms and shrugged. “Just the way it is. When you’re carrying lots of money, somebody might try to take it, same as if you run a bank.”

Morgan turned to Dove Ed. “What do you think? Man who got killed, he was just a passenger. He deserve that, you think?”

Surprise spread over Dove Ed’s face. “I thought you said they killed three.”

Morgan shook his head. “I said they shot three. Killed a passenger, badly wounded a shotgun messenger. Winged the driver, a man named Mart Goddard. He’s been driving for ten years now, so I suppose he was due to get shot. That the way you see it, Mr. Mulvehill?”

“No offense, sheriff. I just meant it’s a bad line of work if you want to keep safe, is all.”

Dove Ed said, “They gonna be all right?”

“Who?”

“The...the driver and the other man.”

“Old Mart, he’s tough. He’ll be driving again before you know it. The other fellow, he took a load of buckshot, nearly died before they could get him to Malad Summit, but the doc says he’ll make it. I guess he’s pretty tough too.”

Morgan saw the tension go out of Dove Ed's shoulders, as though he had put down a heavy weight. Tom Mulvehill, on the other hand, folded his arms across his chest. He seemed to want to ask more questions, but didn't know what to say.

Morgan ignored him. "But that's not why I came. How have you been, Dove Ed? Your head mended all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You've been able to work and ride, then?"

"I said I was fine. What do you want?"

"It's like this. I was talking with Alice last night." Morgan stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and stared at the ground, doing his best to look embarrassed. "She asked if I had seen you around, and when I said that I hadn't she seemed awful disappointed. She's been under the weather, you know."

"Is she all right?"

"Well, she's feeling right poorly." He hated himself for the lie, for playing on the boy's affections, for using Alice as a lure, but he knew that he had to separate Dove Ed from Tom and Cash somehow and he could think of no other way. But by the question and tremor in his voice, Morgan thought he had succeeded. "At any rate, I promised her I'd look you up and see if you'd pay her a visit. I think it would do her a world of good to see you, Dove Ed."

"All right." Dove Ed nodded. Both his face and voice seemed lighter than when Morgan arrived. "I'll come."

Tom got to his feet. As far as Morgan could tell, he wasn't wearing a sidearm, which reassured him, but only to a point. "Tell you what. You ride ahead and we'll catch up soon as we can saddle the horses."

"No need for you to come along, Mr. Mulvehill. Dove Ed and I can manage."

"No trouble at all. Fact is, we need some provisions anyways, but we've got a few things to finish up here first. Don't let us keep you waiting."

"I'll be along shortly," Dove Ed said.

Morgan shrugged, cursing to himself. He had hoped for some time alone with Dove Ed, certain that he could get through to the boy if Tom and Cash were not around, but he had not foreseen Tom's sly wariness. And suppose they turned up at Alice's home or the saloon, only to discover her in the peak of health? That could not be permitted. No, there was no help for it now. He pulled his hands out of his pockets, a slightly crumpled envelope in his right, which he held out to Dove Ed.

"I almost forgot," he said. "Alice wanted me to give this to you. You don't have to read it now. Just when you have the time."

Dove Ed took the slim envelope and opened it. Inside was a single sheet of stationery, folded once. As he drew it out, the paper trembled in his hand. He looked at the writing inside and gave Morgan a puzzled glance, then began to read, moving his lips as he worked out the words.

"What's it say?" said Tom, and came around the campfire.

Morgan spoke before he reached Dove Ed's shoulder. "By the way, Mr. Mulvehill?"

“Yeah?” Tom paused mid-stride and looked at him.

“Since you asked about the robbery I thought you might be interested to know. County’s put a reward on the bandits.”

Dove Ed glanced at Tom, who once again wore a knowing grin, and whose stare never left Morgan’s face. “Is that so?”

“Five hundred dollars for information leading to apprehension. A thousand dollars for the capture or killing of each bandit.” Having lied about Alice to entice Dove Ed into town, Morgan felt no compunction about increasing the amount of the reward to discomfit Tom Mulvehill, and keep his attention away from note. The man showed no concern. Rather, he whistled in admiration.

“That’s generous terms, sheriff,” he said. “Why, I’d turn in my own grandmother for a thousand dollars.”

“I don’t think she had anything to do with it,” Morgan said, and smiled. “Witnesses saw three men. But if they change their stories to include an elderly lady, I’ll thank you for her whereabouts.”

Tom laughed. “You wouldn’t want to take that lady alone,” he said. “I learned how to fight from her, and by God she can still whip me.”

“Then I just hope she’s not in my jurisdiction.”

While they bantered, Dove Ed finished reading the note, refolded it and tucked it into his shirt pocket. When he turned away without another word, heading for the corral where Cash still stood among the horses, Morgan heaved a mental sigh of relief. The boy had not revealed that

the note came not from Alice, but from Morgan himself. Had he chosen to show the note to Tom, things could have gotten sticky. They still might.

Morgan said, "I'll hope to see you in town soon." He walked to his horse and loosened the reins, climbed into the saddle. Tom stood watching him go. Dove Ed had reached the horses and was speaking to Cash. Both of them looked toward him. Morgan raised a hand in farewell and rode up the track. When he reached the crest of the hill he looked back. All three men were standing by the horses, and Tom Mulvehill waved his arm in the direction of Malad City. None of them paid any heed to him. Morgan rode slowly until he was out of sight of the farm before he urged his mount to a trot.

Tom Mulvehill had outflanked him at the last, and Morgan had the distinct impression that he hadn't fooled the man at all with his lies and evasions. In a few moments, perhaps, he would badger Dove Ed into divulging the contents of his note, and when he did he would come after Morgan with murder on his mind. Morgan preferred to have a substantial head start before then. He would return to town, gather up his deputies and a few other steady men and lay in wait, but he wagered against himself that Tom would be too canny to venture into town, into an ambush. What then? Ride out and try to take them at the farm? He should have done that from the start.

The problem was he had no indication that the three had committed the robbery to begin with, just his suspicions. Their camp held no cans of paint, no loose shovel handles, no clothing from the Mercantile or Vanderhoof's store, let alone gold dust, bullion, or cash. The Williams farm lay empty, even the husk of the cabin. Morgan wondered idly what had happened to the massive iron door under which they had found Mulvehill the night Jacob Putney died. He thrust

it from his mind. A missing door, even one as large as that, was no more proof of wrongdoing than an absence of gold or paint was. If only he could have gotten close enough to see the brands on the horses. Waldron thought that two had gone missing after the bandits crossed his land, and two unbranded ones had turned up in their place. But suppose he had insisted? Mulvehill would have shot him dead, of that Morgan had no doubt.

In fact, Morgan had no doubt that Dove Ed, Tom Mulvehill, and Cash Joyner had committed the robbery that killed two men and wounded another, a friend of Morgan's. The conversation with them confirmed the matter, but Morgan had ridden out hoping against hope that he was mistaken. He bore no love for Mulvehill or Joyner; they could go to the devil. But he had hoped that Dove Ed, at least, was innocent of these acts so that he need not watch an old friend's son hang. With that in mind, he had penned a brief message for the boy, gambling that Dove Ed would be reluctant to deliver Morgan into Tom's hands. The gamble had paid off, at least for now.

He sighed and legged his horse into a gallop. Mentioning the reward might put the fox in the henhouse and cause some confusion, but that would not last long. He had to fetch reinforcements before the three made a move. And as he rode, he could try to figure out what to tell Alice.

Chapter 27

On the hurried ride to the cave, Dove Ed let his horse lag behind the others so that he could read and re-read Morgan's note:

Daffyd,

I hope to deliver this news in person, but circumstances may prevent it. I will be brief.

The doctor tells me that Charlie Parks, who was shot during the robbery, will most likely recover. Perhaps you don't know what I mean. I hope that is the truth.

Perhaps you know what I mean, but you don't care. If that is so, then I will see you at your hanging and may God have mercy on your soul.

But if you know what I mean and it comes as a relief to you, then I beg you to come to me at once. I can help you, I think, but I have to do it soon.

Your father helped me when I was at my lowest ebb. To my shame, I did not help him as much as I could have, but I can help you if you will let me.

Morgan

When he opened it there on the farm with Morgan and Tom standing nearby, he almost did not understand. Never a strong reader, he went through it a second time, and a third. When he realized what it meant, his head snapped up, looking for Morgan. But the sheriff was already riding up the track away from the farm, with Tom Mulvehill watching.

For the first time since the robbery, Dove Ed felt as though he saw things clearly. Until reading it in the note, he had not known the name Charlie Parks. Learning the man would live, his own heart expanded, like a great belt had been unstrapped from around it.

“Come on, boy,” Tom said. Morgan was a distant shape on the hillside, nearly out of sight, and Tom strode toward Cash and the horses. Dove Ed refolded the note and stuffed it into his shirt pocket and followed.

“We need to leave,” Tom said. “Now. Before he comes back.”

“Why?” Cash said. He still held the currycomb and leaned against the flank of the horse beside him. His color was not good.

“He knows,” Tom said.

“No,” Dove Ed said.

“How?” Cash said.

“I don’t know how, but he knows,” Tom said. “Maybe he didn’t before he come up here, but he knows now, and he’ll be back with deputies behind him.”

“Shit,” said Cash. He sagged against the horse as though exhausted.

Dove Ed shook his head. “He just come to see me,” he said. “Tell me about Alice. That’s all.”

“Get your head out of your ass, boy,” Tom said. “It don’t take a good liar to tell a bad one, and I’m a god damned world champion. That man come to look us over, is what. You see

his eyes? Looking at every piece of gear in this camp, looking for anything to do with the stagecoach.”

“Did he see the brands?” said Cash, his head still hanging.

“Don’t think so. Even if he did, he couldn’t hardly draw down on all three of us. No, he’s gone to fetch some help, and if they’re up on the hill just yonder, it won’t be long.” He waved his hand in the general direction of Malad City, and they all turned to search the rough track. They saw no sign of Morgan, but Dove Ed imagined he could hear hoofbeats on the wind, the sound of the posse approaching. His skin crawled.

“If they are just over the hill,” Cash said, coming around from behind the horses, “Ain’t nothing we can do about it. They’ll have us. But maybe they ain’t. So let’s saddle up and get out of here.”

That was several hot, dusty, hurried hours ago. They loaded the horses with everything they could carry, looking over their shoulders every few seconds for a band of lawmen to appear on the crest of the hill. The wagon, the lean-to, the heavier tools they left behind. They put Cash in charge of the two stolen horses before Tom and Dove Ed rode up the track to scout ahead. Dove Ed pictured Morgan waiting with ranks of armed and mounted men, right up until he crested the hill and saw the country stretching empty toward the horizon. He turned back and beckoned to Cash, waiting as the lean man caught up with them. Dove Ed looked around at the little spread of land that killed his mother, ruined his father, and nearly destroyed him. Then he wheeled his horse around and followed Tom up the road, heading in the direction of Samaria.

They followed a route chosen for just such an eventuality, leaving the road unobserved and careful to leave little sign. Once in the backcountry they began to feel more confident that

they had eluded any pursuers, and their backward glances came fewer and fewer. Only then did Dove Ed dare to ease Morgan's note out of his shirt pocket and read it through again, pondering the meaning of each sentence.

I hope to deliver this news in person. Dove Ed tried to imagine what would have happened if Morgan had chanced upon him alone, what they would have said to each other. He hadn't the faintest idea how he would have reacted. Even now he wasn't certain what to do.

The doctor tells me that Charlie Parks, who was shot during the robbery, will most likely recover. Perhaps you don't know what I mean. I hope that is the truth. He wished that were true as well. In Dove Ed's mind, the roar of his shotgun drowned out every recollection of the holdup. He saw the man, Parks, through a haze of powder smoke, fling up his arms and collapse over the rear of the coach. After that, his next memory was of standing over Parks' body, peppered with red holes from the shot.

Perhaps you know what I mean, but you don't care. If that is so, then I will see you at your hanging and may God have mercy on your soul. On the long retreat, with the posse close behind them, Dove Ed had tried to will his heart harder, to force himself from caring, to concentrate only on escape. In their packs they carried more wealth than any of them had ever seen. Next to that, what was the life of one man? Well, two if you counted the passenger, three if you included Jacob Putney...

He had been successful only in deadening all emotion. The money seemed unreal, more so after they locked it behind the vault door. Then came the string of days, each one like the last, pretending to work the farm and trying not to remember the expression on Charlie Parks' face.

But if you know what I mean and it comes as a relief to you, then I beg you to come to me at once. I can help you, I think, but I have to do it soon. Dove Ed worried at this like a coyote with a tough old chicken. How could Morgan help? Even if Parks survived, it was Dove Ed's shot that laid him low, and Dove Ed who fled with the loot from the coach. It was Dove Ed who stole horses from Waldron's ranch. How could Morgan paper over such offenses? Despite his doubts, though, hope quickened in him that there was a way to make all these things right.

But what about Cash and Tom? What about the cache of treasure squirreled away in the cave?

He could ride off and leave them right now, but Tom, at least, would give chase, and that could only end one way. Better to wait until they reached the cave, and perhaps even longer? No, Morgan said it had to be soon. He didn't want to delay much more.

Your father helped me when I was at my lowest ebb. To my shame, I did not help him as much as I could have, but I can help you if you will let me. By the time they arrived at the cave with the iron door, Dove Ed had decided.

Tom wanted to empty the cave and ride out immediately, but Cash, his face pinched and wan with pain, said he would go no farther today. "You wouldn't let me ride into Malad City, and that was just for supplies," he said, grunting as he slid from the saddle. His legs nearly gave way when he landed. "You wanted to break camp right away, well, we did that. You wanted to ride hard and confuse our back trail, we've done that too. But boys, I'm done in."

Dove Ed offered his shoulder, and Cash leaned on him to the cave mouth, where he fished the key out of his shirt and handed it to Dove Ed, who unlocked the iron door. Tom set to caring for the horses and unloading their gear, saying, "It's just as well, I guess. I don't like the

look of that sky.” Clouds had piled up in the western sky as they rode, warning of approaching storms. “Get him settled, Dove Ed, then you come back and help me. I want to get a tarp up to shelter the horses tonight.”

Inside the door, Cash leaned against the wall of the cave while Dove Ed went ahead to prepare a bedroll for him. The daylight from the doorway cast only weak illumination inside, and even that was fading as the clouds rolled in. Dove Ed drew a box of matches from his pocket. He struck one and touched it to the wick of the oil lantern that stood on the strongbox at the center of the cave, adjusting the flame to keep it from burning too high. He paused, thinking of the fortune in gold and notes inside the strongbox that served as their table. Cash eased past him and sank down onto one of the rude pallets of straw, wincing and holding his left arm awkwardly against his injured side.

“Christ almighty,” he said.

“We should take a look at that.” Cash waved him away.

“No. It’ll keep. You get out there, help Tom with the horses before the weather breaks.”

As Dove Ed headed for the door, Cash lay across his pallet and put his arm over his eyes, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

Outside, Dove Ed found Tom fighting with a large canvas tarp that the wind kept snapping while he tried to tie it over a gap between two boulders. He scrambled atop the rocks and grabbed a rope tied to one corner and lashed it around a nearby outcropping. Together they secured it into a makeshift roof over the gap and drove the horses beneath it, where they would be sheltered overhead and on two sides. They removed the saddles and packs and toted them into the cave as thunder rolled across the lowering sky, and a few fat drops spattered the ground. Tom

ducked inside, but Dove Ed stayed by the door, watching lightning reach toward the earth, feeling the wind cool on his face. When the wind gusted rain through the door, he pulled it nearly shut and wedged it with a stone to allow the air to circulate. Although the cave stayed naturally cool and the framework let some air in around the doorframe, three men and an oil lamp could soon make it feel stuffy and close.

They broke out some supplies and canteens and ate. Cash stirred himself to take some jerked beef, and they shared a can of peaches while they listened to the thunder outside and the wind whistling through the metal latticework supporting the door. “It’s a shame we didn’t have time to lay in more whiskey,” said Tom, chewing on a hardtack biscuit. “That sheriff would arrive just when we was low on provisions.”

He brushed his hands together, swallowing the last of his hardtack, and lifted the lantern from the strongbox. Shadows tilted crazily as he moved it to the side so he could open the lid of the strongbox. He took out bags of gold dust, coins, and bills, and began arranging them in four piles, the fourth of which was larger than the others.

“What the hell are you doing?” Cash said.

“Planning ahead. Tomorrow each of us will pack along one of these piles, and the last one will go on the pack animal.” Tom picked up three bundles of banknotes and tossed one to Cash and one to Dove Ed. The last he folded and tucked into his shirt pocket. “A little spending money. I figure we’ll head north from here, to Oneida or as far as Pocatello, and go west from there.”

“Are you crazy?” Cash said. “We go north, we got to pass through Malad City. Ain’t that what we’re trying to avoid?”

“We could swing wide around it.”

“If there’s a reward out, then news damn sure made it to Oneida and Pocatello. And what if someone spots the brands on those horses we took? They won’t even care about the stagecoach; they’ll just hang us for horse thieves and find the money after.” Cash shook his head. “Why north anyway? Why not back south? We could take the train west from Ogden.”

Dove Ed said, “Where are you going?” Cash narrowed his eyes.

Tom said, “West, I said.”

“But where? What’s there?”

Tom stared, and said, “In California there’s saloons and casinos, hotels and women. There’s music and dancing and whiskey.”

“There’s those things here, or in Ogden, or Idaho City. Why would you go west?”

“For one thing, we can’t stay here, remember? And besides, California has all those things, but better. The finest women, the biggest saloons, the best whiskey. And after all that, a man could buy himself a saloon of his own, if he had the money, which we do. I’m sick of the pissant little towns in the middle of nowhere, the dust when it’s hot and the mud when it’s raining, the bad food and the bad drinks and the dried-up women. In all my time in the Innocents, for all the scores we took, I never had a score like this one. I’m going somewhere I can take advantage of it.”

Cash said, “What Dove Ed means to say is, he ain’t coming.” He turned to Dove Ed. “Ain’t that right?”

“What?” said Tom.

“He said, where are you going? Not we: you.”

Tom scowled. “If you ain’t coming, what are you going to do? Go south? East to Kansas or Cincinnati maybe?” He snorted to show what he thought of that idea.

“No. I don’t know,” said Dove Ed. “I thought maybe of staying. Working my father’s...my farm.”

“That’s the stupidest idea I ever heard of. You can’t stay here, you dumb potato-eater,” Tom said, his voice rising. An angry flush spread up his neck to his face. “And even if you could, why would you want to? To work that patch of rock and dust, spend your life wondering if the crops will grow, or the horses go lame, until you starve or grind yourself down to nothing? With your share of the treasure, you could buy yourself a ranch in Montana or Texas or California, with hands to do the work, and live the life of a rich man, but you sure as hell can’t do that here. What will you tell the sheriff about where you got the money, as if he didn’t already know where it come from?”

Dove Ed said, “I don’t want the money.”

Silence fell in the cave. Outside, wind and water battered against the iron door. A lightning flash lit the doorway, and several seconds later thunder muttered distantly to itself.

Cash said, “Think about what you’re saying, Dove Ed.”

“I’ve thought about it already. You can keep the money. I don’t want any of it.” He held up the bundle of notes, tossed it at Cash’s chest. Cash made no attempt to catch it, and the bundle fell to the ground at his feet.

“All right, if that’s the way you want it.” He turned to Tom. “Congratulations, Tom. You just became richer by half.”

Tom scooped up the fallen bills. “Wait just a goddamn minute,” he said. “I’m all for cutting you out of the split, boy, but nobody cuts themselves out of a prize this big. And it’s for damn sure no one cuts themselves out to stay and get taken by the law. Why? What’s in it for you?”

“I’ve got a farm here,” Dove Ed said. “It’s not much but it’s mine, I didn’t have to steal it from anyone. There’s a girl, a woman in town...”

“That little cow from the saloon?” Tom said. “Or were you thinking of the whore from Nell’s? Don’t go thinking you’re better than me, boy, just because you’ve got a piece of worthless land. What are you going to do, marry your piece of tail, join the church choir, become a pillar of the community? Remember, you killed a man for money, even if you don’t want it now. You laid in wait and bushwhacked that shotgun messenger and ran off with his treasure while he bled his life out. You’re a thief and a murderer, and your friend the sheriff wants to put you at the end of a rope!”

“No,” said Dove Ed. “That man didn’t die.”

“You shot him and left him for dead, like you did for Jacob Putney. You’re a killer. How would your little piece from the saloon feel about that? How would the city fathers feel about that? Go give your testimony in church on Sunday and see what it gets you!”

Dove Ed pulled Morgan’s note from his pocket and held it up. “The sheriff says he can help me, if I come right away. I’ll go in the morning. The money’s yours. You can take the

horses too, if you want, but it's my last chance." He let his hand fall, still holding the note, and hung his head. "I sinned, I know it. I thought with enough money it wouldn't matter, but it does."

Cash put his hands on Tom's chest. "It's all right, Tom. Tomorrow we'll ride out without him, and he's on his own. He takes his own chances."

But Tom would not be placated. "Are you so stupid you've forgotten that there's a reward out for you? For all of us? Cash, what do you think will happen when the sheriff catches up with him? He'll sell us out, is what, hoping to keep his own neck out of the noose!"

"No," said Dove Ed. "No, I won't. I promise."

"He'll keep quiet, Tom," said Cash. "He won't talk."

"No, he won't," said Tom, reaching for his pistol. "No, by God, I'll kill him first!"

Chapter 28

Until the moment Tom reached for his weapon, Cash believed the argument to be simply another squabble in the long series of squabbles between Tom and Dove Ed. He reckoned that Tom needed to let off some steam, while Dove Ed would reconsider his intention to leave, giving up thousands of dollars in the process, and turn himself in to the sheriff. As he had since their meeting, he did his best to separate the two and soothe their tempers, despite the pain in his left shoulder aggravated by the day's ride. But Dove Ed remained determined, and Tom's anger burned brighter and hotter with every passing word, until finally he pulled his revolver from its holster and fired.

The bullet went into the floor; as Tom drew, Cash flung himself on Tom's right arm, dragging it down even as he pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot slapped the walls of the cave and rebounded, making Cash's ears ring, while the bullet plowed up dirt and dust before caroming off deeper into the cave. Tom cursed and tried to wrench his arm free of Cash's grasp. They reeled back and forth, scuffling for footing, while Cash yelled at Dove Ed to run, to get out, quick, but more gunshots resounded, deafening in the enclosed space.

Cash's injured left arm could not maintain a grip on Tom, but he clung with his right arm until something struck him hard and knocked him to the ground, the breath rushing from his lungs in an explosive gasp. Fire blazed before his eyes, burning oil from the overturned lamp spilling across the cavern floor. Through the ringing in his ears he heard running steps, clashing metal, then voices. He pushed himself up on his right elbow, still wheezing for air. The flames from the oil were already dying down, having somehow missed igniting the bedding and the banknotes. They cast a weak blue and yellow light, by which Cash could see the dark, wet stain

spreading across the front of his shirt. He sat back, pressing his hand to it and bringing it away, wet with his own blood.

“Aw, shit,” he said.

He was alone in the cavern, with the treasure spread at his feet and the light flickering low. From the cave mouth, he could hear Tom’s voice, raised again, and he thought he heard Dove Ed respond, but could make out none of the words. A gunshot, and another, and the voices were silent. The light ebbed.

Tom came back into the cave, identifiable in the guttering light only from the stream of curses pouring from his mouth. He stopped when he realized the light was going out. Then he cursed some more, bending down and feeling about for the fallen lantern.

“It’s not busted,” he said. “Hope there’s some oil left in it.”

Cash heard him strike a match and saw Tom’s face in the flare of light it cast for a moment before he touched it to the lamp wick. The flame rose, chasing the darkness back into the corners. Tom put the lantern back on the strongbox and looked at Cash. He sat heavily on the ground.

“Dove Ed’s gone,” he said. “Run off into the night, probably to fetch the sheriff.”

“That might be because you tried to shoot him,” Cash said.

“Why the hell did you stop me?”

“Why the hell did you try? He wouldn’t have told nobody.”

Tom turned his attention to his leg. Cash saw fresh blood staining Tom's right trouser leg above the knee. Tom put his fingers into a fresh hole in the fabric and tore it wider, hissing as he did. "He'd say he wouldn't. But once they start asking him questions, it'd only be a matter of time before they get everything out of him."

"Maybe." Cash watched Tom probe at his leg. "Did Dove Ed do that, or did you shoot yourself?"

"If I did, it's because you spoiled my aim." Tom rested his arms on his knees, his hands bloody. "Damn it, why'd you come between us, Cash? It's been a long time coming, me and him. You had no call to stop me. Instead you let him have time to get his piece out and shoot back. He still ain't much of a shot, but he winged me pretty good."

"He did more than that."

Tom squinted at him and scrambled over to his side, pulling Cash's hand away from his chest. Blood soaked the shirt all the way to his belt, black in the uncertain light. Tom undid the buttons gently and peeled the wet cloth away. More blood pulsed sluggishly from the wound, adding to the slick mess that seeped into Cash's undershirt. Tom kept his face impassive, but blew his breath out in a whistle. "Dove Ed did that?"

"I wasn't exactly watching. Might have been you, but what difference does that make?"

"Not much, it's true."

"Guess there's no point asking you to get help."

"More than you know."

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, before he lit out, Dove Ed locked us in here.”

“What?” Cash laughed, but lost it coughing. A coppery taste flooded his mouth and he spat a black gobbet. “I’ll be damned. The little son of a bitch ends up with all the treasure, after all his fine speeches.”

Tom helped Cash get as comfortable as possible on one of the sleeping pallets, propped up against the wall. “I don’t want to go out lying down,” Cash said. Tom placed a canteen of water by his hand and rolled a cigarette, which he lit before placing it between Cash’s lips. They sat together while Tom bound up the bullet graze in his own leg. Then Tom stood and picked up his rifle and Dove Ed’s shotgun, abandoned when the boy fled.

“If it’s all the same to you,” he said, “I’m going to try to get that door open. I’d rather not sit and wait for the sheriff to come find me.”

“Be my guest,” said Cash. “I think I’ll just rest here a while.”

Tom nodded and left, taking the lantern with him. Cash could see a faint outline of light, bobbing and flickering as Tom approached the door. He closed his eyes. The pain of each breath was growing duller, which he welcomed, but he felt cold and tired, and had trouble catching his wind. He had seen many men die just this way during the war and thought it would frighten him to be in their place. In fact, most of them had died weeping, some calling for their mothers, some calling to God. But Cash felt calm and not particularly sad, and there was no one’s name he needed to speak.

He had heard dying men confess their sins, as though they could not bear the pain and the burden of their guilt both. He cast about his recollection, searching for anything that weighed him down. It surprised him that he could hardly think of a single time in his life that he regretted. He never cared for Army life, but it had taken him away from the barren patch of clay in North Carolina where he was born. He did not repent of the nights spent in saloons or whorehouses; in fact, he remembered those nights fondly as the reward for the difficulties he had endured. And if he had fallen into bad company and stolen and killed, well, he never expected to die any other way either.

A rifle shot erupted from the cave mouth, shocking Cash back to awareness. Another shot, and another, on and on, evenly spaced a few seconds apart. He lost count after the first few, but Tom must have fired the rifle dry and reloaded, because a long silence fell, followed by another fusillade. Cash wished he could shut out the noise and sleep, but each explosion made him flinch a little, crashing through the cave so that he could feel his heart pounding in time. When at last the gunfire ceased, Cash feared his heart would as well.

Tom limped back in, his expression telling Cash the whole story. A thin scrape on his left cheek bled into his beard. "Damn ricochet," Tom said. "I nearly shot my own head off."

"I guess we chose well when we bought that door," Cash said, and the thinness of his own voice surprised him.

"That we did." Tom slumped on his bedroll. "I marked up that door and the frame pretty good before I ran out of ammunition. If I had another ten boxes, I expect I could really make a dent."

Cash wheezed feebly, the only laughter he could manage. “You’re good at destroying property, aren’t you, Tom? You still owe me for one pistol you ruined.”

“You son of a bitch. I should have killed you instead of joining up with you.”

“You tried and missed, remember? If I’d killed you, I wouldn’t be in this fix.”

“No, you’d be starving by the roadside somewhere, unable to fend for yourself. Why, you couldn’t even hold up a stage properly,” Tom said. Cash did not reply.

After a while, Tom said, “I keep thinking of those poor bastards who died behind this door in Corinne. At least they went quick, breathing smoke or burning up. I always figured I’d go quick, from a bullet most likely, or getting hanged. I never figured on starving to death. How long does it take, do you think?”

Cash was silent.

“I bet thirst’ll do it first. There’s food in the saddlebags, but only a little water in our canteens. We’ll ration it out, make it last. Should have filled them before dark, stead of waiting for morning, but no help for that now. Important thing is to hold out as long as possible, cause Dove Ed’ll be back, sooner or later.”

Cash lay still. Tom covered Cash’s face with his hat and took the pistol from Cash’s holster. He made his way to his own bedroll, stretched out, and settled himself to wait.

The sound of the shot galvanized Dove Ed into action. He jerked his revolver out and pulled the trigger, neglecting to cock the hammer in his haste. The pistol, a single-action, failed

to fire, and Dove Ed watched, horrified, as Cash wrestled with Tom, yelling for Dove Ed to run. He backed toward the exit, fumbling at his own pistol. Tom's went off twice more, the din drowning out Cash's voice, and startling Dove Ed so that he slipped the hammer of his gun. It went off. Dove Ed cocked it again and fired at random into the cave before turning and fleeing for the exit.

At the iron door he turned and pointed his pistol back the way he had come, his hand trembling. Another shot from within, and Dove Ed knew that Tom would appear, and when he did he would be killed. Without thinking, he reached out left-handed, grasped the hard, cool edge of the vault door and swung it shut. It clashed against the framework, rattling it against the staples he and Cash had labored so long to drive into the stone. Dove Ed put his back to the door, gasping for breath, and his hand fell on the key, still jutting from the lock where he had left it. Wind lashed rain into his face.

"Dove Ed, you get back here!" Tom shouted from behind the door.

Dove Ed turned the key and yanked it from the lock. He spun around and raised his gun, but aiming was out of the question. He backed away, making for the nearest outcropping of rock. Before he reached it, he heard Tom Mulvehill's body slam against the door, and his roar of outrage clear over the storm. "God damn it, boy, you get back here, I said!"

"No sir, I don't think I will now," Dove Ed said. "I said I was leaving, and I am."

"All right, all right, wait!" Tom said. In the rain and the darkness, Dove Ed could not see him, but he could picture Tom pressing his face close to the edge of the door, where the stone gapped away from the framework. In places there was just enough space to reach or peer

through. “You want to take your chances with the sheriff, that’s your decision. But you aren’t gonna just leave us stuck here, are you?”

Dove Ed looked down at the key clutched in one fist, the revolver in the other.

“Look, Dove Ed, I’m sorry I drew on you,” Tom said. “You know I’ve got a temper. Always have. But you ride away now, you’re killing Cash and me. Is that what you want?”

Dove Ed shook his head, confused. “No, it ain’t,” he said. “But if I give you this key, Tom, I believe you’ll try to kill me again.”

Tom barked laughter, the mocking sound Dove Ed had grown to despise. “No use giving my word, either, is there?” he said. “How about this: I’ll throw my gun out there. You come get it, and leave the key on the ground where I can see it—not reach it, just see it. Then you go on your way while I figure a way to pull the key in here. By the time I’ve got it, you’ll be long gone. What do you say?”

Dove Ed considered. If it were only Tom, he would ride away and not look back, but he hated to leave Cash, at least, to the mercies of the law or starvation. “All right,” he said. “Throw it out.”

A solid thump sounded from a few feet in front of the door. Dove Ed crept forward, feeling with his foot for the pistol, then froze. “What about Cash’s pistol? What does he say about all this?”

There was a long pause before Tom replied. “Cash grabbed my arm when I drew; it’s the only reason I missed,” he said. “But I slung him down and I guess he struck his head. He didn’t follow me up here.”

Dove Ed advanced farther, until his foot touched a something heavy and metallic, three or four yards from the iron door. He bent to retrieve it, still clutching the key in his hand. "I'll leave the key right here," he said. "You'll be able to see it by daylight..."

His hand closed, not on the butt of a pistol, but on the haft of Tom's Bowie knife.

Dove Ed flung himself backwards as Tom fired from his clumsy vantage point at the door. The muzzle flash blinded him, leaving afterimages swimming in his vision. He scrambled back for the safety of the rock outcropping, his feet slipping on the muddy ground and his hands scrabbling for purchase. The gun fired a second, a third time; to reach through the cage Tom had to contort his arm, shoulder and head into an awkward pose, the only thing that kept him from aiming true.

Dove Ed almost made it. As he reached the outcrop and spun behind cover, a hammer blow impacted on his skull. Sheets of light and color flared through his head and the ground leapt up to smash him in the face. The roaring of the storm disappeared, replaced by the roaring in his ears as darkness engulfed him.

How long he lay senseless, Dove Ed never knew. Consciousness came in fragments, blurred and monochrome like inferior daguerreotypes: his hands fumbling with the lead ropes of the horses; struggling to mount as the animals shied from the bloody apparition in their midst; the world spinning crazily as he lurched in the saddle, clinging to the pommel, while the horse chose its own path. He tasted coppery blood, washed into his mouth by the rain. He slumped over the horse's mane, or reeled back in the saddle, as though he rode a ship on a rolling sea. All about him was darkness.

He never felt himself fall, but looked up into a face he did not know. A man, round-featured and sun-weathered, spoke to him from a thousand miles away in a language he did not understand. Then a fire, and a blanket, and the sun overhead although it had just gone night. He was lifted and carried and bumped and rattled about: a wagon or a cart. Other men around him, above him, carrying him until the sun vanished and the sky became planks. He closed his eyes and let the darkness return.

Chapter 29

It surprised Morgan to see Bill Finney at the door of the sheriff's office; a rancher out on Marsh creek west of Malad City, Bill had little use for town and less for the law. He met Bill's eye between B.F. White and Henry Harkness, who sat with their backs to the door, facing Morgan across his desk. Ben White looked over his shoulder at Finney, annoyed at the interruption, and Morgan raised a finger.

"Why don't you wait on the porch there, Mr. Finney?" he said. "I won't be a minute." Finney nodded and took a seat in one of the chairs that overlooked the street. Ben White shifted in his chair as though expecting Morgan to shut the door. Harkness, looking freshly-barbered and wearing a tailored suit, regarded Morgan evenly and kept his peace.

"As I was saying," said White, implying that Morgan was to blame for Finney's appearance, "It's nothing personal, you understand. The commissioners feel that it's time to make some changes, and Mr. Harkness has suggested an acquaintance of his who might prove willing to take on the duties of the office. It seemed only fitting, considering the circumstances."

"Circumstances?" said Morgan. He knew what the man meant, but damned if he would make it easy for him.

Harkness said, "My predecessor, shot in the back while fleeing; a notorious murderer attacking residents of the county; a stagecoach robbed and passenger killed; horses stolen from a nearby ranch; no stolen property recovered or suspects apprehended. And all this in just the last few months. It seems the county could benefit from the presence of more experienced lawmen if Malad City is to grow and thrive. The men I have in mind kept the peace in the gold towns in Montana and Wyoming. I have no doubt they will do the same here."

“What men?”

“Walter Shoup, who is a former colonel of cavalry, and John McCammon, who served as both an Indian agent and United State marshal,” said Harkness. “I have had dealings with both of them and know them to be rigorous and fair in their enforcement of the law.”

Morgan looked at White, who somehow managed to wear conflicting expressions of satisfaction and embarrassment at this list of the sheriff’s failings. “I’m sorry, Morgan,” he said, “but it’s been decided. We wired Mr. Shoup and Mr. McCammon earlier this week, and have received their replies only this morning.”

“I see. And how soon do you anticipate their arrival?”

“In ten days’ time, perhaps sooner.”

For a moment, Morgan thought of taking the badge from his vest and casting it onto the desk before walking out, leaving White and Harkness speaking to an empty chair. Instead he rose, and his guests followed suit. “Very well,” he said. “I’ll see to it that everything is ready for them when they arrive.” That would be a matter of removing his few personal possessions from the desk—a bottle of whiskey, a pair of spurs that needed mending, a block of wood half-whittled into the awkward shape of a horse but never finished. If he left now, the office would hold nothing to say he had ever been there.

Henry Harkness extended his hand to Morgan, who shook it. “Thank you, sheriff,” he said. “If I may, come see me if you are in need of employment. I plan to expand my interests in Malad City. I could find room for a man such as yourself.”

Morgan nodded gravely, as though he took the offer seriously, although of course it was nonsense. You don't fire a man for incompetence and then put him to work for you. As he released Harkness' hand and reached for White, who shook his hand automatically, Morgan said, "Or maybe I'll find work down to the salt works, right, Ben?" White's smile did not reach his eyes.

The two men donned their hats and left without a backward look. Morgan slumped into his desk chair, which no longer felt like his. He cast his glance over the desktop, scarred and stained from eight years of use, and wondered why he had ever taken the job in the first place.

A soft cough at the door reminded him about Bill Finney, who stood there hat in hand. Morgan stirred himself and said, "Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

Finney's reply caught him unprepared. "Well sir, I believe I've got one of those road agents out at my ranch," he said. "He's shot pretty bad. I come for the doctor, but I figured I'd tell you first."

They rode to Finney's ranch together as fast as they could manage, Morgan, Finney, and Dr. Sherman, with Morgan urging them to keep up their pace. Finney's description of the injured man—"a young fella, black hair, shot in the head"—made Morgan think it had to be Dove Ed, but with Finney almost fifty years old, he tended to describe everyone age forty or less as a "young fella."

"My boy Luke come across him yesterday morning, lying by Marsh Creek and a roan horse nearby with Waldron's brand on him," Finney said as they hurried from the sheriff's

office, looking for the doctor. “Luke thought he was dead, but when he saw he was breathing he rode for home and the wagon. Me and Luke and Jack and Davy, we loaded him on the wagon and took him to the house, but Lord! He’s a fright, the whole side of his face tore up and bloody. I left the missus to look after him; she’s good with a poultice.”

“Was anyone else with him, or did you see any sign of anyone else?”

“No. Just him, face down in the grass. But there was rain last night. The young fella was soaked through. We didn’t waste time looking for anyone else.”

“Did you bring in Waldron’s roan?”

“Davy led him in. That’s how we knew it was one of the road agents. Heard about it from Waldron that they took two of his herd a while back and left him a couple of clapped-out buzzard bait in return.”

“He say anything?”

“Just moans is all. Say, is there a bounty on him?”

Morgan ignored the question. They found John Sherman at his dispensary, about to make his round. They apprised him of the situation, and as he fetched his instruments Morgan said to Bill Finney, “Now listen. There might be a reward coming, but for now you keep this quiet. If this should be one of them who held up the stage, I’ll see to it you get what’s yours. But if I hear one of your hands has been in town bragging about this, you’ll get what’s yours and more. Understand?”

Finney nodded, and Morgan knew the man would keep the news to himself. It might already be too late to muzzle his ranch hands, but he would deal with that when he had to. John

Sherman emerged with his bag, and the three men collected their horses and set out. The ride took something over an hour, even at the pace Morgan set, and they spoke little. It gave Morgan time to worry.

When he gave the note to Dove Ed, he half expected to be shot down before he could ride away from the Williams farm, but either Dove Ed hadn't shown the note to Cash and Tom, or he hadn't read it until it was too late. What happened then? From the mess they left at the farm, Morgan figured, the three had broken camp in a hurry, but not such a hurry that they forgot to cover their tracks. So they rode off together, but something had gone wrong. Perhaps Cash or Tom had discovered the note after all. Perhaps they had quarreled over the takings from the stage. Whatever the circumstances, he promised he would repay the hurt they had done Dove Ed.

It never occurred to him that the wounded man might be Cash or Tom, or even a stranger who had suffered a mishap. The thought might have spared him some worry during the ride.

They reined in outside the trim cabin where Bill Finney lived with his wife and three children. The eldest, Luke, a sixteen-year-old with a fringe of beard just beginning to show, had heard them approach and waited to take their mounts to the corral. Doctor Sherman slid to the ground and strode inside almost before his horse drew to a halt. Morgan followed, less than a step behind, while Finney took his time.

Inside, the cabin was neat as a pin. The door opened into a broad open room with a logn table at the center and the fireplace on the back wall. Doorways to the left and right led to bedrooms. Finney's daughters, tending the kettle in the fireplace and mending clothes, pointed the way to the bedroom on the right with quiet murmurs, but Sherman acted as if he knew the way already and tipped his hat to the girls without pausing. Morgan did the same, but moved

more self-consciously. The girls, in their early teens perhaps, regarded him gravely before returning to their tasks. Morgan stepped to the doorway and looked into the room beyond.

It was small and plainly furnished with a bed and a washstand. Mary Finney had pulled a chair next to the bed, although she stood now to keep out of the doctor's way. A basin on the floor held cloths and cloudy water. The air felt close and thick. Doctor Sherman sat on the edge of the bed, his hands gently exploring the mass of bandages and cloth that swaddled the man who lay there. Morgan did not recognize the face at first, swollen and blood-masked as it was. He walked around the bed to the far side and gazed down on the uninjured side of Dove Ed's face.

In the hours after the killing of Jacob Putney, Morgan had spent most of his time at Dove Ed's bedside, certain the boy would die from the damage to his head from Putney's shovel. The mottling of the bruises, the swelling, and the patch of cotton wool over the cut in his scalp all seemed too terrible to survive, but Morgan saw now that those were minor hurts compared to what a bullet could do. The right side of Dove Ed's face looked peaceful and boyish in sleep. The left side was a ruin of torn flesh and smashed bone, centered in his cheek and spreading outward to encompass the nose, the corner of the mouth, the eye. A furrow of red and black trailed back toward the left ear, where the bullet had left his body.

Morgan swallowed hard. It seemed impossible, but Dove Ed's chest rose and fell; the boy still breathed in rapid, shallow gulps. Despite Sherman's care and gentleness, he flinched away from his touch, moaning. Sherman opened his case and began extracting items from it, bottles and rolls of gauze and scissors. He said, "Please fetch me some fresh water, Mary." Mary Finney retrieved the basin and left the room without a glance at Morgan.

"He's going to die," Morgan said.

Doctor Sherman used the scissors to cut the gauze into broad squares. He said, "It's a wonder he hasn't already. He spent a night in the rain or face down in the mud with a wound that should have killed him outright. I'll apply a solution of chloride of zinc to clean it, then dress it with gauze. That's all I can do at this point."

Mary Finney returned, carrying the basin, now filled with clear water, and placed it at the foot of the bed in easy reach of Doctor Sherman. The doctor took a measured amount in an enameled cup and added something from one of his jars, then stirred it. He said, "There's nothing for you to do here, Morgan, and this is likely to be upsetting to watch."

"I'll stay."

"You won't be any use, I tell you."

"I won't be any more use in town, either."

"What do you mean?" From the case, Sherman took a piece of sponge and soaked it in the enamel cup. Mary Finney turned back the bedclothes from Dove Ed's shoulders and chest. The boy looked shrunken and pale against the sheets.

"I had a visit from B.F. White and Henry Harkness just before I came to find you. It seems I've been turned out as sheriff."

Sherman paused and turned a pitying glance on him. "I'm sorry, Morgan," he said.

"It's been coming," Morgan said.

Sherman nodded. He looked back at Dove Ed and said, "When I start to clean the wound, he's liable to thrash about. Do you think you could hold him still while I work?"

As the doctor swabbed the sponge, coated with the creamy mixture he had created, over the gruesome wound, Dove Ed indeed roused enough to struggle against his ministrations. Morgan held firmly to his shoulders, using one forearm along the boy's face so that he could not turn away. This left his own face just above Dove Ed's, inches from the torn, mangled hole in his cheek. The odors of the chloride of zinc mixed with the thick scent of blood in Morgan's nostrils and the boy's cries tore at his ears. He could and did close his eyes and turn his head away.

With that grisly task complete, Doctor Sherman covered the cheek with the squares of gauze and wrapped a clean bandage around Dove Ed's head to keep them in place. Dove Ed lapsed back into unconsciousness. Sherman gathered his medicines and tools, packed them back into his case, and rose. "I'll be back tomorrow to check on him and change the dressing," he said to Mary Finney. If he lives that long, he didn't say. He shrugged into his coat and settled his hat. "Shall we go, Morgan?"

"I'll sit with him a while," Morgan said. Sherman looked as though he would say something, but he merely shrugged and left. Outside, Morgan heard Bill Finney call for the doctor's horse.

"If that's all right," Morgan said to Mary Finney. "I don't want to be a bother to you."

"You sit," she said. "I'll bring you something." She went out.

Morgan turned the chair so that he could look at the unmarked side of Dove Ed's face, so small and lost beneath the swaddling and the blankets. He did not know how long he sat at the boy's side, watching his chest rise and fall. He never noticed when Mary Finney put a mug of coffee beside him. He watched the afternoon shadows creep across the counterpane without

noticing the passage of time. His leg began to fall asleep, and he shifted in his seat but did not take his eyes off Dove Ed.

“I’m sorry,” he said as the light through the window grew orange and lambent. “I tried to help you too late. Maybe when you first came back to town, or even after your father passed, I could have...no, even then it was too late. I abandoned your father long before that, let him fall into his bottle. I could have pulled him out, or stopped him going in to begin with. Instead I turned away, and left you to find your way alone.”

Dove Ed stirred and lay still again. Morgan waited to see if he would move or speak. Then he said, “I made a mess of it all, Dove Ed. I killed Red Murphy, and brought Henry Harkness here, and that was pure accident. I turned my back on Hugh Williams and his boy, and that was pure selfishness. But I failed to pull you from the path of that bullet, and that was pure sin.”

“Alice,” said Dove Ed.

Morgan caught his breath and leaned close to Dove Ed’s face. “It’s Morgan, Dove Ed. I’m here. What did you say?”

The boy mumbled and moaned, his legs shifting beneath the bedspread. “I left them in the cave. The door,” he said, his voice muffled and distorted by bandages and pain.

“Left who? Cash? Tom?”

Bill Finney appeared in the bedroom door. “Sheriff? What’s...?” Morgan waved him to silence. Finney came to stand beside him.

“Dove Ed, can you hear me? It’s Morgan. Where’s Cash? Where’s Tom?”

A tear collected in the corner of Dove Ed's right eye and spilled down the side of his face. "I locked the iron door. I shut them in the cave!"

"What's he talking about, Morgan?"

"Shh!"

Dove Ed reached out blindly, and Morgan took his hand. "It's all right, Dove Ed. I'm here. Where's the cave? I can let them out if you tell me."

Suddenly Dove Ed's right eye opened wide and searched the room, scanning in all directions at the same time. It made Morgan dizzy to watch, and he reached a hand to cover the good side of Dove Ed's face, hoping to calm the erratic dartings. Dove Ed seized his hand with surprising strength and pressed against it, sobbing.

"Alice!" he said. "Alice."

His tremors subsided; his breathing grew quieter, though ragged. Morgan felt the grip on his wrist relax as Dove Ed slumped back against the pillow. Fresh blood dotted the bandage over his eye. Morgan removed his hand, arranging Dove Ed's on his chest, and stepped back. Sweat, sprung out all over his body, cooled and made him shudder.

"Bill," he said, "would you be so good as to fetch my horse?"

"Sheriff, did you understand a word he said? About a cave and an iron door? What does it mean?"

"It means that I need to ride back to town and find Alice."

The sun set as Morgan rode in. The lights of Malad City, which once meant welcome and safety to him now seemed to keep him out, to warn him away from the safe places inside. The laughter and chatter emanating from Owens and Price saloon were not intended for his ears. He stopped at the livery and arranged for a horse to be saddled and waiting. Then he crossed the street and went through the door of the saloon.

He recognized many of the faces that turned toward him, and fancied that he knew the reason why expression left them when they saw who had walked in. He paid them no mind, but scanned the room for Alice. At that moment she emerged from the kitchen bearing plates of food. Morgan threaded his way between the tables and stopped in front of her.

“Morgan,” she said, a perplexed smile on her lips. “Why don’t you find a table and…”

“I need you to come with me, Alice. Right now.”

She laughed. “I can’t leave, Morgan. I’ve work to do.”

“Dove Ed Williams is out at Finney’s ranch,” Morgan said. “He’s dying, and the only word he’ll say is your name.”

“Dove Ed?” The plates sagged in her grip and her face went pale. Before she dropped them, Morgan took the plates and deposited them on the nearest table. The diners there protested, but Morgan ignored them, his hand already under Alice’s elbow. She clutched at him, stammering incoherent questions. Quiet spread through the saloon as the drinkers, the gamblers, the talkers turned to see what was going on. The ripple reached John Price, who stepped from behind the bar.

“Here, now, what’s all this?” he said, wiping his hands on his apron. “What have you done to upset our Alice?”

“She’s coming with me, John. I’ve need of her out at Finney’s ranch.”

“What, now? But I’ve a full house here and…”

Alice raised her head. “He says Dove Ed is dying. I have to go. Please.”

Price frowned, looking around at the full tables and the listening men. He shook his head and shrugged. “Go then,” he said, “although why you bother for a good-for-nothing son of a drunk like that…”

The click-click as Morgan drew and cocked his revolver cut through the quiet room like an axe through an egg. Morgan extended his arm and sighted down the barrel at the center of John Price’s chest. “I’ve told you before, John,” he said, “that I’ll hear no ill words spoken of Hugh Williams or his boy. Do I make myself clear?”

Price’s mouth flapped open and shut in fear and indignation. “You can’t…” he said. “You’ve no call to… I’m unarmed, for God’s sake!”

“So was Red Murphy, and I liked him better than you. Now shut your hole.”

They stood facing each other, John Price sweating and fearful, Morgan icy and forbidding. Then Alice broke the spell, laying a hand on Morgan’s arm and saying, “Please.”

Morgan lowered his arm and placed the revolver back in its holster. He glared at Price a moment longer, then spun and, with Alice clinging to his arm, strode from the saloon.

At the livery stable, he helped Alice aboard the waiting horse and mounted his own. Side by side they rode west out of town in the dark. No one followed.

Chapter 30

They stayed with the Finneys two nights and two days, taking it in turn to sit at Dove Ed's bedside, although Alice sat longer with him than anyone else, holding his hand, singing softly, praying, or talking of anything that came into her head. For his part, Morgan pitched in with the ranch chores and sat with Dove Ed whenever Alice needed sleep. The Finneys never complained of losing a bedroom; the women shared the other bed, while Morgan, Bill Finney, and his son Luke slept in the barn. The nights were warm and it was no hardship to sink into a bed of straw at the end of the day.

Doctor Sherman visited, changed the dressing on Dove Ed's head, and allowed that there seemed to be little inflammation in the wound. He remained pessimistic, however. "Even without an infection, he has been grievously injured and lost far too much blood," he said as he departed the first day. "You should prepare yourselves." Alice nodded and thanked him for his efforts, and when he had departed she went right back to praying for Dove Ed's recovery.

Sitting at the bedside, Morgan could think of nothing to say, so he sat and waited. Late the second night, listening to the calm, deep breathing of the women in the other bedroom and the shallow, jerky breaths of Dove Ed, Morgan tried to pray. "Dear Heavenly Father," he began, and went no further. The words tasted bitter in his mouth; he remembered uttering them many times, long ago, and that they had done no good whatsoever. To use them now smacked of defeat and hypocrisy, so he did not. Instead, he wished for Dove Ed's recovery with all his heart, at the same time knowing that his wishes meant nothing.

Just after dawn of the third day, Alice called out, and Morgan and the Finneys gathered in the small room. Dove Ed's breathing had become labored, as if each inhalation was a struggle. Alice clasped his hand between hers and held it to her breast. His legs moved; his face twitched where it was not covered with bandages. He drew in a shuddering breath and let it out and did not draw another.

They used Bill Finney's wagon to take Dove Ed back to his father's farm. There they dug a grave behind the ruined cabin and held a short memorial service before burying him. Morgan suggested that Dove Ed should be interred in the town cemetery so that Alice could visit the grave if she wished. But Alice said, "If he was happy anywhere, it was here." They erected a wooden marker in which Luke Finney carved Dove Ed's name, only spelled correctly, as his mother had intended. Morgan and Alice and the Finneys bowed their heads; Doctor Sherman, who had come to fill out the death certificate, joined them in paying their respects. No one else did.

Morgan brushed soil from his trousers. He and Bill and Luke had served as pallbearers and gravediggers. Doctor Sherman clapped him on the shoulder and said he was sorry before riding back to town. The Finneys piled into their wagon and drove up the hill, leaving Morgan and Alice alone. They stood, listening to the rattling wagon recede in the distance and looking at the ruins of the Williams farm: the partially-completed corral, the collapsed cabin, the abandoned wagon and tools left behind when their owners fled. The mountains around them were losing some of their greenery in the summer heat; swathes of gold and dun streaked the hillsides.

Alice's eyes were dry. She had done her weeping at Dove Ed's bedside, though grief still pinched her features. Morgan suspected he wore a similar mien. He had no tears to shed, but from his throat to his gut he felt hollow. "Shall we go?" he said, and his voice sounded constricted. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Shall we go?"

Alice nodded but made no move to leave. "What will you do now?" she said.

He tried to think of anything meaningful he could do. He shrugged. "I suppose I'll go looking for the cave," he said.

"Why?"

"It's my job," he said. "I'm the sheriff."

“Not for very long.” He supposed she had heard about the new lawmen hired by the town.

“No, not for long. But until they arrive, I’m the sheriff.”

“Do you think you will find it?”

“No.” Dove Ed had called for Alice, and after that he said no more. Beyond the bare fact that there was a cave, and that Cash and Tom were in it, Morgan had no idea what to look for or where to find it. But searching the mountains seemed preferable to sitting in the sheriff’s office, waiting to be thrown out of it.

“And after that?”

“Leave town, I guess. Go somewhere they don’t know my name. Maybe I’ll ask Mart Goddard if he needs a shotgun messenger who doesn’t mind his gabbing. What about you, Alice? What will you do?”

“Go back to Owens and Price, I suppose. If they’ll still have me.”

“That’s my fault. I could have a word with John, apologize...”

She made a sound and flipped one hand in dismissal. “There are other things I can do. I’m glad you shut him up.”

Something moved in Morgan’s chest. He opened his mouth, not knowing what to say, and would have shut it again, but Alice, sensing his disquiet, looked a question at him.

“Alice,” he said, and had to clear his throat again. “Alice, we could leave Malad together. If we. If you.”

She kept her gaze steady, not turning away, but not helping him, either. He drew a breath and plunged ahead.

“I could be a good husband, Alice. I could be a good husband to you. We’ve both lost someone, we’ve been hurt by the same things, we’re neither of us wanted in this place. So let’s go away from here and find a new place where we’re wanted, someplace where the memories aren’t so sharp. And we’ll build a home there, with the things we need, and I’ll help your hurt if you like.”

He stopped, unsure what to make of the look in her eyes. He thought he saw tears, but that could be the sadness of the day, couldn’t it? She did not throw herself into his arms or show her back or twist her face in revulsion either. She just stood and searched his face.

Then she said, “I would like that, Morgan.”

He reached out and drew her to him, and she embraced him. When he bent his head to kiss her, he saw the tears on her cheeks. He took her face in his hands, and smoothed away the tears with his thumbs. She reached up, put her arm around his neck, and pulled him close to kiss him. When they parted she said, “Let’s start now.”

They walked to the corral where they had tethered their horses. Morgan helped Alice up. He mounted, and together they rode away from there.

Epilogue

In 1891, a thirteen-year-old rancher's son named Glispy Waldron rode into the mountains near Samaria, Idaho, looking for stray horses to round up. Despite threatening weather, he rode deep into parts of the countryside he hadn't seen before. There, he came upon a curious sight: an iron door, set into the mouth of a cave near the peak of a mountain.

He did not investigate further, because the gathering storm had broken and the rain and wind were fierce. He made his way home, where he told his father what he had seen. After the storm blew out, Glispy and his father tried to retrace his steps, but they could not find the cave with the iron door again. Like everyone in the Malad City area, they had heard the tales of the stagecoach robber who rode out of the mountains half dead, gasped a few words about a falling out with his cohorts, a shooting, and the loot behind the iron door. Then he expired. The robber had been maddeningly vague about the location of the cave. Moreover, no one ever reported his name or the names of the men he claimed to have left locked in behind the iron door.

This was the first time since that event that someone claimed to have seen the door, and it sparked a rash of treasure-hunting. Although Glispy became known for his tales later in life, he swore until his dying day in 1968 that he had seen the door.

In later years, several people believed they had found human remains that belonged to the robbers. But to this day, no one has ever found the treasure that was hidden behind the iron door.