

DINNER AT THE ELK

A.K. BRAUNEIS

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A. K. Brauneis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1) Start of an Era	5
2) We're Somebody Now	15
3) The New Member	24
4) Back to Work	33
5) Haley	38
6) The Next Job	57
7) The Unrobbable Safe	73
8) Gabriella	82
9) Back at The Elk	98
10) Run 'Im Down	110
11) Stranger in a Dark Suit	125
12) Changing Locations	144
13) Another Encounter	154
14) A Full House	167
15) A Spy in Their Midst	181
16) The Set Up	203
17) Back Home	219
18) Surprise, Surprise	230
19) That Year Flew By	243
20) Golden	259
21) New Beginnings	277
22) Back At It	292
23) Pushing The Limit	308
24) Midnight	327
25) Conflict of Interest	341
26) The Invitation	353
27) The Blanket Ceremony	370
28) The Offer	385
29) Shattered	399
30) Taking Refuge	409
31) Hell to Pay	426
32) The Train Wreck	443
33) Justice	459
34) The Last Job	468
35) Change of Heart	485
36) Law Abiding Citizens	502

DINNER AT THE ELK

CHAPTER ONE START OF AN ERA

Elk Mountain Region Wyoming, 1873

The train chugged across the Wyoming expanse, sending too much smoke, steam and ash into air that was already too hot for the comfort of the travelers. Men, foolish enough to wear suits with collars, had long since loosened the restricting material to take what relief they could. The more casually attired passengers still suffered, and some gentlemen abandoned their female traveling companions to go sit at the rear of the car where they could open the windows.

The ladies also suffered inside the sweat box that claimed to be a passenger car. The high necked, long-sleeved dresses, though made of lighter, summer cotton, caused distress for the fairer sex, and many a feminine hand clasped a fan and put them to good use. Opening a window was frowned upon near the front of the car, as many chose to remain stifling rather than tolerate the onslaught of ash, smoke, and dry dust that would inevitably be blown in along with the breeze.

Babies cried, toddlers whined, and the older children sat, slouched upon their seats, finding the heat too stifling even for their youthful exuberance. Bored with telling stories and playing games, they wished that something—anything, would happen to relieve the tedium.

And then it did.

Three sharp blasts from the engine's whistle sent shivers and sweat trickling down the backs of the passengers. Only the children were blissfully unaware of the dangers of crossing through this stretch of the Wyoming badlands. Outlaws roamed here. All the way from two-bit scavengers out for whatever the passengers carried on their person, up to the notorious Elk Mountain Gang, led by the infamous bandito, Joaquin Cortez.

Women hurried their children to them, while husbands dashed forward to protect their families. Some of the younger, more impetuous men pulled guns, as the screeching brakes struggled to bring the train to a shuddering halt.

But before any action could be taken, the back door to the passenger car crashed open and two dusty, and threatening, outlaws strode into the group of gasping civilians.

“Everybody out! That means you too, young’un. Put that gun away unless you want a pistol-whippin’.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Yessir. I mean . . . no sir. I mean . . . we didn’t mean nothin’. Sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go tell it to yer ma.” The outlaw brandished his own weapon around to indicate the whole group. “Now, all of ya, out. Ain’t nothin’ gonna happen to ya, ifn ya just do as yer told.”

Shuffling of feet, combined with snuffles from some of the more delicate ladies, accompanied the exodus of the passengers from the train.

Stepping down into the dirt, the ladies were surprised to find one of the outlaws holding out a hand to assist them with that last jump to solid ground. But once they were outside and huddled in a group, women slid wedding rings off fingers, spirited them into their purses and clutched purses to bosoms. Men discreetly hid pocket watches and hoped their wallets weren’t too obvious.

“C’mon, all of ya straighten out here,” the first outlaw ordered. “Stop bunchin’ up. Hey, Lobo, give me a hand here.”

The second outlaw, a round-faced, hard-looking man, grinned like a wolf and started grabbing purses, his intentions clear.

“Lobo, Gus!”

The shout cut across the heat wave to subdue the two outlaws.

“Crap,” the first one grumbled, his dirty blond mustache bristling with irritation. He turned on the horseman who had just pulled rein in front of him. “What?”

Passengers and outlaws alike coughed and sputtered, as they waved the disturbed dust away from their faces. Only once the dust settled, did the folks on the ground get a good look at the horseman. He was young, one might say, baby-faced, with his blue eyes and light brown curls. But the blue eyes were hard, and the tied-down rig of a gunman took attention away from boyish good looks.

“You know what Nash said,” the gunman snarled. “No stealin’ personal items from the passengers. And don’t take all their money, neither. Leave ‘em enough ta carry ‘em over. We ain’t out ta break common folk.”

Gus threw up his hands in frustration. “Well, why the hell not? We always steal from the passengers. We’re outlaws; it’s what we do.”

“Yeah, Kid,” Lobo spit in the dust. “We usually get a tidy sum here. It’s good drinkin’ money. What’s Nash’s problem?”

“No problem, Lobo. Unless you’re plannin’ on defyin’ his orders.”

Tension increased and the gunman sat up straighter, his right hand moving to line up with the butt of his gun.

Both outlaws on the ground took things down a notch.

“Naw,” Lobo said and spit in the dirt again. “I guess what we get outta that safe will more’n make up fer these tidbits.”

“Good.” The horseman turned a cold eye to the other outlaw. “Gus? You gonna cause problems—again?”

“Sheesh.” Gus’s lip curled, but he did back off. “Fine. Whatever the little-boy-genius says. Fer now.”

“Good.”

“When is Malachi gonna be ready ta blow that thing?” Gus asked. “Ain’t it about time we got done and outta here?”

“Malachi ain’t blowin’ it,” the horseman said. “Nash is gonna open it, hisself. Malachi’s up in the engine with Redman, keepin’ an eye on the train crew.”

“Open it, hisself?” Gus puffed out a blast of air. “Bloody little show-off. Why don’t he just blow that thing, so we can get outta here?”

“It’ll be done soon enough, Gus. Just keep the passengers quiet, will ya?”

Touching his horse’s flank, the gunman rode off toward the freight car at the back of the train. More than one pair of admiring, female eyes watched him go.

“Who was that?” one of the ladies, too impressionable to understand discretion, asked no one in particular.

Gus snorted. “That?” His tone dripped with sarcasm. “That was none other than *The Kansas Kid*. I swear, if he weren’t wearin’ that gun—”

“The Kansas Kid?” A young man’s eyes lit up. “I think I’ve heard a him.”

“I know I have,” announced another. “He’s said ta be the fastest gun west of the Mississippi. Kilt more men than he’s got fingers before he was sixteen.”

“Yeah, well ya can’t believe everything ya hear,” Gus snarked.

“You backed down from him fast enough,” one of the youngsters took note.

Gus turned on him. “What was that?”

“No, nothin’. Sorry.”

“Yeah, you better be. ‘Cause I’m Gus Shaffer, and you know what that means.”

“Ah, no. No, I don’t.”

“Wh . . .?” Gus stammered. “You mean ta tell me, you ain’t never heard a Gus Shaffer?”

The lad shrugged. “Sorry.”

“I’ve been runnin’ with Elk Mountain for years. Dammit. If it weren’t fer that little show-off, Napoleon Nash, steppin’ up and takin’ over leadership of this gang, why I’d be—”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Napoleon Nash?” asked one of the older gentlemen, as several ladies gasped and brought hankies up to their faces. “We’re being robbed by Napoleon Nash?”

“Wow,” stated another.

“Yeah. I didn’t know we was bein’ robbed by Napoleon Nash. I wondered why you weren’t gonna take our rings ‘n such. I mean, what happened to Cortez? Don’t he run the Elk Mountain Gang?”

Gus was still getting over his shock and indignation, so Lobo stepped in to answer the question.

“Naw, Cortez ain’t around no more. He went and got hisself kilt, so Nash there, he took over.”

“Only ‘cause he’s got that gun backin’ ‘im up,” Gus finally responded. “Dammit. I’d be runnin’ this gang if it weren’t fer that.” He stuck a finger in the face of the passenger and wagged it at him like an old schoolteacher. “Then you’d know who I was, dagnabbit.”

“Cortez is dead?” asked one of the younger men. “Did Nash kill ‘im ta take over the gang?”

“What?” Gus sputtered. “Geesh, you’re a blood-thirsty lot. No, Nash didn’t kill ‘im.” His eyes became distant, and his mouth tightened with remembered animosity. “Someone else went and done that.”

Jack *The Kansas Kid* Kiefer pulled his horse up by the opened door of the freight car. One lone man stood on the outside, leaning against the floor of the car, while he held two horses. He turned a hawk-nosed face to the approaching rider, then nodded acknowledgement, as the horseman pulled up and dismounted.

“How’s it goin’?” Jack asked.

The Shoshone put a finger to his lips, requesting quiet.

Jack grinned and looked in the freight car to see for himself.

His partner, Napoleon Nash, sat cross-legged in front of the large, impressive safe. He leaned on it, his ear pressed against the warm metal, as his long, slender fingers attempted their seduction of the tumblers. His dark brown eyes were closed, and strands of dark hair were plastered against his forehead by the perspiration caused, just as much by his focus, as by the heat of the day. The look on his face could only be described as erotic ecstasy.

“How’s it goin’?” Jack inquired again.

Leon jumped, and his face screwed up in an irritated grimace as he glared at his partner.

Jack grinned. “Just askin’. We gotta get a move on.”

“You can’t rush something like this,” Leon told him. “You know that.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t wanna get caught, sittin’ here, playin’ with ourselves,” Jack countered. “Maybe I should get Malachi, and he can blow it.”

“Not yet,” Leon frowned. “Taggard’s on look-out. He’ll let us know if we have company coming. Besides, I almost had the last number before you interrupted me. I’d have it open by now if you—”

“Uh huh. How about I just go get Malachi anyway. Ifn ya ain’t got it open by the time we get back, then he better blow it. It’s what he’s good at.”

Leon nodded, then with a deep sigh, settled in to continue.

Three minutes after Jack left, a soft, metallic click sounded from inside the workings.

Leon’s face broke into a wide, dimpled grin as he locked eyes with the Indian. “One of these days, the railroads are going to learn that they need timers on their safes, like the banks.”

Mukua grunted and nodded. He then sent a thumbs-up to the other gang members that had been watching the car from a safe distance.

A loud whoop went up as success was announced.

Leon continued to grin as he swung open the heavy door, then gazed upon the riches within.

“Oh, that’s beautiful.”

Mukua jumped into the car, bringing three sets of saddle bags with him. He handed one to his boss, and the two men stuffed them full of the money, bonds, and jewelry.

Gus’s craggy face appeared at the door. “Ya finally got it opened?”

Leon’s grin wouldn’t quit. “Yup.”

“About time. Lobo and Charlie are gettin’ the passengers back on board. Let’s get goin’.”

Leon was so pleased with the outcome of this job that he didn’t even reprimand Gus for his insubordination.

With three saddlebags stuffed to bursting, the gang split up to confuse any pursuers who might think it worthwhile to head out on a hot summer day to track down an outlaw gang they already knew they wouldn’t find.

Leon and Mukua headed off with one bag, Jack, along with Hank and Charlie took another route, then Gus with Malachi and Redman, Ed and Lobo went off with the third. Taggard Murphy, who’d been the look-out, took his cue from his cohorts departing and headed back on his own.

DINNER AT THE ELK

Barring incident, they'd all meet up again at the hideout. The loot would then be stashed in the safe inside the leader's cabin, and Leon would divvy out funds as he saw fit. There always had to be money held back to see the gang through the slow winter months, and if everyone got their fair share up front, it'd be gone within a week.

Even though Leon was young to be leader of this gang of ruffians—just barely twenty, and Jack was even younger—he had learned a lot about gang management from his predecessor, Joachim Cortez. Leon had stayed with plenty of Cortez's methods, but others he kicked to the wayside. Giving everyone their full share right after a successful robbery was one of those traditions that was being given the boot.

There'd been a lot of grumbling at first, especially from Gus. He had been Cortez's second-in-command, and nothing was sticking in that man's craw more than the fact that this little up-start had slipped into the leadership role without so much as a by-your-leave. At first, it had been Jack Kiefer's reputation that had kept the crotchety outlaw in line, but then the lack of support from his fellows sealed his fate.

Cortez had been a good leader, and the gang members respected him. Well, until one of them caved his head in. But none could deny the increase of the payload once Napoleon Nash took over. He was young, but he was experienced and intelligent. The jobs he planned were meticulous in their detail and generally went smooth as silk. Gus was well-liked, and he'd been around for ages, but even the dimmest of the gang members knew they wouldn't be haulin' in the kind of loot with him, as they were with Nash.

Despite grumblings of held back pay, Napoleon Nash remained in the leader's cabin.

Another change that Leon made, was that he brought in that stoic old Indian and insisted that he would always have a place at the Elk Mountain hideout. Nobody really knew why and, at first, nobody trusted him. But Mukua soon found his niche.

In his day, living with his own people up near the Yellowstone River, Mukua had been a holy man, one who frequently spoke with the spirits and interpreted dreams and premonitions. He generally dressed in his traditional buckskin trousers and knee high moccasins, but usually spruced it up with a brightly colored shirt. Too brightly colored by some accounts.

The one constant in his wardrobe was the black fedora he insisted on wearing, along with the feather sticking out of its brim. The feather, however, did change. Once one wore out, he'd be on the lookout for a replacement, and it didn't much matter what type of feather it was. Eagle, hawk, vulture, and even chicken feathers, would be so honored, depending

on what was available. Quiet and unpretentious, he became the fella everyone went to for advice, or just to talk out a problem. Because of this, he got saddled with the handle: Preacher, although a Christian man, he never was.

So, despite rumors of being a cold-hearted murderer, Mukua soon gained the trust and respect of his fellow gang-members. He and Leon held a special bond, though neither man ever offered the explanation. Only Jack, who was as close to Leon as anyone could be, knew the history between the two.

Being the first ones back at the Elk, Leon gave the signal to the lookout, then he and Mukua headed up the well-guarded trail that led to the small town-sized cluster of buildings which constituted home for many a sorry-lookin' outlaw. They pulled up at the barn, and while Leon snatched the saddlebag and headed directly to the leader's cabin, Mukua took the two sweat-covered horses into the stable to relieve them of their gear.

Leon's first duty, when he entered the spacious living area of the cabin, was to deposit the contents of the saddlebag into the large safe that was set up in the far corner. He could never help the chuckle that escaped him, as he'd kneel beside the old safe and twirl in the combination to open the door. It struck him as serendipitous that a safe he could open so easily, even without knowing the combination, was a necessary tool for keeping the peace.

Still, whatever worked. He swung the door open and smiled at how quickly the safe was filling up. Adding the newly acquired plunder to the current stack, he figured they'd have more than enough to get them through the winter months. Once the heat died down from this most previous hold-up, he would let the fellas have a good share of their earnings, so they could go cut loose in a sympathetic town for the weekend.

He then went to the pump next to the large, cast-iron stove and doused his head and shoulders with a good splash of lukewarm water. Having an indoor pump was a luxury that even the near-by towns couldn't boast, and he smiled at the thought of how well his business was prospering. Cupping handful after handful of the liquid, he rinsed his eyes, nose, and mouth clean of the dust and sweat that had caked upon him in layers.

Feeling refreshed and still dripping, he headed to the porch and settled himself into one of the chairs there to await the return of the rest of his gang. This was always the hardest part for him, waiting for everyone else

DINNER AT THE ELK

to return, safe and sound. Most of his men were experienced and well-honed at evading pursuers, but Leon still could not fully relax until all had returned.

He smiled when he spotted Mukua's buckskin appaloosa gelding, with the appropriate handle of Buckwheat, and his own copper mare, Fanny, suddenly appearing in the large paddock off the barn. Despite their weariness, they trotted out to center ring, flinging their heads at the other horses and stirring up more dust, before they both began circling and pawing the ground, looking for that perfect spot to plop down for a roll.

Leon never tired of watching the horses frolic; it was one of the few things, along with a good game of poker that allowed his overactive mind to settle and his body to relax. Looking at his mare now, he smiled with fondness as she laid back her ears and ran the other horses away from her spot in the dirt.

He generally didn't like mares much, preferring a good, solid gelding for his outlaw horse. But when he came across the well-bred chestnut filly, he didn't question fate and snatched her up out of a herd of broomtails for a fraction of her true worth. One look at the beautifully developing hindquarters that promised both speed and agility, the name *Fanny* came to mind and never left. In the two years they'd been together, she not only lived up to his expectations, she exceeded them.

Then he spotted Mukua heading his way with two tin mugs, most likely filled with beer from the keg inside the barn. His grin widened.

Mukua smiled as he approached the steps, showing gaps in his grin where a couple of teeth were missing.

"Hey, *Napai' aische*," he greeted his boss, using the Shoshone name for Leon, that only saw the light of day when they were alone. "That was a good job. The boys will be wanting to celebrate."

"I'm sure they will," Leon accepted the offered mug of beer. "That's a new keg in the barn, so there's plenty, if they want to have a bit of fun."

"Hmm," Mukua nodded, as he set the second mug on the railing, then turned to go.

Leon frowned. "Aren't you going to join me?"

"Naw. I brought that one for Jack. I'll have a beer with the boys when they get back. They don't like me socializin' too much with the boss."

"Aww, come on. They're over that now, *Ata-i*. Everyone likes you."

"I know. And I want to keep it that way."

A distant gunshot caught the attention of both men, but they knew it was only the signal announcing the arrival of more gang members.

"Ahh," Mukua continued, "here they come. Soon, this yard will be so full of dust, I will not be able to find my way back to the barn. I better

go. Some of them fellas know nothing of tending to their horses. If I was not there to tell ‘em, they would leave their poor beasts standing in their stalls, still tacked up and sweating. Once the horses are settled,” his mouth spread in a skin-stretching grin, and a mischievous sparkle lit up his dark eyes, “then, I will drink beer.”

Leon laughed out loud. “Okay. Suit yourself.”

Mukua nodded and headed for the barn.

Leon took a good-sized gulp of his beer, then set the mug on the railing to await the company of his partner.

Dusk settled over the Elk, but the celebrating was just getting started.

Leon and Jack sat comfortably on the porch, leaning back, with legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, each nursing their fourth, or fifth, mug of beer. The fire pit by the bunkhouse had a slow burn going, with venison steaks, a large pot of beans and another of boiling potatoes laid out across the rack, filling the air with enticing aromas and savory anticipation. Everyone was hungry.

All were in good spirits, and the beer flowed. Hank had his guitar out, singing every outlaw-friendly song that came to mind. Wesley, an older black fella, and Luke, who was just the opposite, took their respective ladies by the hand and danced amongst the claps and hoots of their fellows. Some joined in, kicking up their heels and singing along with the songs despite not really knowing the words, while others whooped and hollered, slinging jokes back and forth or playing basic games of chance upon the log table. It had been a good day, and with the continued leadership of the *boy-genius*, it was promising to be a great season.

“Had a bit of a surprise ridin’ back here today,” Jack commented after a lengthy stretch of silence.

“Oh yeah?”

“Hmm. Lobo told Hank, then Hank told me, that several of the passengers knew who we were.”

“Really?” Leon perked up. “Well, it’s about time.”

“Apparently, we’re worth five thousand apiece.”

“Is that all? Me, being leader, ought to be worth at least two thousand more than you.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Oh, I dunno,” Jack countered. “You might have the brains, Leon, but I got the gun. That counts for a lot.”

Leon puffed. “Maybe once you outgrow that baby face. Ever think of growing a moustache? You’d be intimidating enough then—maybe. You’re not even twenty yet.”

“So what? I can still pull the trigger. I got a reputation, ya know. Folks are scared a me.”

“Yeah? Like who?”

“Gus, fer one.”

“Yeah, well . . . Gus. Who else?”

“I don’t know ‘em by name, but . . . folks.”

“Right. Well, I tell ya, Kid—”

“I’ve told ya before, Leon, don’t call me ‘Kid’. I don’t like it.”

“But that’s your gunny handle.”

“It ain’t. I’m Jack Kiefer. That’s my handle.”

“Yeah, but Kid, on every wanted poster I’ve seen of you, it says: ‘Jack *The Kansas Kid* Kiefer’. And, it makes sense; you’re from Kansas, and you’re a kid. Let’s face it; you’ve been saddled with that handle, so you better own it.”

“It don’t make no sense,” Jack argued. “You’re from Kansas too, and you ain’t much older ‘n me. I don’t see ‘The Kansas Kid’ stamped on your wanted posters.”

“Well, the name’s already taken, Kid. We can’t have two Kansas Kids out there. Besides, every gunman worth his salt is ‘Kid’ something: Kid Shalane, Kid Curry, Billy the Kid, The Apache Kid. I’m afraid it’s a fate you can’t avoid.”

“It might help if you’d stop callin’ me ‘Kid’.”

“Hey, Nash, Kid!” Charlie called from the fire pit. “Steaks is done.”

“See?” Leon said, “there’s no avoiding it.”

Jack groaned.

CHAPTER TWO WE'RE SOMEBODY NOW!

Carbon, Wyoming
August 1873

Napoleon Nash and the Elk Mountain Gang Strike Again!!

Despite their brand-new tumbler action safe, designed with a timer opening, the First Territorial Bank on Main Street, was robbed again by the notorious Elk Mountain Gang, led by Napoleon Nash.

The bank's manager, Mr. Mooney, is furious. "Mr. Navarre, himself, assured me that his safe was unrobbable. Yet, even after changing the timer on the lock mechanism since the last time we were robbed, Nash knew exactly when to hit us. Myself and my assistant manager are the only ones who know when that safe can be opened, and still, on two separate occasions, Nash has known those times.

"I'm going to be having a word with Mr. Navarre about this! He insured the contents of that safe, and he better honor it! As for my assistant, I trust him with my life, so someone in my employ is digging up that information and sending it along to those thieves. There's going to be some changes made, I assure you!

"As for that gang of outlaws, it's past time for Governor Campbell to do something about them. It was bad enough when Cortez was running that gang, but Napoleon Nash has taken their thievery to a whole new level! It's time to dig out that nest of vermin and be done with them!"

Mr. Mooney continued for some time with his suggestions for Governor Campbell. But this reporter must agree that something needs to be done. Time will tell if the Governor's Office responds to this crisis or not. In the meantime, Mr. Mooney will be doubling his security and wants to assure his customers that their money is safe with him.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Woo Hoo!” Leon slapped Fanny on her sizable rump, causing her to toss her head and give a little buck.

Taggard Murphy galloped along beside Leon, both their horses giving their all to the race. Dust billowed out behind them, leaving a trail for all to see, but neither man was concerned about pursuit. As usual, the gang had split up after their successful thieving in Medicine Bow, so with Jack and Mukua taking half the loot with them, and the other members pairing off into their own groups, the trails left to follow would be too numerous to track.

Leon led the way onto a narrow path and slowed his mare down, causing Taggard to run into the back end of Fanny.

“C’mon, Leon. What are ya stoppin’ for?”

“We’re fine. That posse is going to be so turned around, they’ll be back in town before they realize they’re going the wrong way.”

“Dammit.” Taggard pulled his dust-caked gelding up beside the mare, “you’re gettin’ too cocky. You’ll pay for it one of these times.”

Leon removed his black hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. “In all the years we’ve run together, have I ever led you astray?”

“Those were different times,” Taggard said as the friends trotted up the hill. “We were on our own and penny-ante. Nobody cared. But now, you’ve got \$8,000 on your head, and so does Jack. Posses are gonna be huntin’ you fellas with a little more incentive. That puts the whole gang at risk.”

“At risk?” Leon laughed. “We’ve got a stronghold that no lawman or bounty hunter has ever been able to penetrate. I haven’t met a lawman yet who could figure out how to find the accesses to The Elk, and, on top of that, every single one of us is an expert at covering our tracks. Plus, we’re all making real good money. You’re worrying too much, old man. Life is good.”

“And you’re too young and cock-sure of yourself to know that extra caution ain’t a bad thing. That damn hat band a yours stands out like a wet fire on a clear night. I told ya before, ya need ta get rid a that beacon.”

Leon’s smile dropped, and he ran a caressing thumb over the elk bone band with the silver inlaid topaz conchos.

“And I told you before, this was a special gift, and it’s not going anywhere.”

Taggard scowled. “Fine. But as you get better known, it’s gonna cause you problems, mark my words.” He pulled his horse’s head around and booted into the lead. “C’mon, Leon, pick it up, let’s go. I ain’t gonna relax until we got our share of the loot safely stored away at the Elk.”

Leon whooped and, clamping the hat back on his head, he gave Fanny her head. "Come on, old man. I'll race ya . . ."

Jack and Mukua had already arrived at the Elk by the time Leon and Taggard showed up.

"See?" Leon smiled when he spotted Jack's bay and Mukua's appaloosa turned out in the paddock. "I told you so, the money's all back here, safe and sound. You worry too much."

"Uh huh." Taggard dismounted and, taking the reins of Leon's horse, he walked away, leading the animals into the barn. He'd said his piece and he'd been riding with Napoleon Nash long enough to know not to bother pushing it.

Leon snatched the saddlebags off his mare, then slapping the dust from his trousers, he skipped up the steps to the porch. Jack sat in his favorite chair, feet up on the railing and enjoying a tin cup full of beer.

"What? No beer for me?" Leon asked his partner.

"Didn't know when you'd be gettin' back." Jack grinned at him. "Besides, Preacher-Man is still in the barn. I expect he'll be bringin' ya your refreshment."

"Yeah. Any problems?"

"Nope."

"Good. Be right back."

"Uh huh."

Leon entered the cabin, the cool interior of the large room refreshing him after the heat of the summer sun. He spied the pump and was tempted to get a dousing but knew that business had to come first. Once the money was secured inside the safe, then he could indulge in a quick hosing off. After that, a beer would go down real fine. Yeah, he felt good.

Then three shots from the lookout, signaling that someone was coming in hot, pushed all thoughts of comfort out of his mind. He dumped the saddlebags on top of the safe and ran outside.

Jack was already off the porch and joining Taggard and Mukua in the yard, as they awaited the approaching horsemen.

They heard the galloping hooves just prior to one horse, lathered and breathing hard, coming into sight from around the bend. Charlie was in the saddle, but it was obvious, he was not alone. Another man clung onto the cante behind Charlie, though those on the ground couldn't see yet, who it was.

DINNER AT THE ELK

Charlie pulled the horse up beside the group, and the animal stood, with head down and legs shaking, as Hank slid to the ground.

Taggard and Jack jumped forward and grabbed him before he collapsed, then lowered him with care to rest in the dust.

Blood seeped from a hole in Hank's shirt and saturated the material around it. Hank's gasping breath came just as heavily as the horse's, and he clutched at the wound in his side, trying to stop the bleeding with just his hands.

"Dammit." Leon looked up at Charlie for an explanation. "What happened?"

Charlie stepped down from the trembling horse and shrugged.

"They was waitin' in ambush," His words came out between gulps of air. "We was . . . careful too, really givin' 'em the run around . . . or so I thought. Hank's horse went down . . . afore we even knowed what was happenin'. We was lucky ta get away with our hides."

"Bullit has gone right through." Mukua examined the wound, front and back. "Best we get him to the bunkhouse. I will tend to him."

"Yeah," Jack agreed. "You got some a that medicine, herb stuff?"

Mukua smiled at him as he helped Hank to his feet. "Yeah, Jack. I got some a that 'herb stuff'. I will make 'im a strong tea, help 'im sleep."

"Aww, no," Hank found enough strength to protest. "Not one a your teas, Preacher. I think I'd rather be hurtin' than drink that injun concoction a yers."

"No, ya wouldn't." Mukua dragged him toward the bunkhouse.

"Ya, I would."

"Naw, you're just delirious."

"No, I ain't."

Leon ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. "He can't be hurting too bad if he's got enough strength to complain."

"Oh, I dunno." Jack watched the pair disappear. "Have you tasted Mukua's 'medicine'? That stuff is awful bad."

"Hmm." Leon nodded, as he thought about it.

"This is exactly what I was talkin' about, Leon," Taggard said. "Hank and Charlie were lucky this time. But you can bet that this is gonna start happenin' more often."

"Yeah." Leon stretched out his back muscles and rubbed his neck; he could feel a headache coming on. "We're going to change things up a bit. That route they used to get back here is now shut down. Obviously, the law knows about it. We'll have to be more careful covering our tracks." He grinned with the devil's sparkle. "Maybe we can get Malachi to set up some booby traps with dynamite. Not much, just enough to scare them

off.” He clapped a skeptical Taggard on the back. “We’ll re-think our escape routes before we go out again. That oughta make you happy. Now, it’s time for a beer.”

Leon walked off toward the barn and the keg, satisfied that the conversation was over.

Taggard sighed. “For a smart man, he sure can be bull-headed stubborn.”

“Yup,” Jack agreed. “But ya gotta admit, Taggard, he do get things sorted. Elk Mountain is a secure hideout, and he’ll make sure it stays that way.”

“I sure hope so. But still . . .”

“What?”

“No. Nothin’. I’ll see ya later, Jack.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Elk Mountain, Wyoming. October 1873

Leon sat comfortably in his armchair, snuggled in with his stockinged feet stretched out on a foot stool and crossed at the ankles. He was reading a book, the light from the fire flickering across the pages and warming his toes.

Then a knock on the door interrupted Leon’s focus, and a frown creased his brow. The story was just getting interesting, and now his escape into another existence had been abruptly broken. He sighed. Marking the place in the pages, he set the book aside and returned to reality.

“Come in.”

Taggard Murphy entered, bringing a blast of cold air in with him.

Leon’s frown turned to a smile.

“Taggard. Come on in. Have a seat.” Leon stood and moved the paperwork of the plans for their next job from the second armchair, then motioned his friend to settle in by the fire. “Would you like some coffee?”

“No, that’s fine.” Taggard removed his coat, hung it on a peg by the door then joined his boss in the comfort zone of the fireplace but did not take the offered seat. “There’s somethin’ I need ta talk to ya about.”

Leon’s brow twitched. He never did like the sound of those words strung together. “Should I be sitting down for this?”

Taggard shrugged. “I’m leaving the gang.”

Silence.

DINNER AT THE ELK

Leon struggled to remove the knife from his back.

“Why?” he finally asked. “Are you mad at me? Did I do something to —?”

“No. It ain’t that. We’ve been friends too long fer that.”

“I always figured we were friends, Taggard. I thought you liked it here. At least you did when Cortez was running things.” Leon became defensive. “Is that it? You don’t like taking orders from me?”

“No. That ain’t it. It’s just time.”

“It’s just time? What’s that supposed to mean? C’mon Taggard, this is the best season we’ve ever had. We’ve got all the stores and supplies we need for winter and then some. There’s still money in the safe, and once we pull this next job, we’ll be sitting pretty for next spring. I’m even going to hand out bonuses at Christmas. We’re somebody now. How can this be the time to leave?”

Taggard sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair; he figured this wasn’t going to go easy. “Yeah, you’re somebody. And maybe that’s part of the problem.”

Leon frowned and shook his head in disbelief. “What?”

“C’mon, Leon,” Taggard persisted. “When you and me were runnin’ together, we were just penny-ante thieves. We stole enough to get by on and we were happy with that. Nobody cared. Nobody even knew who we were. But now, you’re pushin’ it. The wrong kind of people are beginnin’ ta take notice.” He hesitated and gazed into the fire. “Besides, well, it ain’t right, what we’re doin’ ta folks.”

Leon’s jaw set with irritated determination. “We only go after the corporations, Taggard. You know that. The average citizen gets treated fairly; I don’t allow any rough stuff. You know that, too.”

“Fairly?” Taggard swung around, the flickering light from the fire dancing in his dark eyes. “You’re too busy in the freight car, playin’ with the safe, ta see the faces of the passengers. It makes me sick. They’re either scared or angry, or both. You may not take their personal items, but you do take most of their money—and you do it at gunpoint. How’s that fair, Leon?”

Leon hesitated, feeling unsure of his position. He drew in a deep breath and met the challenge in his friend’s hard eyes. “Wells Fargo insures whatever we take. Even the payrolls. Those people get their money back. The only ones we’re hurting are the banks and railroads; the big corporations who don’t give a damn until it hits them in the pocketbook.”

“You keep tellin’ yourself that, Leon. But Wells Fargo takes months to pay out on these kinda claims, and in the meantime, people who needed

that money you stole, are goin' hungry and sinkin' inta debt waitin' for compensation."

"The folks around here don't hate us," Leon persisted. "They love it when we come into town and spread some money around. We're good for business, we help their economy. They've given us the head's up, more than once, when a lawman has come snooping around. Damn, Taggard, there's even dime novels being written about me and Jack, and the Elk Mountain Gang. We're bucking the system; we're heroes."

Taggard snorted. "And what about when the system starts buckin' back? Wells Fargo and Pinkertons already have you in their sights. Not ta mention that safe company you keep targetin'. What's their name again?"

"Navarre."

"Yeah, Navarre. And safes ain't the only thing they got a hand in. Railroads, banks, security. They ain't too pleased with our success, either. You keep goin' like this, and they'll be comin' after you, big time. It's a losin' game, Leon. You're on the top now, but for how long?"

"Most of the banks have the timer locks and it won't be long before the railroads have 'em too. Then what? You ain't always gonna have someone on the inside, tellin' ya when ta show up. And on top a that, with the reward on you and Jack increasin' every year, more and more likely it'll be one a your own men that turns on ya. Set ya up to arrive at a bank only ta find a herd of lawmen and guns pointin' right at ya. You're playin' a dangerous game. I give ya ten years at the most, before you're in prison or dead. I don't wanna stick around ta see that happen."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, there, Taggard," Leon griped, hurt feelings making his tone harsh. "Don't you worry about those timed safes." His eyes flicked to the plans he'd shuffled over to the table. "I'm working out a way to open them without needing any inside information. Besides, the men are all happy here. They're making good money with me running things, and they know it. They're not going to throw that away just for a small percentage of some reward money. They respect me. They're loyal to me."

"Really?" Taggard cocked a brow. "Gus respects you?"

"Well . . . Gus . . ."

"And Lobo?" Taggard barked a laugh. "Lobo's loyal to you now, because you're on top. But one bad season, and he'll knife you in the back. And you know it. Kiefer and Mukua can't be with you all the time. You're making enemies, Leon. Powerful ones, and weak ones that can be used to get at you. You're a smart man; you could do anything you wanted to do."

DINNER AT THE ELK

“And I am,” Leon insisted. “I’m having the best time of my life, right now. As far back as I can remember, I’ve been under the control of somebody else. Ridiculous rules being forced onto me, constantly being told what to do, then getting punished for doing it.” He started to pace, shaking his head. “No more, Taggard. I’m boss now. Nobody tells me what to do, not anymore. I know what I want my life to be.”

“Aww Leon. You’re only twenty-two years old. You don’t know anything. I’m tellin’ ya, get out while you still can.”

Leon stopped and stared at the floor, his heart hurting. He couldn’t understand why one of his best friends was turning away from him.

“I’m happy right where I am. This place is a haven. You’re a fool for leaving it. What are you going to do, huh? Where are you going to go? You’ve got nobody, just us.”

“No, that ain’t true,” Taggard told him. “I got a friend. He’s the sheriff in Buffalo. He told me that any time I wanted out, ta come see ‘im.”

Leon laughed. “Oh, come on. And you call me a fool. I’ve never met a sheriff I could trust. It’s a set-up, Taggard. You’ll be walking right into a trap.”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ve known him a long time. We served together. We lost track a one another after the war, and we kinda went off in different directions. But I run into him a few months back. He coulda arrested me right then and there, but he didn’t. He offered me a way out before I got in so deep, I couldn’t get out. I trust ‘im.”

“More than you trust me?” Leon sulked.

Taggard shook his head. “There’s no comparison. It ain’t a matter of who I trust more. It’s about me makin’ changes in my life. About me doin’ the right thing accordin’ to my conscience.”

Leon tried to put hurt feelings aside; he knew when he was on the losing end of an argument.

“Well, you gotta do what you gotta do, I guess.”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you stay for the winter? It’s kind of cold for a ride to Buffalo now.”

“No. Thanks, but I can still get there before the heavy snows start. I made my decision. I’d best act on it.”

Leon nodded and went to the cupboard next to the stove. He took down the bottle of whiskey and, without asking, poured out two shot glasses.

Taggard solemnly accepted the drink, and the two men toasted their farewells and downed the shots.

“I’m going to miss you,” Leon admitted, his throat tightening. He didn’t have many close friends, so he hated losing the ones he did have.

“Yeah. I can’t say as I’ll be stayin’ in touch, either. If I’m breakin’ away from this life, that’s gotta include you and the Kid.”

Leon nodded his understanding. “When are you leaving?”

“I figure first thing in the morning.”

Another nod. “Well, come by here on your way out. I’ll give you the money that’s owed you. And don’t give me a line about how your conscience won’t let you take it. You earned it, it’s yours. Besides, you’re going to need a stake.”

“Yeah, all right. One last time, I guess. Say goodbye ta the Kid for me. Although I may run into him and Ed on my way down the mountain. They should be headin’ back by now.”

“Yeah, they should.”

The two men stood and looked at one another, neither one found this parting easy.

Finally, Taggard extended his hand. “Goodbye, Napoleon. Watch your back.”

Leon took his hand and they shook on it. “Yeah. You too.”

Taggard turned and, taking his coat from the hook, he opened the cabin door and left, closing it behind him.

Leon stood where he was, watching the door as though hoping it would open again, hoping that his friend would return and laugh about what a good joke he’d had. But he didn’t.

Finally, he turned away and poured himself another drink, a double this time.

With a heavy heart, he downed half of it in one go, the burning in his throat having nothing to do with the fiery alcohol. He coughed and wiped a sleeved arm across his eyes, then stood, staring at nothing as he swirled the golden liquid around in its glass.

Finally, he straightened, looked at the whiskey, then tossed it back and set the glass onto the table.

He sighed.

“Damn.”

CHAPTER THREE THE NEW MEMBER

Morning frost was soon replaced by a light dusting of snow and the Elk prepared to hunker down for the cold winter months. Leon's final job of the season hadn't gone as smoothly as he would have liked, blaming Taggard's unexpected departure for putting him off his game.

Truth was, he hadn't done his homework, and the timer mechanism proved more complex than he expected. They rode out of town in the dead of night with about as much fanfare as a coyote finding the chicken coop empty. He gave the fellas part of their Christmas bonuses early, along with permission to go have some fun with their friendly neighboring town so they could blow off their disappointment. And since they hadn't known about the bonus, this was just as good as a payday. Even Jack joined in on the fun, because he knew that Leon, with the mood he was in that night, wasn't worth being around.

Leon stayed up all night, pacing back and forth in the living room with the fire blazing, and the coffee pot putting in full-time duty. He knew he could figure this out. He was the best there was, and he wasn't about to let some little timing mechanism run him out of business. He'd gotten a good look at that safe in the bank; studied it, like a wrangler studying a wild stallion. The solution was there, somewhere, lurking in the depths of his mind, taunting him, forcing him to work for it. He chewed his lip, drank his coffee and walked a path in the already thinning carpet.

Then, as the morning light fought against the night shadows, Leon picked up pencil and paper, and began to work it out.

Bleary, sleep-heavy eyes looked up as the door to the cabin closed against the cold air. Jack stood on the threshold and smiled at him.

"Ya fell asleep at the table again, didn't ya?"

Leon groaned and rubbed his eyes. "I guess so."

Jack hung his coat up on the peg, then spotted the coffee pot. He headed to the stove and was pleased to find that both it and the coffee were still warm. He poured himself a cup.

"Ya want one?"

Leon glanced at his cup on the table, still half full of cold coffee. "No."

Jack poured his own. "Good. 'Cause there's only enough left for one cup anyway." He moved papers, and a book on algebra, from the armchair closest to the fire and sat down. "Well?"

“Well what?”

“Well, what ya stayed up all night for,” Jack said. “Did ya figure it out?”

Leon looked at the scattered sheets of scrap paper, all covered with drawings and mathematical equations that only he could understand.

“Yeah, I think I did. We’re going to need nitro, though.”

Jack choked on his coffee. “Nitro? As in nitroglycerin?”

Leon stretched, then sat back and nodded. “Yup.”

“Ain’t that stuff dangerous?”

“No more dangerous than dynamite. Unless you shake it, or drop it, or spill it . . .”

Jack snorted. “Yeah, well. I dunno . . .”

“It’s the only way we’re going to stay in business, Jack.”

“What’s wrong with dynamite?”

“Dynamite won’t touch these new safes. We gotta blow them from the inside. Only nitro can do that.”

Jack sat and brooded for a few minutes, as he nursed his coffee. “Damn.”

Leon sent him a crooked smile. “Relax, Jack. It’s too late in the season to get all the supplies together for it now. We’ll plan it for our first bank job come spring.”

“Oh great. Now I got all winter ta sit here and worry about it.”

Two days later, winter got serious about keeping the gang snow-bound for the season. Leon considered backing off on the sentry duties, since no one in their right mind would be out in this kind of weather, when a warning shot sounded from the entrance look-out. He frowned, but stood up to grab his coat and hat, just as Jack came out of his room where he’d been napping.

“What the hell?” Jack grumbled while rubbing his eyes. “Ain’t it snowin’ out there?”

“Sure is,” Leon said, then shrugged. “I can’t imagine why anybody would be out on a day like this, especially this high up.”

“I suppose there’s only one way ta find out,” Jack grouched, as he pulled on his boots and donned his heavy coat. “Let’s go.”

Dressed for the weather, the two men opened the door and braced themselves for the cold temperatures.

DINNER AT THE ELK

It was a relief that the wind had died down some, but the snow still fell in large, ground-covering flakes, while the cold, crisp air tingled their noses and caused both men to snuggle deeper into their coats.

Gus and Malachi also braved the elements to come check out who was arriving in their haven, but Hank, still recovering from his bullet wound, opted to remain dry and warm by the bunkhouse stove.

Leon secretly hoped it was Taggard coming back, that the sheriff's offer had turned out to be a trap, after all, and his friend had come to his senses. But as Charlie rode into the yard leading a horse that sported a blindfolded rider, Leon's heart sank. There would be no reason to hide the entrance to the hideout from Taggard.

"Damn," Gus grumbled, as he rubbed his hands together for warmth. "He must be plumb crazy, ridin' up here in weather like this."

"Maybe he got lost," Malachi commented.

"Yeah," Jack said. "Maybe."

The group on foot walked toward the two horsemen, and they all met in front of the barn.

"What's goin' on, Charlie?" Jack asked. "Who ya got there?"

Charlie shrugged, as he dismounted. "I dunno." He stamped his feet and blew into his hands. "We spied 'im wanderin' around out there by Bullfrog Creek. He says he got lost."

Malachi grinned and nudged Gus in the side. "See? Told ya."

Jack stepped forward, looking up at the man, who sat stone cold still upon the steaming horse. It was impossible to get any kind of reading from him. He was bundled up in a buffalo coat that covered him from ears to ankles. A buffalo hat took care of his head, and any information from his eyes was hidden behind the blindfold. Every inch of buffalo hair captured the snow in layers, and the increasing abundance of heavy flakes falling, covered him in a natural camouflage.

"You can take off your blindfold," Jack told him. "But don't make no other moves than that."

The apparition's upper limbs moved toward their appendages, and heavy mitts clasped and pulled at one another to remove them from cold, stiffened digits. Fingers grabbed the mitts and slapped them against the coat, sending snow cascading down. The movement of the arms heading for the top of its head, caused more caked whiteness to split and tumble, only to disappear into its own kind upon the increasing blanket covering the ground.

Fingers stumbled over the knot behind the head until the blindfold loosened, and a small section of the face bared itself to the frigid air.

The five outlaws stared in silence. Even through the falling blanket of white, they could tell that something wasn't right in the man's cold, icy stare meeting their gazes.

Jack came to his senses first. "What's your name, Mister?"

The apparition shifted, apparently taking a breath, then a muffled voice from within the depths rumbled its answer.

"Name's Obadiah Oswald. Folks just call me 'Snake-eyes'."

"Why do they call ya that?" Malachi asked, and Gus smacked him on the arm. "Hey. What ya do that fer?"

Leon and Jack ignored the dispute, and Jack stepped closer to the horse's head.

"Do you know where you are, Mr. Oswald?"

"Can't say as I do. But I would be obligin', if I could step down offa this horse and get the blood goin' again."

"We'll do more than that," Leon offered. "Come on up to the cabin there. We'll get you fixed up with something to eat, and then we can talk."

Jack turned a scowl to his partner, but Leon chose to ignore it, smiling in welcome as the bear dismounted.

"Much obliged," it rumbled. "It's colder than a pecker in vomit out here."

Leon's smile flickered. "Okay. Malachi, help the man get his horse settled. Charlie, you can call it a day. Go tell Wes and Lobo it's time for their watch."

Charlie smiled through his chattering teeth. "Sure thing."

"What do ya think you're doin'?" Jack complained, as they stripped their snow-laden coats off in the warm cabin. "I'm heada security. Ain't it up ta me who stays and who don't?"

"Yeah," Leon slapped the snow off his hat, "but you weren't going to send him packing on a day like this. Besides, we might be able to use him. With Taggard gone and Hank laid up, we short-handed."

"So what? It's winter. We don't need no more men."

Leon shrugged. "Just thinking ahead, Kid."

Jack seethed. "Next time, you let me do the invitin'. I don't care if I woulda done the same this time. It don't look good in front a the men. I'm security here, and they know it. Let me do my job."

"Yes, all right, Jack. Next time."

DINNER AT THE ELK

Leon sat across the table from their guest, as that man wolfed down flapjacks, beans and bacon. Jack stood behind Leon, leaning against the wall, and neither man knew quite what to make of Mr. Obadiah Oswald.

Once he'd pried himself out from under the buffalo coat, he wasn't quite as big or impressive as the apparition they'd first encountered. He wasn't as tall as the outlaw leaders, but his girth equaled four of theirs put together. It still wasn't apparent if he was big-boned, muscular, or just plain fat, but his horse must have felt the strain.

These characteristics were not what caused the partners to stare.

The man's skin was almost transparent, but not from the cold, it was his natural complexion. His straggly hair and beard were white, and the tangled mass tightly framed pink-rimmed eyes that were the palest blue they had ever seen. When those eyes looked up and met theirs, it was like being pierced with an icicle. And there was no emotion in them; they were cold in every sense of the word.

Snake-eyes was a fitting name for him.

"So . . . Mr. Snake," Jack began, and those orbs flicked up to encompass the gunman. "What's your business out here?"

"My business ain't none a yours. I'm obliged for the food, but once my horse is rested, I'll be movin' on. Unless you wanna do some horse-tradin', that is."

Leon smiled, but it was tight and suspicious. "We come across a man in our territory, on a day when no God-fearing soul should be outdoors. I think that makes it our business."

"I ain't no God-fearin' soul," Snake mumbled around his food, "And besides, I told ya, I got turned around out there."

"Okay," Leon pushed onward. "But what were you doing out there in the first place?"

"We don't like it when strangers just happen ta stumble by," Jack said. "It makes us kinda nervous."

"Well, like I said, I'll be leavin' soon."

Leon glanced back at Jack.

Jack shook his head.

Leon's smile returned to their guest. "The way the snow is piling up out there, it's not likely you'll be going anywhere, Mr. Snake. And I like to know who I'm bunking with."

The cold eyes flicked from one man to the other.

"Maybe I'm the one who should be worried," he said. "I'm familiar enough with these mountains ta know that a gang a outlaws got their hideout up here, somewhere. Ain't nobody been able ta find it, though."

He smiled; the gaps left by missing teeth being the only dark to his white. “Ironic, ain’t it? An outlaw hideout that nobody can find, and I stumble across it only ‘cause I got lost.” Feeling the tension rising, Snake pushed himself away from the table, giving his empty plate a shove. “Nah, never mind. I ain’t got no problems with you fellas. You might say we’re in the same line a work.”

“Is that so?” Jack asked him.

“It is.” Snake jerked his chin toward his saddlebags dumped on the floor by the front door. “Them bags is full of loot. That’s why I was in these mountains. I figured no posse was gonna come after me here. I thought I was familiar enough with this range ta make it through okay. Guess I was wrong. It seems lucky for all of us that we found each other.”

“How’s that?” Leon asked.

“I need a place ta hole up for the winter, and I got enough money ta help with stores. Win/win, I’d say.”

“What makes you think we need stores?” Leon asked.

Snake smiled, and those ice orbs bore into the young leader.

“I heard tell that the Elk Mountain Gang hit the bank in Rawlins a while back. I also heard that Napoleon Nash couldn’t open the safe, so the gang got away with nothin’. That musta been embarrassin’.” Leon squirmed but remained silent. “I doubt you woulda tried that job this close ta winter if ya hadn’t been wantin’ one more big score before shuttin’ down. Yessir, come early spring thaw, when you’re hitchin’ in your belts, I figure you’re gonna need what I got.”

January 1874

Leon sucked his teeth, dropping the horse brush as he spun around to face his attacker.

“Jeez, Ata-i. What are you doing, sneaking up on me like that?”

Mukua shrugged. “You should have listened to your horse. She knew I was here.”

Leon glanced at Fanny, and that mare stood with her head up, the whites of her eyes sending him an accusing message.

“You spend too much time inside your own head,” Mukua said. “You do not pay attention to what is going on around you.”

“Yeah, well,” Leon mumbled, as he stooped to pick up the brush. “I have Jack for that.”

“Jack isn’t always at your side. Like now.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“We’re in Elk Mountain now,” Leon reasoned. “Why would I need him to watch my back while I’m here?”

Mukua smiled his quiet smile, the one that made Leon feel like he was being judged and found wanting.

Embarrassment settled over him, and he turned to continue brushing his mare.

“I do not trust the White One,” Mukua stated. “The things he is saying in the evenings around the poker game do not bode well.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“Like, why don’t we share the women here through the winter? Like, you are not a good leader, if you cannot provide enough women for your men.”

Leon scowled and turned back to face Mukua. “What? He wants us to bring whores up here for the whole winter? It’s enough that Luke and Wes have their women with them. The other fellas can do that too, if they want. They know it. I can already see the problems that turning this place into a bordello would create. Besides, we need our money for supplies through the winter months, not for paying whores to come and live here. What the hell is he thinking?”

Mukua shook his head. “No. He is not saying we should pay for them. He says, when he’s holed-up for the winter, he finds himself a woman and takes her. He uses her for his own pleasure, then when the spring comes, he returns her to the place she came from.” Mukua shrugged. “Maybe he does and maybe he does not.”

Leon stood, speechless. Then: “You mean, he kidnaps a woman from her home and family, and . . .?”

“Yes,” Mukua confirmed. “He sees nothing wrong with this. In fact, when the time comes for whiskey and stories, he goes into great detail of how he uses her. The men get restless, they start to think bad thoughts. The White One has been making propositions to Bess and Mary, and they don’t like it. Neither do Luke and Wesley. Gus can see trouble coming, but the White One does not respect Gus. Perhaps you should say something.”

Leon’s lips pressed together into a tight line. “Yes, I think I should. Tell him to come up to the cabin. Now.”

Mukua nodded and turned to go.

Leon touched his arm. “Ata-i.”

Mukua looked back.

“Don’t tell Jack.”

“Snake. Sit down. Cup of coffee?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Leon poured out two coffees, then settled in at the table for the discussion.

“I hear you’ve been stirring up some unrest in the bunkhouse,” Leon stated.

“Unrest? That damn injun been tellin’ tales?”

Leon kept his cool. “That damn injun is a good friend of mine. And he doesn’t tell tales.”

“You oughta be more particular about your friends.”

Leon’s expression hardened. Apparently, this oaf didn’t know who he was dealing with.

“It has to stop,” Leon said. “Winters are difficult enough to get through without you adding lust to the bucket. Bess and Mary are not whores; they are each here with their own man. The only things they do for all the men is the cooking and mending. That’s it. You want a woman here, then you bring your own, and you tend to her. And she better be here willingly. What you do when you’re on your own is your business, but what you do while in my gang, is mine. No more talk about sharing the women here.”

“Hell, I’m just lettin’ them fellas know what they’re missin’ out on,” Snake countered. “There’s nothing wrong with it. What’s the point of tyin’ yourself down to one woman for years, when all ya need ‘em for is ta keep ya warm through the winter? It’s the natural way a things. Males take their females and use ‘em how they want. You see it in the wilds all the time.”

“We aren’t in the wilds, Snake,” Leon reminded him. “And we don’t treat women that way. This is not up for discussion. It’s over. I don’t want to hear anything more about it.”

“Or what?” Snake snarked. “You can’t kick me out, not in the middle of winter. Besides, you need my stash of coin. We’re going through supplies right quick. If you don’t have my money to buy more as soon as the weather allows, you’ll all starve.”

“You mean the money that’s in my safe?” Leon asked.

Snake’s eyes narrowed. “That’s my money. You ain’t got no right to it.”

“You’ve been helping yourself to the stores freely enough. I figure a good portion of that cache is rightfully mine. Besides, I’m not going to kick you out, Snake. That would be a death sentence this time of year, and I can’t bring myself to do that to a good horse. But there will be no more talk of women up here through the winter. Is that understood?”

“And just who’s gonna stop me? You?”

DINNER AT THE ELK

Snake didn't scare easy, and the thought that this little slip of an "outlaw-leader-wanna-be" could put the fear of the devil into him, never came into his calculations. Therefore, when Napoleon Nash stood up and leaned into him, the chill that seized his heart was equaled only by the surprise in his gut.

Leon's countenance changed in an instant. The bookworm, who stood back and let the Jack's gun do his fighting for him, transformed into a menacing and lethal force that would brook no opposition.

Despite himself, Snake gulped. Clarification came to him, and he no longer sneered at the gang members who dared not oppose their new boss's dictate. Nash was a natural leader and, when it came to leading a bunch of hard-nosed low-lives of the criminal element, he was quite capable of using force and intimidation to maintain respect.

Snake backed off.

"Yeah, yeah. All right," he mumbled, still not able to meet those dark, storm-cloud eyes that bore into him, challenging him, daring him to oppose. "I see your point."

"Good." Leon straightened, and the storm cloud dissipated. He was back to the unimpressive lad again. "I'm glad we had this little talk, Snake. You can go now."

The walk back to the bunk house was a challenging one for Snake. Once out of the leader's presence, his natural surliness returned and he berated himself for being so easily intimidated. Why should he let some little upstart dictate what he could do or not do, or even talk about? Nash had some height to him, but he was skinny. Another ten years, and he might just grow into a man, but right now, Snake could end any dispute just by sitting on him.

Snake snorted, a spraying of snot from his cold nose, sparkling onto his beard.

Yeah, given the right opportunity, I'd show that Nash. Nobody tells Snake-eyes Oswald what he can and cannot do.

CHAPTER FOUR BACK TO WORK

March 1874

Leon stood over the table, plans and equations jotted down like chicken scratch on the large sheet of paper spread out upon the surface. Some of the sketches and notes were circled with dark ink, and Leon focused upon the list he was writing with the intention of going shopping.

Jack leaned on the counter, nursing a cup of coffee, as he watched his partner concentrate. Cold rain pounded a tattoo upon the roof and the windows, making it a sloppy, unpleasant day for anyone having to leave their warm shelters. Jack knew how Leon got once he had a job worked out, and Leon had been working on this one all winter. The fact that he was now writing out a shopping list, told Jack that they would soon be heading down the mountain.

“Ya know, we don’t gotta leave right away,” Jack stared out at the rain, so heavy that he couldn’t even see the barn. “Huntin’s been good and, thanks ta Snake, we got enough money ta keep us in stores ‘til we can get beyond Bear Creek.”

“Hmm.” Leon barely changed focus. “We can’t keep buying our stores from Bear Creek, they’re running low on basics, too.”

“Yeah, but we still got enough ta last us another month. Why push our luck?”

Leon pulled his eyes away from his list and cast them in his partner’s direction. “You’re just scared of doing this job. What’s the matter? Don’t you trust me?”

“Oh, I trust ya all right, Leon. I just don’t trust nitroglycerin.”

Leon grinned. He straightened up and stretched out his back. “Ahh, it’ll be fine. I found a lot of information on it in the books I already have here. I’ve done my research. You worry too much.”

Researchin’ and doin’ are two different things.”

“True,” Leon concurred, as he joined Jack by the stove and poured himself a coffee. “But there has to be a first doing to make the research worth the time. Otherwise, why bother?”

“Exactly. Why bother?”

“We’ve already been over this, Jack. If I don’t figure a way to open those timer-locked safes, then we’re out of business. Are you ready to walk away now and go be a cowhand somewhere?”

DINNER AT THE ELK

Jack snorted. “Naw, I don’t suppose so. Let’s just hold off ‘til we got better weather, okay? Even if we could get through the pass now, it’ll be real sloppy. Good way for a horse to break a leg.”

Leon sighed and looked out the window at the horizontal rain. “Yeah. I guess you have a valid point there.”

“Uh huh.”

April 1874

Leon and Jack squelched their way to the bunkhouse. Early spring was almost worse than full-blown winter up in these mountains. Snow and ice still covered the landscape, but the commencement of the rains now turned the snow to slippery slush, and the air to a damp, bone-chilling onslaught.

Opening the door to the communal housing was both a blessing and a curse. The dry warmth was pleasing, but the odor of humanity cooped up through a long winter was just as overwhelming as a freezing blast of winter wind. Late spring would be the time for opening windows and doors to let the sunshine in.

For now, though, the stench would be tolerated, and business tended to.

Most of the gang sat at the large dining table, engaged in cards. Mukua was stretched on his bunk, reading, while Snake was leaving a mess of wood shavings behind, as he whittled away on a rough stick.

All the men looked up from their pastimes with an air of expectation.

Mary glanced up from the stove where she was tending to a simmering stew and poured two cups of coffee without waiting to be asked.

“Hello, fellas,” she greeted the leaders, as she handed them the beverages. “Would you like some stew?”

“No thanks, Mary,” Jack said, accepting his cup. “Just here for the usual spring business.”

“Of course,” she answered, “We’ll leave you men to it, then.”

Bess was busy in the far corner with a basin of heated water and a scrubber, tending to the laundry. She glanced up as soon as the leaders entered and, squeezing out the excess water from the towel she’d been scrubbing, she set it aside with the rest of the cleaned laundry. She joined Mary and, making a wide berth around Snake, exited the common room to occupy themselves in their living quarters.

“Okay,” Leon began. “Everybody here?”

“Yeah, we’re all here,” Gus poured himself a re-fill. “Except Luke and Rex who are on watch duty. We’ll let ‘em know what’s up. We all wanna

know what ya got planned. It's time ta blow the stink offa this place and get busy."

Leon smiled. "All right," he couldn't argue that point. "Well, as you fellas know, most of the banks are upgrading to the new Linus Yale timer locks, and I don't think it will be long before the railroads are using them, too."

"Yeah," Charlie groused, "it's gettin' harder for an honest outlaw ta make a livin' these days."

"It is," Leon agreed. "But I've figured out how to get them open. It's not easy, one might even say it's a bit dangerous—" a snort came from behind Leon, where Jack leaned against the door, "but, I know it's going to work."

Skeptical looks made the rounds. Nobody was interested in dangerous.

"So," Gus spoke for everyone. "What does this here plan entail?"

"Well, basically, we're going to be using nitroglycerin, so we can glow the safe open and not worry about the combination."

Malachi choked on his coffee. "That ain't dangerous, that's outright loco."

"Yeah," Hank agreed. "I'm all fer makin' a livin', but I don't wanna die doin' it."

"This is the best you could come up with?" Gus growled. "S'heesh, it don't take no genius ta know that's nuts."

"Yeah," Lobo spoke up from his corner. "C'mon, Kid, you can't tell me that you're goin' along with this."

"I'm the brains of this outfit," Leon cut in before Jack could answer. "I plan the jobs, and I decide what we do. Now, I don't want you fellas to worry. Jack and I will do this one alone. The equipment needed for this job is specific, so I'll be taking care of the purchases, and the Kid will scope the place out. You fellas that come with us will be there just as backup, keeping an eye open for the sheriff, that sort of thing."

"And just how do you intend ta open that safe with nitro, without blowin' yourself up along with it?" Gus asked.

Not wanting to give away his whole plan, Leon gave Gus the edited version.

"Well, basically, I'm going to blow the safe open from the inside out."

Hoots and snorts made the rounds

"Now, just how are you plannin' on doin' that?" Gus demanded.

"You don't need to worry about it," Leon told him. "I've had all winter to figure this out. I know what I'm doing."

Gus sneered. He knew when he was being shut out, and he didn't like it. "And just where is this little heist gonna take place?"

DINNER AT THE ELK

“The Mercantile Bank in Denver.”

Whistles were added to the hoots and snorts making the rounds. This job was sounding crazier by the minute.

“You’re nuts,” Lobo stated. “That bank’s right in the middle a lawman haven. You pull it off, and you’ll have every marshal, Pinkertons and Wells Fargo agent, and The Bureau, all out to get ya. There won’t be no place you can hide.”

“I can hide here,” Leon said. “Isn’t that what having a secure base is all about? We do the job at night, and the explosion won’t be very loud. We’ll be out of that town and on our way home before the law knows we’ve been.”

The room sat in silence as the men allowed this information to sink in.

“Like Lobo,” Gus finally said, “I wanna know what the Kid thinks a this plan.”

Jack pushed himself off the door. “I spent the whole winter watchin’ ‘im work this plan out. I think it’s a good one. Besides, Nash is the boss. The final say is his.”

More grumbling.

“Look fellas,” Leon continued. “We know things are getting harder out there. We have to up our game if we want to stay in business. You know the door is always open. Jack and I are doing this job, and if you stay here, you accept my rule, otherwise, you can leave. No hard feelings.”

More silence. Everyone knew this policy and by staying on, they accepted it.

Snake remained silent in his corner, whittling on his stick.

Leon sighed, feeling the growing uncertainty. “When have I ever steered you fellas wrong?”

“That last job in the fall got us nothin’,” Lobo pointed out.

“That’s because it was a timed combination, and I didn’t know what I was up against,” Leon said. “Now I know.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Lobo was still skeptical.

“I’ll give you fellas a week to think about it,” Leon offered. “We’ll start planning our first train for sometime over the next couple of weeks. That way, those of you who don’t want to stay on will have a stake to help you get set up somewhere else. We’re running short of money in the safe, anyway; we’re going to need to replenish it.”

Snake sat up and paid attention. “What do ya mean, you’re runnin’ short?”

“I wasn’t counting your cash, Snake,” Leon assured him. “You’ve contributed enough. Besides, you staying on here is questionable. We took

you in for the winter, but it's probably best if you go your own way after the train job."

"That suits me," Snake griped, as he stole a glance to the ladies' living quarters. "I prefer my own rules."

"Good," Leon prepared to leave. "You all know where we'll be if you need to discuss this further. Hang in fellas, it's almost time for some fun."

"I told ya they wouldn't be happy about it," Jack said, as they sloshed their way back to the leader's cabin. "I ain't happy about it, either."

"I know. Thank you for backing me up in there."

"That's what I'm here for, Leon, ta back you up. Even if I think you're crazy."

"I won't force you to do it," Leon said, "although, I don't think I can trust anyone else with a job like this."

"No, I'll do it. I think it's crazy, but I know you got it planned down to the last minute." He laughed. "And if we pull this off, we really will be somebody."

"Yeah."

CHAPTER FIVE
HALEY

“This is boring,” Leon complained, as he helped Jack and Mukua stuff money and bonds into various saddlebags. “I need a challenge; something to get my blood pumping again.”

“Boring?” Jack asked. “There ain’t nothin’ boring about pullin’ over a train and crackin’ open the safe before the law shows up. You’re just gettin’ antsy over the Denver job. Boring. Geesh. I’ll take boring over flyin’ lead, any time.”

“Aww, you’re just getting soft, Kid. Don’t you remember the good old days, when it was all new and—”

“And we didn’t know what we was doin’,” Jack continued, “and the mistakes we made got us inta more trouble than I care ta revisit.”

“Like I said, you’re getting soft.”

“Arrgg,” Jack fastened the buckles on the bag. “Here, you and Preacher-man load up the horses. I’ll go check on how the boys are doin’.”

Leon watched Jack stride away, then turned an impish grin to Mukua. The look that was directed back at him wiped the smile from his face.

“What?”

“Jack is right,” Mukua stated. “You’re getting cocky. The Spirits don’t like it when we small beings get cocky.”

“We’re just having some fun Ata-i, you know that.”

“Hmm.”

“So, has the little-boy-genius got the safe opened yet?” Snake asked, as Jack approached the group.

Jack pulled up and glared at the obnoxious, soon-to-be-gone, gang member.

“Listen,” he said, “It’s one thing fer Gus ta call ‘im that, ‘cause Gus has been with this gang for years, even longer than me and Nash. But you ain’t earned the right. Show some respect.”

Snake snorted. “What for? That little runt? The only reason he holds this gang together is ‘cause he’s got his own personal gunman, and everyone knows it.”

Jack pivoted and was in Snake’s face.

“If, after spendin’ the winter with us, you ain’t figured that out yet, then it’s a good thing you’re goin’. What are ya waitin’ for, anyway? You got everything you own with ya. Why don’t you get gone?”

“Cause I want my share of this job, that’s why,” Snake growled. “I didn’t spend the winter in a lonely bed just ta walk away with nothin’ for it.”

“You walked away with your life,” Jack reminded him. “Though, I admit, that ain’t much.”

Snake snorted and would have commented, but Hank interrupted.

“Hey, Kid, how are things goin’ up there? Folks is gettin’ restless.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack said. “Yeah, you fellas can start helpin’ ‘em back on board. Leon’s almost done.”

Jack looked back to the freight car and when Leon saw him, he waved, indicating that they were ready to go. Jack waved back, then headed for the engine.

He’d only gone a couple of feet when a young woman slipped in the icy mud and, in her desperation to stay afoot, she clutched at Jack’s coat sleeve.

“Oh. Here ma’am, let me help you,” Jack offered.

He placed his hands under her elbows and got her steadied again.

One look into dark brown eyes, and his heart did a flip.

“Thank you.” She released her hold. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to grab you like that.”

“Don’t worry about it, ma’am. Are you all right?”

She dazzled a smile at him, as she straightened out her blonde hair, which had been tucked into a neat bun and nestled under her hat. Now her curls were all aflutter, and the loose strands danced enticingly around her oval face.

“Yes, I’m fine now, thank you. I can manage.” Her gaze showed appreciation for the blue eyes that didn’t hide their appreciation for her. Her smile turned shy, and she blushed. “And it’s Miss,” she added in a whisper.

“Yes ma’am, ah . . . Miss . . .?”

“Sherman. Miss Haley Sherman,” she informed him, though she knew she was being bold.

“Miss Sherman.” He tipped his hat. “Is your chaperone with you?”

“Oh no,” she admitted. “I’m traveling alone.”

Jack’s interest peaked. “Really? That’s kinda dangerous in these parts. Ya never know when a band a thievin’ outlaws might stop your train.”

“Yes,” she teased, “I was forewarned that outlaws roamed these areas. I do so hope I don’t run into any.”

Jack grinned. “Yes, Miss. Ah, would ya like me to assist you onto the train?”

“Why, yes. That would be—

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Excuse me, young man.”

Jack pulled his eyes away from the enticing beauty and found himself blocked by an aged woman dressed in widow’s weeds and carrying an indignant Chihuahua.

“Yes, ma’am?” Jack responded as he eyed the growling little dog. “What can I do for ya?”

“You can help me back onto the train, is what you can do!” she insisted. “My legs can’t climb an iron beast like this.”

“No, ma’am, you’re not expected to,” Jack said. “That’s what those gentlemen standing by the steps are for.”

“No, we ain’t,” Gus stated from his position just inside the doorway. “That little bugger has already nipped me once.”

“What?” Jack said. “This little thing?”

He pointed a finger in the direction of the dog then snatched his digit back, as snarling teeth accompanied a sharp stab of pain.

“Ouch.” Jack examined the blood beading up on his index finger. “What the . . .?”

Gus and Malachi snorted their amusement.

Even Haley found the situation humorous. “It seems this woman needs your assistance more than I do,” she stated. “I can see myself back on board.”

Jack momentarily forgot the throbbing pain in his finger as disappointment took over.

“Oh. All right, if you’re sure.”

“Yes. Perhaps we’ll meet again. In town?”

Jack’s grin returned. “Maybe.”

His eyes watched her move toward the passenger car, where Snake, Gus and Malachi assisted the last of the passengers up the steps.

The widow lady sniffed, irritated by the outlaw’s lapse in focus. “I do apologize for Snickers biting you, young man, but it’s your own fault.”

“Excuse me, ma’am?” Jack was incredulous, as the throbbing returned to his finger “I ain’t done nothin’.”

“You robbed this train,” she exclaimed. “Your hooligans forced us out, to stand here in this slush, freezing our feet, while you help yourselves to your plunder. My poor little Snickers is shivering so much, he’s likely to have a fit.”

Jack glanced at the dog, nestled comfortably within the woman’s winter coat, the only thing showing through the dark folds were the wide, white rimmed eyes and a small set of sharp, snarling teeth.

“Ya,” Jack sucked on his finger. “I can tell, he’s real distressed.”

“Are you going to help me up those steps, or not?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jack told her. “Just keep them teeth away from me, okay?”

“Oh, good heavens,” the woman sniffed, as she hid the dog within her bundles. “A big strong outlaw like you, afraid of a little dog.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once Jack felt it was safe, he took the lady’s arm and assisted her to the steps of the train car. She grabbed hold of the railing, and with Gus getting a good grip on her sleeve, he and Jack managed to get her onboard without any more bloodshed.

“Thank you,” she said. “I can manage well enough on my own, now.”

Then she and her dog dismissed the outlaws as though they were her personal servants, and disappeared into the passenger car.

“Eww Eee,” Malachi grinned, “there ain’t no tellin’ who yer gonna meet out here.”

“Yeah. Or what,” Jack grumbled, still sucking on his finger. It hurt.

He glanced around, looking to see how many more passengers still needed to get on board. Most were already inside, and the few that were left would soon join them. He felt a twinge of disappointment that the pretty young blonde had already returned to her seat, as she was nowhere to be seen. Too bad. One final look into those lovely dark eyes would have been a nice conclusion to this job. Maybe he would look her up in town.

He briefly noted that Snake had disappeared. “Where’s Snake got to?”

Gus shrugged. “I dunno. Probably gone ta pester Nash about his share. It’ll be worth it ta have him gone.”

Jack nodded agreement then continued his way toward the engine.

Stepping onto the running boards of the steaming locomotive, he nodded to Lobo who was guarding the two-man crew.

“Okay, we’re done,” he said.

“About time,” Lobo grouched. “It’s bloody hot in here. How the hell do you fellas do it?”

The engineer shrugged. “You get used to it. It’s a living, ain’t it? And an honest one, at that.”

Lobo’s eyes turned hard as he perceived the insult. “You better watch your mouth.”

“Lobo,” Jack caught his attention. “Get on down. Go tell Rex we’re done here. We’ll see you back at the Elk.”

Lobo growled but did as instructed.

Jack sighed as he turned to the crewmen. “You oughta be careful what you say to a man holdin’ a gun on ya. Lobo ain’t exactly the forgivin’ type.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“You fellas ain’t never killed anyone during a robbery,” the engineer argued. “As long as nobody tries ta stop ya, what difference do it make?”

“Well now, me and Nash ain’t never killed nobody durin’ a robbery,” Jack pointed out. “But I ain’t so sure about Lobo. What he done before he came ta us is somewhat questionable.”

The conductor gave the engineer a jab in the ribs.

“I told ya,” he said. “You can’t trust these highwaymen no how. Next time do what I say and keep yer mouth shut. You keep forgettin’: the conductor’s always right.”

“Sound advice,” Jack concurred. “Now, I’m gonna go back and help with the last of the passengers. Then you can be on your way.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Kid,” the conductor stated. “I should get back to the passenger car anyway and make sure everyone is all right.”

“Not a good idea,” Jack told him. “Best you ride the engine the rest of the way.”

“But it’s my job to—”

“Not this time. I’ll check on ‘em. Stay here.”

Jack hopped down from the engine ignoring the conductor’s grumbling and walked back alongside the train.

Gus and Malachi had just handed the last passenger up into the car, when Jack grabbed the railing and climbed aboard himself.

“What ya doin’, Kid?” Malachi asked. “Train’s pullin’ out in a minute. We best be gettin’ goin’.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jack said. “I just wanna check somethin’. You fellas can head out. I’ll be along directly.”

Gus snorted. He’d seen Jack eyeballing the pretty blonde, and he figured he knew what Jack had on his mind.

“Yeah, well don’t be hangin’ around too long,” he grumbled. “You know the law’s been patrolin’ these parts. This train don’t have ta not show up for some cocky sheriff to come nosin’ around.”

“I know, Gus. I’ll just be a minute.”

Jack entered the passenger car. He tried to appear casual as he strolled down the aisle, his piercing eyes scanning the seats, looking for one young lady in particular.

The other passengers busied themselves as they settled in again. Some sat quietly, mothers holding their children close to them, while others were in full conversation, talking about the recent event. The discussions ceased as the passengers became aware of the outlaw back in their midst, and a nervous tension filled the car.

Jack stopped halfway down the aisle, looking around.

“Any a you folks remember a young, blonde woman?” he asked. “She was travelin’ alone.”

Strained glances made the rounds.

“What do you want to know for?” one gentleman finally asked.

“That’s disgusting,” a woman stated, as she pulled her daughter in closer. “Taking advantage of a young lady just because she’s on her own.”

“I ain’t takin’ advantage a no one,” Jack snapped back, irritated by the accusation. “I’m worried about her, is all. Why ain’t she here?”

More looks were passed around. No information came forth.

Jack sighed. “Did any of ya see her get back on board?”

This was met with some head shaking and the occasional shrug.

“I saw her outside, talking to you,” the widow-woman stated. “I, for one, have not seen her since.”

A few accusing stares were sent Jack’s way.

He ignored them. “Anybody else see her?”

“I saw her outside with the rest of us, while you fellas were robbing the train,” another gentleman offered. “I didn’t see her get back on board though. And I was one of the last.”

“Damn,” Jack muttered. “Yeah, okay. Thanks.”

He heard the whistle up ahead sound off its warning, and the train lurched, then jolted into movement. Jack cursed again and made a quick exit. He stepped outside, onto the landing, then hopped to the ground. Most of the gang had already split up and were heading back to the Elk, but the sound of hoof beats announced the arrival of Leon, ponying Jack’s horse up to him.

“What are you doing?” Leon asked him. “C’mon, everybody else is gone, already.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jack said. “But I’m worried about one of the passengers. She didn’t get back on board.”

Leon sighed. “Don’t tell me, she was young and pretty, right?”

“Yeah,” Jack answered, hope rising. “You saw her?”

“No,” Leon sniped. “I just know where your brain goes when you see a pretty lady.”

“No, this is different,” Jack insisted. “She’s travelin’ alone, and I know she didn’t get back on that train.”

“That’s her problem, isn’t it?” Leon answered. “You probably just didn’t see her. I mean, where else would she be? There’s no reason for her to go wandering off.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Jack gave in. Taking the reins of his horse from Leon, he mounted, and the partners began the ride back to the Elk. “At least Snake’s gone. That’s one low life outlaw I ain’t gonna miss.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“I’m sure he’s not gone yet,” Leon said. “He was adamant about collecting his share from this job.”

Jack pulled up. “Didn’t he come get that from you before the train pulled out?”

“No. I admit, I was surprised. He made sure he had everything with him before we came out on this job, including his cache in the safe. From what I could tell, he had no intention of returning to the Elk with the rest of us.”

Jack felt a chill go through him.

“Damn.” He looked back to the now empty train tracks.

“What?”

“That means he disappeared around the same time as . . . I’m goin’ back.”

“What? What for?”

“Look, just trust me, will ya? Somthin’ ain’t right here. You carry on to the Elk ifn ya want, but I’m goin’ back.”

True to his word, Jack booted his gelding into a gallop and returned to the scene of the crime.

Jack pulled up beside the tracks and dismounted. He searched the ground for any telltale marks but had no luck.

Leon pulled Fanny to a halt but kept back so as not to add more hoof prints to the confusion. He bit his lower lip, anxiety mounting, as he felt the need to vacate the area. But he also trusted Jack’s instincts, so he tried to be patient while he waited for the verdict.

Jack straightened, shaking his head. “There’s already too many tracks here, people and horses. We’re gonna have ta do a search of the area.”

“Okay. I’ll go this way and you go that. We’ll do a circle search. You know how.”

“Yup,” Jack mounted up. “Meet ya back here, if not sooner.”

The partners split up.

Jack trotted off, planning his circle and heading for areas offering cover for a man up to no good, other than what they’d all been up to. As he approached each copse of shrubbery or trees, he slowed his horse to a

walk, not only to keep his own presence undetected, but also to give himself quiet to listen.

Coming to a complete stop, he strained to pick up any sounds. The surroundings were silent. The damp chill of the spring day keeping most creatures warm within their beds, only emerging to hunt or graze. Jack shivered, his inactivity causing him to feel the cold more.

He nudged his gelding forward, walking toward the next copse, stopping and listening again. Then, he heard it. A slight sound really, only a muffled groan that would have been overlooked by anyone not on the alert for it. Jack turned his horse toward the small gathering of trees and shrubs, until he detected movement through the thinly veiled branches.

What he saw made his blood run hot.

The bulky trousers and winter coat covering Snake could not hide the movement of his haunches or the traces of pale flesh and blonde hair now falling loose from their coiffure. Her hat was gone, and her coat had been thrown aside. From what Jack could see, she was lying on her back along the length of a fallen tree, with her bare arms stretched above her head and tied there.

She struggled against her bindings, but hardly made a sound. The weight of her attacker crushed her into the bark of the tree, and her bare legs, spread wide by Snake's unwanted presence, kicked uselessly at the air.

Jack was off his horse and onto Snake before the assailant knew anyone else was there.

He grunted with surprise when angry hands grabbed his coat collar and yanked him off the woman, whose pleasures he hadn't intended to be done with yet.

Jack spun him around and hit him hard with the body of his Colt Peacemaker.

Snake staggered, clutching his head where the metal had split the skin and bruised his skull. He stumbled backward, but amazingly kept his footing, then sent a wild snarl to the interloper.

With a yell of rage, Snake charged, but the sight of the business end of Jack's .45 staring him in the face, brought him to an instant halt. Breathing heavy with his exertions, and blood leaking from his forehead, he stood, shaking with anger, his pale eyes crazy with lingering lust and intentions of murder.

"What the hell's your problem?" Snake griped. "I ain't had a woman all winter. I got this one. You go find your own."

Through his peripheral vision, Jack could see the woman still lying on her back. Snake had used his knife to rip off her clothing, and she was

DINNER AT THE ELK

stuck there, still tied to the fallen tree, with all her private femininity exposed to the world.

Jack's teeth bared in a snarl as he focused on Snake.

"You was leavin'," he said, barely containing his own anger. "Why don't you do that, before I forget myself."

The only sound was Haley, trying to scream through her gag.

The adversaries glared at one another.

Jack was acutely aware of the naked woman laid out behind him, but he dared not turn to assist her. One false move, one instant of inattention, and Snake would be on him, gun or not, and Jack wasn't sure he could take Snake in a down-and-dirty fist fight. He kept his gun steady and aimed at his target.

Snake, realizing his fun was over, decided it was time to tuck himself away, and he moved his hands to do just this.

Jack hissed, stopping him. "The only move I want you ta make, is ta back up toward your horse, and then git."

Snake's ghostly eyes narrowed to slits. "Just tryin' ta make myself decent."

"There ain't nothin' decent about you. Just start backin' up."

"I still got money comin'," Snake insisted. "I ain't leavin' without it."

"Like I said before, you still got your life. And after what you've been doin' here, consider yourself lucky."

Seeing the cold, steady gaze of the gunman not wavering from his target, Snake reconsidered his priorities.

"Fine. I'll just take what's mine and be goin'."

He started walking toward the woman, pulling his knife as he went.

Haley tried to scream through her gagged mouth, but only a high-pitched mumble escaped. Her eyes widened with terror as the monster came at her, and she kicked at him to keep him at bay.

Jack stepped up and grabbed him again, pushing him aside. He raised his revolver, and, with cold intensity, he re-established his aim at Snake's head.

Snake smiled, cold and calculating. If Jack was going to kill him, he would have done it by now.

"You ain't foolin' me. You ain't a killer."

"You know nothin' about me," Jack said. "But you're right, I ain't gonna kill ya."

Snake's smile turned triumphant, but became a bared-tooth snarl again, as Jack lowered his gun to aim it directly at Snake's nether regions.

"Maybe I'll just maim ya instead. Make sure you don't never treat a woman like this again."

A crack appeared in Snake's demeanor. He could handle a gun being pointed at his head, but threatening his manhood, sent a knot of fear to his gut.

"What the hell?" Snake covered his privates with his hands, in the vain hope of protecting his most cherished asset. "Only a cold-hearted bastard would do that to another man."

Jack heard a horse coming up behind him, but he never took his eyes off Snake.

Snake, on the other hand, saw salvation in the approach of the second rider.

"Nash. Get a leash on yer guard dog. He ain't right in the head."

Leon took one look at the woman laid out on the log like she had been trussed up for Sunday dinner. Silent tears slid down her face, and blood soaked into the strip of her own petticoat that had been used as a gag. There was also blood smearing the inside of her thighs, and on her wrists where her leggings had been used to tie her to the log. The assault upon her had been violent, and the look Leon sent Snake told him not to seek salvation in his direction.

Leon dismounted and went to tend to Haley, leaving Jack to do as he would.

Snake was mean and not so bright, but he was no coward. Realizing the odds were against him, he refused to beg. Straightening up, he deliberately tucked himself away, as he stared with defiance at his nemesis.

"You bastard," he hissed. "Do your worst. But you better make it count, 'cause I don't forget easy."

A scream of rage erupted from behind Jack, as Leon removed the gag from Haley's mouth.

"Kill him!" she shrieked, her fury punctuated by sobs. "Kill him. He's a monster. Kill him—"

"Yeah, he's a monster," Jack agreed, though still not taking his eyes off his victim. "But I ain't gonna kill 'im. It's your lucky day, Snake. I ain't even gonna shoot off your little dick there."

Snake's eyes shifted, attracted by the movement of Leon snatching up Haley's coat and draping it around her shoulders. She trembled, her emotions in turmoil, and she clutched at Leon in desperation. Snake grinned as he witnessed the terror he had created; he got high on it. He licked his cold lips as the sight and smell of his victim created arousal again.

Jack saw the lust return to those pale eyes and his own blood ran cold.

"You bastard," came out low and dangerous, then he tipped his gun up and fired.

DINNER AT THE ELK

Snake clutched at his face, staggering backward until he hit a tree. Bending over in pain, he spat blood as more of the red substance oozed from between his fingers.

“You shot me in the face,” he yelled, then coughed and more blood poured from his mouth. “Damn you. My ear’s gone. What the hell—?”

“Yeah. Ain’t that a shame.” Jack gave his gun a spin, then aimed it at his target again. “And ifn you know what’s good for ya, you’ll get on your horse over there and get gone. We don’t ever wanna see you back here again.”

Snake bared his blood-covered teeth in a wild snarl, the red against his stark white giving him the appearance of an apparition from some frozen depth.

Jack cocked his gun. “You heard me. Git.”

“You’re gonna regret this,” Snake gurgled, then he spit a heavy spittle of blood into the wet snow. “This ain’t over yet.”

“Yeah, it’s over,” Jack countered. “If’n I ever see ya again, I won’t be so gentle.”

Still doubled over and leaking blood from the gaping head wound, Snake snatched up his horse’s reins, hauled himself aboard and, with one last, resentful look at his pleasure, he made a hasty retreat.

Only then did Jack turn back.

Leon sat on the fallen tree, with Haley cowering and trembling in his arms.

“Why didn’t you kill him?” she accused Jack through her sobs. “He’s a monster. You should have killed him—”

“Yeah, maybe,” Jack said. “But I don’t need that on my conscience, not even for you.”

Haley fell apart, sobbing uncontrollably as she sank deeper into Leon’s embrace.

“Now what do we do?” Leon asked. “If there’s a posse anywhere in the area, they’ll have heard that shot.”

“Yeah. We’ll have ta take her with us.”

“Why? We have to move fast and light. We’ve already spent too much time lingering over this. We can leave her here. Even if they didn’t hear the shot, the sheriff’s going to be out here sooner or later to check the scene. They always do. Let them deal with her.”

“No,” she screamed. “What if that man comes back? No. You can’t leave me here.”

Jack and Leon exchanged anxious looks.

“We can’t take her to the hideout,” Leon insisted. “She must have family waiting for her. The last thing we need is to have kidnapping added to our list of crimes. Stealing’s fine, but kidnapping is lower than low.”

“I don’t have any family,” Haley wailed and clutched at Leon’s shirt. “I’m alone. Please don’t leave me here.”

Jack sighed. “Bess and Mary can look to her,” he suggested. “And Preacher can do any doctorin’ she might need. We ain’t got much choice here, Leon.”

“Yes, we do. We can leave her here for the posse to find.”

“No. I ain’t doin’ it,” Jack insisted. “I’m takin’ her to the Elk.”

Leon sighed, knowing he’d hit the brick wall that was his nephew.

“Fine.”

Once Jack mounted, with Haley settled onto his lap, he removed his coat and Leon wrapped it snugly around Haley’s legs and feet. She still trembled, but it was more from shock and fear than from the cold.

An hour later found the partners still making their way back to the Elk. They were forced to keep the pace down to a fast walk due to the injuries of their charge, and both felt anxious over the delay. They couldn’t take the most likely route back because they knew that was the route the local law enforcement would check first, so this also added delay to their return. The fellas at the Elk would be getting worried.

“Maybe you should ride on ahead,” Jack suggested. “Let ‘em know we’re comin’.”

“Maybe.” Leon glanced around at perceived threats. “I don’t like leaving you out here on your own, though. What if that posse shows up?”

“Then you’ll get what you wanted,” Jack pointed out. “Haley can go back with them.” He felt her grip tighten on his shirt with this suggestion. He gave her a squeeze to calm her fears.

“I didn’t mean for all three of us to go back with them,” Leon pointed out. “Just her.”

Jack shrugged. “Too late now.”

Leon made sure his sigh of frustration was heard by all.

“Look,” Jack persisted, “you go take the other fork. You’ll get back to the Elk faster, then you can send some fellas back for us. Maybe give Preacher time ta prepare one a his awful teas. It makes sense.”

Leon didn’t like it when Jack was right. He rode on in silence as he considered the options. He couldn’t come up with anything else.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Okay. But you watch yourself. I know what you get like when you’ve got a pretty girl in your arms.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see ya back there.”

“Uh huh.”

Leon turned Fanny about and flicked her into a gallop, retracing their trail.

Haley sniffed, her hold on Jack remaining solid, as though afraid that he was going to disappear right out from under her.

“I’m glad he’s gone,” she whispered. “He scares me.”

“Leon?” Jack asked. “Aww, you don’t need ta be ascares a him. He’s all bluster.”

“He doesn’t like me.”

“He don’t know ya,” Jack explained. “He don’t like anybody he don’t know.”

Leon allowed Fanny to continue at a steady hand-gallop, covering the distance to the fork as quickly, but as safely, as they could. He didn’t like this situation, not one little bit.

This is a fine pickle, he mused, trusting that Fanny knew her way. Just like Jack to come to the rescue. Dammit, why did he always have to bring home strays? What are we going to do with a single woman up at the hide out? Mary and Bess are one thing; they’re both attached to their own man, so it’s understood, and everyone respects this. But a young, pretty woman, with no man laying claim? That will only mean trouble. Leon sighed. I can already hear the bickering, everyone vying for her attentions. There’s going to be fights breaking out, for sure. She’ll either have to choose herself a man and be willing to live in sin or leave. Leon preferred the latter. Actually, he would have preferred if she wasn’t heading for the Elk at all. Then another thought struck him. What if she lays claim to Jack? Or Jack to her? Oh great . . .

Topping a ridge that was often used as a lookout, Leon dismounted and tied Fanny to the hitching tree. Bending low, he scrambled up the final incline, then snaked along on his belly until he came to the edge of the drop-off. He had no intentions of heading straight back to the Elk, leaving Jack exposed to a posse. He would wait here for at least half an hour and make sure their back-trail was secure. He’d be damned if he let his nephew be captured because of some . . .

Then, he saw them.

Five men on horseback, following the not well concealed tracks left by the two horses.

Leon waited, hoping they would see his tracks heading up to the ridge and follow him instead of Jack. They reached the fork, stopped for a moment, then continued following the two sets of tracks, completely ignoring the set Leon had left when coming back.

He cursed. *Why is it you can never count on a posse to do the right thing?*

Not caring if the posse saw him now, he stood up and ran back to Fanny.

Her head jerked up from nibbling on the sparse shrubbery, and she sent him a wild-eyed look.

“Don’t be such a prima donna,” he told her. “This is second nature to you. Let’s go.”

He was in the saddle and booting her back down the trail before she had time to think about how indignant she was.

Leon loped along the trail. He had to catch up to that posse before they caught up to Jack, and he didn’t mind making a lot of noise doing it. Unfortunately, the posse was so intent upon their trail, a herd of stampeding cattle wouldn’t have forewarned them of danger coming from behind.

Leon pushed Fanny into a hand gallop and, coming around a bend, he spied the rear guard of the pursuers as they moved along the trail. He came up to the group and, slowing Fanny down to a trot, he joined the ranks and settled in like one of their own.

It took a full thirty seconds for the deputy in the rear to look at him and frown.

“Hey, who are you?”

“Napoleon Nash.”

The deputy snorted. “No, you ain’t. That’s who we’re trackin’. Napoleon Nash and the Kansas Kid.”

“I hate to disagree with you, Deputy. But I am Napoleon Nash, and the only person you’re tracking is Jackson Kiefer. And, to be quite honest, looking at the direction you fellas are going, I don’t think you’re tracking him anymore, either.”

“What are you goin’ on about? We’re closin’ in on ‘em, real fast.”

“Nope, don’t think so.”

The deputy sighed in exasperation.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Sheriff Erikson,” he called forward. “I got some fella back here claimin’ ta be Napoleon Nash!”

“What?”

The posse came to a sudden halt.

Erikson turned his horse and pushed his way through the other riders. He halted when he got within range and glared at the youngster sitting on the skookum mare.

“What the hell,” the sheriff cursed. “Just who do you think you are? It’s illegal to interfere with a sheriff’s posse. Don’t you know that?”

“Yessir, Sheriff,” Leon said. “I’m just telling you the way it is. I am Napoleon Nash, leader of the Elk Mountain Gang. I’m worth,” Leon did a quick calculation on his fingers, “eight thousand dollars, by last reckoning.”

The lawmen laughed and hooted, slapping each other on the back.

“You ain’t Nash,” Erikson stated, his disgust showing through. “You’re just a skinny kid with delusions of grandeur. Get on home, boy.”

A wild yell, filled with blood-curdling rage, sprang from the back of the group. A horseman, his head wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, came charging through the posse and headed straight for Leon.

Leon’s eyes widened in surprise as Snake came at him.

Fanny barely had time to rear when the assaulting horse ploughed into her at full gallop. Both horses staggered, and Snake’s horse, being the smaller of the two, went down to its knees. Snake booted the animal back onto its feet, as Fanny got herself organized then pivoted and powered into a full gallop.

“What the hell are you doing, Oswald?” Erikson yelled. “Are you mad?”

“That’s Nash!” Snake roared back. “He was right in your midst. You’re lettin’ ‘im get away.”

“You mean, he actually is—?”

Snake cursed and whipped his horse into a gallop, charging after the disappearing outlaw.

The posse, amidst their own curses and mayhem, got their horses organized and joined the pursuit.

“C’mon, girl,” Leon shouted into the wind. “Let’s show them what a horse race is really all about.”

Fanny flattened her ears and flew over the ground. Since it didn’t really matter where they went, as long as it was away from Jack and the hideout,

Leon let Fanny pick her own route. For a tank of a horse, she was surprisingly swift and sure-footed, and she knew this terrain better than anyone.

Leon grinned with delight. The danger of the situation increased his adrenaline rush and he threw caution to the wind as the wild chase grew in intensity. This is what he lived for; this is what being an outlaw was all about. This was fun.

He couldn't hear the pounding of the hooves coming from behind him, but he could hear the gun shots being fired. He chuckled, shaking his head. The chances of anyone firing a gun from aback a galloping horse and hitting someone else, who was also aback a galloping horse, were slim to none. They may as well throw their bullets onto the ground than waste gunpowder trying to hit him. Any sheriff's posse that began shooting under these circumstances instantly dropped in Leon's estimation. Any sheriff who permitted it was a fool.

Erikson. Yeah. Leon would remember his name.

Within half an hour, Leon lost them. Fanny, used to running posses on wild goose chases, had readily accepted Leon's direction into the twisting gullies and switchbacks that created confusion in anyone but the most familiar. Reaching another lookout, Leon pulled up and gazed over the open range before him. He saw them, off in the distance, riding around in circles trying to pick up his trail. He laughed out loud when they gathered into a group and set off in the wrong direction.

Ahhg, this was too easy. It almost hadn't been any fun at all.

Leon approached the main entrance to the Elk, knowing full well that he had been spotted by the fellas on lookout duty. He grinned when he heard horses galloping toward him and waved as Hank and Charlie pulled up.

"About time," Hank said. "We was beginnin' ta think ya run into ta some trouble."

"We did," Leon told them. "And it's not over yet."

Smiles dropped.

"Is that why the Kid ain't with ya?" Charlie asked.

Leon frowned. "Isn't be back yet?"

"Nope. He didn't go and get himself caught, did he?"

"No, worse than that."

DINNER AT THE ELK

Hank and Charlie exchanged a frown.

“He’s dead?” Hank muttered.

“Nope,” Leon shook his head. “Even worse than that.”

“What could be worse than that?” Charlie insisted.

“He’s taken another lost soul under his wing,” Leon explained. “He’s bringing a woman back with him.”

The two men grinned.

“What’s wrong with that?” Hank asked. “It’s nice havin’ a woman ta warm yer bed at night.”

“This one won’t be warming anyone’s bed, not if I can help,” Leon grouched. “She’s injured and is only staying long enough to get back on her feet.” He nudged Fanny forward, heading to the hideout. “Keep an eye out for him. He shouldn’t be much longer.”

Hank and Charlie exchanged grins, then followed in their boss’s wake to carry on with their duties.

Leon entered the hideout proper and flagged down Gus.

“What?” Gus grumbled, not wanting to be volunteered for any further duty that day.

“I want you to head down Bear Crap trail,” Leon told him. “A woman was injured during the robbery, and the Kid’s bringing her here. He’s having to take it slow.”

Gus frowned. “A woman? Why didn’t he just leave her there for the posse to find?”

Leon shrugged. “You know what he’s like.”

“Yeah, right.” Gus looked toward the bunkhouse. “Hey, Malachi! Go saddle up our horses.”

“What fer?” came the distant holler from the building.

“Cause I said so, that’s what fer. We gotta go look for the Kid.”

“Never mind,” Leon commented. “Here he comes.”

“Never mind!” Gus yelled. “He’s comin’.”

Jack wasted no time in trotting his horse to the leader’s cabin, so Leon and Gus had to break into a run to meet him there.

Haley clutched at Jack’s coat, staring wide-eyed at the group of unruly men who gathered around the steps and stared up at them.

“It’s all right,” Jack assured her. “They won’t hurt ya. I’m just gonna hand ya down, so’s I can dismount. Gus, help me out, will ya?”

Gus stepped forward and reached up to accept the load, but Haley screamed as though the hounds of hell themselves were gaping their bloody maws in anticipation of her soul.

“No—!” A leg lashed out to kick him. “No. Don’t touch me. Don’t touch me.”

Gus recoiled out of harm’s way.

“What the hell,” he grumbled. “I ain’t never had a woman say that to me. What’s her problem?”

Malachi grinned a tobacco-stained set of choppers at him. “You looked in a mirror lately, Gus?”

“Yeah, every week, when I shave. What of it?”

“Maybe you just ain’t what the lady has in mind.”

“Yeah? Why don’t you try then? Maybe she won’t be as scared of a little pipsqueak like you.”

Malachi’s smile faded as he contemplated the task.

Haley stared at him, her eyes wide with terror. If she could have disappeared inside Jack’s coat, she would have been gone. Her grip on Jack made him wonder if her fingers were locked in that position.

He could feel her violent trembles to the point that he expected her to pass out from fear at any moment.

“Never mind,” he told his gang, “I’ll manage.”

He was just about to swing his right leg over the cante when Mukua stepped forward.

He touched the lady’s knee and gazed up into her frightened eyes, and an ease fell upon her.

Even later, Haley would not understand why her first encounter with a Plains Indian had such an effect upon her. With all the bloody tales of brutality she had heard about the great Indian Wars, about the warriors torturing their enemies, and the women mutilating the corpses and even eating the flesh, she should be more terrified of him than of any other.

But she wasn’t. She gazed upon that dark, craggy face, and she was reassured. His warm, brown eyes seemed familiar, somehow, and she knew she was safe in his presence.

Jack felt the ease come over her and sent the Shoshone a silent thank you.

“This is Mukua, darlin’,” he told Haley. “Some folks here call ‘im ‘The Preacher’, ‘cause a his manner. You okay with him carryin’ ya into the cabin?”

She nodded, never taking her eyes off Mukua. He reached up for her, and she willingly slid down into his arms.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Thanks, Preacher,” Jack said as he dismounted. “You can put her in my room for now.”

Mukua nodded.

Malachi stepped forward and took Jack’s horse, and the group dispersed.

Jack followed Mukua up the steps and into the cabin, while Leon followed more slowly.

He didn’t like this, not one little bit. What happened to Haley being taken care of by the other women?

CHAPTER SIX THE NEXT JOB

“What are you all grumbly about this mornin’?” Jack asked his partner. “You oughta have more’n enough now for the bank job.”

“We do,” Leon agreed, as he sent a dark look toward the blanket and pillow laying rumpled upon the sofa. “We just brought more back from that train job than I anticipated. Once Mukua has her put to rights, she’s going out with the women, right?”

Jack shrugged. “We’ll see. I’m okay with sleeping on the sofa.”

“I’m not,” Leon snarked. “This is a place of business, not a refuge for wayward women. The sooner she’s on her way, the better.”

“Yeah? And what if I want her ta stay?”

Leon pursed his lips. “What makes you think she wants to stay?”

Jack shrugged, as he stirred the potatoes in the big skillet. “I don’t. I’m just sayin’.”

“Maybe you should just let Mukua tend to her needs,” Leon suggested. “If she decides she wants to stay, then she can move in with Mary and Bess.”

“Mary and Bess bunk with their own men, you know that. The best place for her is right here. Are you gonna slice that bacon, or are ya gonna leave makin’ breakfast all up ta me?”

Leon sighed, grabbed the slab of bacon and began to cut into it with a vengeance.

“I need my space to plan jobs,” Leon insisted. “I’ve got the Denver job planned for two weeks from now. What are you going to do? Stay here to nurse maid her?”

“No,” Jack insisted and sent Leon a scowl. “Mukua is tendin’ to her. He’ll just keep on tendin’ to her. Besides, she might be doin’ a lot better by then and not be needin’ any tendin’.”

“So, she can go.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Jack snapped. “You ain’t got no problem with Hank and Wes havin’ their women here. How come you’re so . . . you ain’t jealous, are ya?”

Leon snorted as he plunked the bacon into a second skillet. “Jealous? Of what? I just like my own space.”

“Naw, you’re jealous, that’s what this is. I got me a woman, and you don’t.”

“Oh, suddenly she’s your woman, is she? She might want to be gone from here faster than I want her gone.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“I dunno, Leon. She was gettin’ real close and tender there on our ride up here. She weren’t too shy, that’s for sure.”

“She was scared. Under normal circumstances she probably wouldn’t give an outlaw a second glance.”

“I dunno . . .”

A knock on their door brought this debate to a close.

Leon grinned. “Mukua. Come in. Do you want some breakfast?”

“No, I have already eaten. I thought I would make some tea for the lady, then it will be here for her when she awakens.”

Leon and Jack shared a disappointed glance. Mukua’s teas often smelled worse than they tasted, and that’s saying something.

“She might already be awake,” Jack said. “I think I heard some movement in there, earlier.”

Mukua nodded, holding up some clothing. “Mary offered a dress, and other things, so the lady can come out when she is ready.”

“She’s welcome ta have breakfast with us,” Jack offered.

Leon’s shoulders tensed, but he kept his mouth shut.

Mukua nodded. “I will ask her, but I doubt she will. I think she would like her solitude for a while longer.”

“How do ya know?” Jack asked. “She might want company.”

Mukua shook his head. “Not yet.”

“But how do ya know?”

Mukua shrugged. “I just do.”

He dropped off his pouch of herbs on the counter, then entered through the door to Jack’s room. By the time he re-emerged, breakfast was over with, and the two leaders were discussing the upcoming job over their second cups of coffee.

Without saying a word, the old Indian set the kettle on the stove to boil for his tea, poured himself a cup of coffee, added a spoonful of sugar, then joined his friends at the table.

“Well?” asked Jack. “Is she comin’ out?”

“No.”

“Does she want anything ta eat?”

“No.”

Jack sighed. “Okay. So, how is she?”

Mukua shrugged.

Jack rolled his eyes.

Leon smiled, knowing the Shoshone could be stingy on words when it suited him.

“We have to leave in a few days anyway,” Leon said. “Why don’t you move into the cabin while we’re gone. That way, she won’t be all alone in here, and you’ll be close at hand to tend to her.”

Mukua nodded. “Perhaps when you get back, she will be feeling better.”

“I hope so,” Leon mumbled. “You can keep an eye on the place, too. Make sure those staying behind don’t get up to any nonsense.”

“It is not up to me to tell another man what to do,” Mukua commented. “Each man is his own guardian.”

Leon sighed. This was an old argument. “You’ve told me what to do often enough.”

A hint of a smile tugged at Mukua’s lips. “You are different.”

Jack snorted. “I’ll say he’s different. Goodness knows, he don’t listen ta me all that often.”

“Oh, I see what kind of a morning this is turning out to be,” Leon pushed himself away from the table. “I’m going to the barn to brush my horse. At least she’ll be happy to see me.”

Denver, Colorado Spring 1874

Leon entered the hat shop.

Mrs. Durant noticed him as soon as he stepped into her establishment, since it wasn’t often that a man dared to enter this women’s domain on his own.

“Excuse me, ladies,” she whispered to the mother and daughter whom she had been attending. “I better see to this gentleman before he turns tail and runs for the safety of the saloon.”

Three sets of feminine eyes showed appreciation, not only for the comment, but for the gentleman in question.

“Who is he?” Mrs. Markham queried. “He is quite handsome and the perfect age for Elspeth. What do you think, dear? Is he worth pursuing?”

“Oh, mother, please,” Elspeth averted her eyes as a pink blush rose in her face. “Why must you see every man as a possible suitor? You know Mr. Conroy has been showing interest.”

A maternal sigh followed this statement. “Mr. Conroy. You can do much better than him, my dear.”

Elspeth rolled her eyes and returned to gazing upon her image in the mirror, wishing her complexion would return to normal.

DINNER AT THE ELK

Mrs. Durant brushed her hand on Mrs. Markham's arm. "I'll be right back. Feel free to try on any of the hats."

"Of course. No hurry. We have all afternoon."

Mrs. Durant took her leave and approached the hapless gentleman who gazed about the shop with a look of confusion.

"Sir," she greeted him. "Welcome. May I be of assistance?"

Leon smiled, and Mrs. Durant wished she was twenty years younger.

"Oh yes, thank you," came the baritone response, and three feminine hearts were set a fluttering. "I do feel out of my depth."

"Quite understandable," Mrs. Durant assured him. "Are you looking for a hat for your wife?"

"No, no. I'm not married." Three sets of feminine ears perked. "I have two lovely sisters, and their birthdays are coming up. I thought, perhaps . . ."

"A hat?" Mrs. Durant responded. "Of course. What a lovely gift. Their birthdays are close together?"

"Very close," Leon smiled his charm. "They're twins."

"Oh my. Well then, yes. You must get them both a hat. How old are they?"

"Eighteen."

"Ah, yes. A lovely age." Mrs. Durant gestured toward the section that had attracted Elspeth's attention. "We have a fine collection of hats for younger ladies right down here."

The bell over the door announced the arrival of more potential customers, and Mrs. Durant found her attention diverted.

"Good afternoon, ladies. I'll be right with you."

"Oh, what a shame," Mrs. Carlson complained. "You do appear to be busy. We can come back."

"Oh, no, no," Leon interrupted. "No need for that. I'm in no hurry. I'll browse around on my own, if you don't mind."

"Oh," Mrs. Durant was relieved and concerned at the same time. She didn't like leaving new customers on their own, but she was getting overwhelmed, and she knew that men often preferred to do their own shopping. "Yes, of course, Mister?"

"Harden," Leon informed her, his wide smile appearing again.

"Mr. Harden," Mrs. Durant confirmed. "Of course. Feel free to look around. Let me know when you need assistance."

Leon nodded. "Ma'am."

He sauntered off to browse, and Mrs. Durant turned to her new customers.

Ten minutes later, she was still busy with the six women, who all were having trouble deciding what hats would go best with what outfit. They chattered back and forth, trying on various colors and styles, while Mrs. Durant assisted with suggestions and compliments.

The gentleman in her shop had been pushed from her thoughts until a niggling in her business owner's sense sprung him back to mind again.

Now, where has that gentleman gone?

"Excuse me, ladies," she interrupted her group. "I should go check on ___"

But her comment was drowned out by the front doorbell, and two more ladies entered the shop. *Oh dear. It never rains but it pours.* And again, the gentleman was forgotten about.

The cash register sent out a continuous dinging and ringing, as all the ladies converged upon the front counter in one cluster.

"Oh, Elspeth, what a lovely hat you have chosen."

"It is pretty, isn't it? It'll be perfect to wear with my frock at the picnic lunch tomorrow."

"Indeed, it will," Mrs. Carlson agreed. "And, I'm sure Mr. Conroy will approve."

"We hardly need to impress Mr. Conroy," Mrs. Markham commented. "Elspeth could show up at the picnic wearing an oat sack on her head, and he'd think it was the latest fashion."

Tinkering laughter made the rounds.

The cash register ka'ching.

"You have a lovely hat there, yourself, Mrs. Arlo. Oh! And you're getting the handbag and gloves to go with it. Just right for Sunday services."

"Yes, I thought so, as well."

Ka'ching, ka'ching.

"I have a thought, ladies. Let's all meet at Florence's Soda Shop for an afternoon treat. It's the perfect day for it."

"What a lovely idea. Yes, let's do."

"We can catch up on all the gossip. Let's do."

Ka'ching, ca'ching.

Finally, the bell over the front door signaled the departure of the horde, and Mrs. Durant breathed a sigh of relief. It's wonderful when business is good, but it would be easier if it spread itself out a bit.

She frowned. *Now, where has that gentleman gotten to? Surely, I would have heard it, if he'd left.*

She came around the counter and started toward the back. "Mr. Harden? Are you back there?"

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Yes,” came the lovely baritone, followed by the gentleman himself. “I believe I have found just what I wanted.” He proved the statement by holding up two frilly hats with matching handbags. “What do you think of my selection?”

“Very nice, indeed, Mr. Harden. And they say men have no taste.”

Leon smiled and came forward to pay. “I certainly hope my sisters will like these. Young ladies can be so difficult to buy for.”

“You have the knack. I’m sure they’ll be pleased. Would you like them in one big box, or two small ones?”

“Oh, two small ones, please. That way, they can each open a parcel.”

“Of course. What a very considerate brother you are, Mr. Harden.”

“Thank you. I do try.”

The sale was completed, and Leon headed for the door.

Mrs. Durant sighed, as she watched the broad shoulders and slender hips walking away. *Oh my. Oh, to be a young maiden again.*

Leon returned to drop off his purchases at the hotel room. Jack was just getting ready to leave on his own errands, and he frowned upon seeing the two hat boxes.

“What are they for?” he asked.

“Just a diversion,” Leon tossed them on the bed. “How are your plans going?”

“Goin’ ta meet up with Gus right now. They’re all eager ta get this done.”

“I hope so. This is important. I don’t want them knee-walking drunk right when we need them to be alert.”

“I know,” Jack said. “Give ‘em some credit, will ya? I know they ain’t the brightest bunch, but they know this is a big haul. They ain’t gonna mess that up.”

“Hmm, I suppose. Okay, I’m off. See you at supper.”

“Yup.”

Entering the mercantile, Leon made a point of studying the list of supplies that were written out upon a ragged slip of paper. He permitted a confused expression to mask his face, as he stopped, frowned and scratched his head. Glancing up, he noticed the clerk watching him so he approached the counter to discuss business.

“Howdy,” he greeted the merchant, adopting a down-home, good-ole-boy, accent.

“Howdy, young fella. Can I help you find some things?”

“Ah, yeah, ya sure can. I just got hired up at the mine, and the boss, he sent me inta town ta pick up a few things.”

“Oh yes? Which mine?”

Leon’s expression went blank. He shrugged. “I dunno. There’s more’n one?”

The clerk smiled. Obviously, his customer wasn’t too bright. “Yes sir. There are a number of mines in operation in those mountains. Do you remember your boss’s name?”

Another shrug. “Boss.”

“This could be a problem,” the clerk commented. “All the mines have a running tab here, and I bill them at the end of the month. If you don’t know which mine you’re working at, how will I know which company to bill for the goods?”

“Huh?”

“Who’s going to pay for this?”

“Oh. No worries. The boss, he gave me money. I hope it’s enough.”

“Ah. Fine. What supplies do you need?”

Leon looked at the list and scratched his head again. “I dunno. I can’t read. Can you read?”

“Yes, I can read.” The clerk offered to take the list. “Let me help you find these items.”

Leon frowned and held the list close. “Oh, I dunno if I should hand this over to ya.” He lowered his voice. “I think the boss is testin’ me, seein’ if I can be trusted ta do the job. I mean, look at this here list. There’s only,” he frowned again, scrutinizing the symbols on the paper, “well, there ain’t many things on it.”

The clerk glanced at the list. “There’s five items on this list.”

“Five?” Leon asked.

“Yes.”

“How many is that?”

“Ahh . . . not many.”

Leon brightened, a grin splitting his face. “See? Now why would he send me all the way inta town fer not many things? Oh, unless these not many things are in large amounts.” Panic threatened to take over. “But he didn’t give me no wagon. Just my horse. How am I suppose ta get this stuff back to the mine if there’s lots of it?”

By this time, the clerk had slipped the list from Leon’s fingers and was running a knowledgeable eye over it.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“You’ll be fine,” he said. “You’ll be able to pack these things in your saddlebags.” He frowned. “Hmm. Nitro. You ever handled nitro before?”

Leon shrugged. “I dunno. What is it?”

“It’s a liquid explosive.”

“Oh. There be such a thing?”

“Yes. Miners use it to clear away the larger rocks and such.”

“Oh. Is it dangerous?”

“It can be if not handled properly.”

“Oh. I’ll be careful with it. I don’t wanna let my boss down. Ifn he is testin’ me, then I’m gonna do a good job for ‘im.”

“Hmm.” The clerk cocked a brow. “All right. Wait here, and I’ll get these items for you.”

“Yessir.”

The clerk moved off, and Leon settled in to wait.

“That gentleman is correct,” said a feminine voice at Leon’s elbow. “Nitro is dangerous for someone not accustomed to handling it.”

Leon glanced to his left, and his heart skipped a beat.

Large green eyes looked up at him, and an eyebrow cocked from under thick, auburn bangs. The rest of her luxurious mane was appropriately scooped back in a bun, and a light blue hat with just the right amount of lace completed the enticing portrait. Perhaps there was a place in the world where her features and coloring were common, but surely not here, in the West.

Leon was mesmerized.

“What is the matter, Monsieur? Are you incapable of speech?”

“What? Oh, no. I . . .”

“I truly think it would be unwise for you to handle nitro, Monsieur,” the goddess recommended. “Perhaps mining is not the right job for you?”

His smile widened. “I’ve handled nitro before, ma’am. It’s not a problem. You’re French? So am I—well, half, anyway. On my father’s side.”

Her shoulders tightened along with her eyebrow. “I am not French. My family comes from Scotland and Ireland.”

Leon frowned. “Oh. I thought the accent . . .”

“You’re certainly nose-y, for an errand boy. And speaking of accents, you seem to have lost yours.”

“Oh.” Leon glanced around for the clerk and was relieved to see that he was still in the back room, collecting the supplies. “It comes and goes.”

“I see.” She cast a look to the clerk, then sighed with frustration. “Apparently the clerk is too busy dealing with your order. I’ll return later. Good day.”

Leon felt panic hit him as she turned and walked away.

“Oh. But I won’t be much longer,” he insisted. “No need to rush off.”

“I must. Busy day.”

“But . . . may I call on you? What is your name?”

She turned and gave him a haughty look.

“Call on me?” she repeated. “I should certainly say not. We have not even been introduced.”

“But . . . wait . . .”

She turned her back and left the store.

Leon smiled, watching her petite figure disappearing out the doorway.

What am I thinking? he reprimanded himself. *I don’t have time for this. Oh, but if I did, what a glorious chase that would be.*

“Here you are, sir, everything on your list.”

Startled out of his fantasy, Leon turned too quickly and brushed against the bottle of nitroglycerin.

The clerk sucked his teeth and snatched the bottle just as it tipped.

“Careful. Let me get this wrapped in some cotton wool and secured in a box. We don’t want to blow up my store now, do we?”

“Yeah. Sorry. It sure don’t look dangerous,” Leon returned to the vernacular. “It could be a bottle a water, fer all I know.”

“Hmm, yes.”

“Say, who was that lady that was just in here? The redhead?”

“Redhead?” the clerk asked, as he packaged up the order. “I don’t recall any redheads living in the area.”

Leon couldn’t help the disappointment.

“However,” the clerk continued with a hint of disdain in his tone, “I hear there is a theatrical troupe in town. Perhaps she’s one of them.”

Leon’s interest piqued. Maybe she wasn’t too high above him, after all.

“Theatrical troupe? They gonna be puttin’ on a show?”

“I would expect so. I don’t dally in such things. And if you were wise, you’d be more concerned with keeping your mind on the job at hand.”

Leon smiled. Inadvertently, the clerk had reminded him of why he and his gang were in Denver in the first place.

“Yup, I suppose you got a point,” he agreed, as he paid for the goods. “Thanks.”

“Good day to you.”

Leon gathered his supplies, including the box of nitro, and headed for the door.

What would I do with a woman like that anyway? She would be a pointless conquest, and I have bigger plans for the night.

DINNER AT THE ELK

Jack and Leon walked along Barber Street, contemplating what to do with the early part of their evening. Jack needed something to distract him. Even though he had complete trust in Leon's abilities, the idea of handling nitro still did not sit well with him. Normally, they'd go for a drink and some light poker to pass the time before a big job like this, but tonight, Leon did not want to indulge in alcohol. What was the point of playing poker if you couldn't have a beer to go along with it?

Jack understood his point, but still, the pull to the saloon became stronger.

"I need somethin' ta do," he continued the argument. "How's one beer gonna upset ya? It'd probably help settle the nerves."

"I'm not nervous."

"Yeah, but I am," Jack grouched. "Ifn we pull this off, and don't get killed doin' it, it'll make us one a the most successful gangs in the area. That'll change things."

Leon smiled. "I must disagree with you there, Jack. By expanding into new territory like this, we won't be one of the most successful, we'll be THE most successful." He chuckled. "We'll be living the high life."

"Uh huh," Jack grumbled. "So high, we can't even go to the saloon for a beer."

"Oh, quit your complaining. Gus and the boys are in the saloon, building up to our distraction. You know that. It wouldn't be good for us to all be seen together."

"Leon," Jack pointed out. "We're in Denver. There's more n one saloon."

"Hmm."

Leon's attention was diverted as they came around a corner and found themselves in amongst a crowd of people standing outside the doors to the theatre house. He smiled. He hadn't intended to lead his partner onto this street, at least not consciously. Beyond that, he wasn't prepared to look any deeper. Here they were, and the doors were about to open.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen!" the barker announced. "Come on in! Only fifty cents a ticket, 75 cents if ya have a lady on yer arm. Right this way. Come, and let us entertain you on this fine evening."

"Fifty cents a ticket?" Jack commented. "That's kinda steep for a bawdy show."

"Oh, I think this is a little bit better than a bawdy show," Leon grinned, his eyes alight with excitement. "I heard there was an honest to goodness theatrical troupe in town. Come on, it'll be fun. And it'll keep us occupied

right up to banking time. Maybe we could dress you up as a lady and save ourselves two bits.”

“Yeah, and maybe we could just not bother goin’ at all.”

“Hey, look there.” Leon took off through the crowd.

Jack frowned. “What?” he asked, then with a shake of his head, he followed in Leon’s wake. When he spied who Leon was hugging, his face lit up with a brilliant smile, and he quickened his pace. “Hey. Josephine.” he greeted their long-time friend. “What are you doin’ here?”

The perky brunette had just been set back on her feet after the exuberant hug from Leon, only to then be plucked up by Jack and given the same joyous welcome.

“Oh my,” she clutched her hat to keep it in place. “What a welcome. And what do you mean, ‘What am I doing here’? I live here. Which is more than can be said for you two. What are you doing here?”

“Ahh, we’re here on business,” Leon told her. “You know, the usual.”

Josey sent him a cocked eyebrow. “Really?”

“Miss Jansen . . .”

All three sought out the source of the summons.

A middle-aged man, slim and fit in his Sunday best, but still showing his age through graying hair and mustache, pushed his way through the crowd like a man on a mission.

Leon leaned to Josey’s ear.

“I’m Josh Harden and the Kid is Rupert Roundtree.”

Jack scowled. “Rupert Roundtree? Dammit, we gotta find ourselves some permanent aliases. You always saddle me with—”

“Shhh,” Josey warned him, then turned her smile to the new arrival. “You made it. I’m so pleased.”

The gentleman took her offered hand and kissed it, his admiring eyes soaking her in. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world. Besides, we had an arrangement, and I always keep my appointments.”

“I’m so glad you did,” Josey primed, then noticed his curious eyes turning toward the other two men in attendance. “Oh, these are gentlemen of my acquaintance, Mr. Harden and Mr. Roundtree. This is Mr. Connelly. He is my escort for this evening.”

“Oh, how do you do,” Leon greeted him and extended his hand for shaking.

“Howdy,” said Jack.

“Yes, hello gentlemen,” Mr. Connelly responded though he wasn’t pleased at having competition for the lady’s attention. “Are you planning on seeing the show?”

“Yes, we are,” Leon informed him. “I hear it’s quite the entertainment.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Yes. I intend to give Miss Jensen a fine evening. Just the two of us.”

Leon took the hint. “Of course. We wouldn’t dream of interfering. Would we Jack?”

“Nope, wouldn’t dream of it. And yer a lucky man, Mr. Connelly, to have such a beautiful lady on yer arm.”

Josey played shy, giving Jack a slap on his arm. “Oh, now you’re being silly. It’s an honor to be solicited by Mr. Connelly. I’m anticipating a lovely evening.”

“Well, then we’ll part company,” Leon said, and took Josey’s hand in his, giving it a kiss. “Josephine, we’ll visit another time.”

Jack leaned in and gave Josey a kiss on the cheek. “See ya later, darlin’. Mr. Connelly, enjoy the show.”

“Yes, I intend to,” he said, his arm wrapping possessively around Josey’s waist.

The two outlaws tipped their hats and made a discreet departure toward the ticket seller.

“How do you know those men?” Connelly demanded. “Surely, they must know not to approach you when you’re working.”

“Oh, stop worrying about it,” Josephine assured him. “They’re just friends. I’ve known them since childhood. Besides, they didn’t know I was working until you joined us. Come, let’s go and enjoy the show.”

The play was an unqualified success, with performers gallivanting around the stage, wearing wild costumes and glittering make-up. Loud bangs and dazzling flares of lights had the audience surprised that the place didn’t catch fire and burn down around them. But then, that was part of the excitement and the thrill of a live show, with professionals who knew how to entertain.

For Leon, the only downside was that there was no sign of the enticing redhead. But he didn’t allow this disappointment to ruin the show, and he clapped and cheered along with everyone else, showing his appreciation.

Loud cheering and whistles accompanied the curtain call, while many stood up and demanded “More! More!” The performers all bowed and curtsied, and lapped up the attention as only an actor upon the stage can. Then, as a final bow was taken, those performers wearing masks and head pieces, removed their costumes for all to see, and Leon’s heart came to his throat.

A thick mane of red hair bounced out from under its disguise, as the actor, dressed like a man with a full beard and black hair, morphed into the very actress Leon had been searching for.

“Well, I’ll be,” he commented as he clapped, then he grinned and whistled and cheered along with rest of the crowd.

“What?” Jack asked.

“It’s a woman!” Leon said, pointing to his desire.

“Yeah, so what? Lots a women play men on the stage. And the other way around, too,” Jack commented. “Personally, I find it kinda disgustin’, but she do look good in them trousers.”

Leon’s grin widened. “Yeah.”

Leon was deep in thought, as he and Jack followed the herd out through the front door and into the street. It was a warm summer night, and many patrons lingered to visit or discuss the play they had just seen. No one appeared to be in a hurry to depart the area, and Jack was anxious.

“I sure hope these folks head for home soon,” he murmured. “We don’t need all these witnesses hangin’ around.”

“Hmm,” Leon nodded. “I expect they’ll move off soon enough.” He turned and looked back at the theater. “Let’s just hang back a few minutes.”

“What for?” Jack asked. “It’s time we got back to the room. Gus and the boys are gonna be settin’ off their own fireworks here, soon.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. We still have time. C’mon.”

And with that, Leon returned indoors.

Jack threw up his hands in frustration. “What?” But he was talking to the disappearing back of his partner. “Sheesh, Leon.”

By the time Jack entered the dim and dusky aisle of the theater, Leon was already nearing the back of the building, behind the stage, where most of the post and pre-production went on. Jack lengthened his stride and soon caught up with his partner.

Back stage was abuzz with activity. Laughter and high spirits, that often followed a successful show, were in high swing. Props were dismantled and stored away, while performers busied themselves with the removal of make-up and prosthetics. Nobody paid much attention to the two young men who were suddenly in their midst.

“What are you fellas doing back here?” came a familiar voice from behind the pair.

Both men turned and were just as surprised to see her.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Josey,” Leon greeted her. “Didn’t expect to see you backstage.”

“Well, likewise, I’m sure,” Josey countered. “Do you have an invitation?”

“Well, no. I—”

“Oh, never mind,” Josey waved his stuttering away. “I suppose you’re interested in meeting someone in particular?”

“Oh, well. I—”

“I’m sure he’s just here, being a snoop,” Mr. Connelly cut in. “Come along Josephine.”

“No, actually,” Leon responded. “I was hoping to be introduced to one of the performers.”

“Yes, I figured as much,” Josephine said. “Well, I know them all, which one caught your eye?”

“Oh come, Josephine,” Connelly protested, “we don’t have time for this.”

“I don’t know her name,” Leon said, ignoring the escort, “but she has red hair—”

“Oh, Ella!” Josey stated. “What a coincidence. We were just going over to say hello to her ourselves.”

“Really?” Leon grinned.

Connelly scowled.

Jack frowned.

“Come on,” Josey ordered as she led the way. “Her dressing room is just down here.”

Leon’s smile intensified as he gave Jack a slap on the arm.

“What are we doin’?” Jack asked him. “In case you’ve forgotten, we got us an important job ta do tonight.”

“Yeah, I know. I haven’t forgotten. Come on.”

“Leon—”

“No, come on. It’ll be fine. We have lots of time. Besides, they’re getting ahead of us.”

“No, they ain’t, ‘cause we should be goin’ in the other direction.”

But Leon was already on the move. As he got around the corner, Mr. Connelly was shaking hands with the actress and engaging her in polite conversation. Leon felt a surge of jealousy and lengthened his stride. Jack reluctantly brought up the rear.

“What a lovely accent you have,” Connelly was saying. “I didn’t notice it while you were on stage.”

“I tend to adopt an American accent when acting, Mr. Connelly,” she replied, and proved it by doing just that. “It is part of an actor’s skill to be able to become any character they choose, you know.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” he agreed. “Well, it was wonderful to meet you. Perhaps you would care to join us for a late supper? My friend and I were just—”

Josephine was not pleased with this suggestion. “Oh no, Frederick. I’m sure it’s too late.”

“Yes, it is,” the redhead responded, not lost on Josephine’s discomfort. “This was our last showing here, and we have lots to do before we sleep tonight. We’ll be pulling out first thing in the morning.”

Leon stepped up to the plate.

“Oh, that is a shame,” he said. “I was hoping, once we were formally introduced, you would join me for lunch tomorrow.”

Her eyebrow cocked in his direction.

“Oh, it’s you,” she stated. “The strange man from the shop this afternoon.”

Jack snorted.

Leon ignored him. “Yes. How do you do.”

“It seems we still haven’t been introduced, so even if I had the time . . .”

Josephine stepped forward. Irked by her escort flirting with another woman while still on her time, was an insult she intended to reprimand.

“I can certainly introduce you,” she offered. “This is my friend, Mrs. Gabriella Tanguay. Ella, this is Mr. Josh Harden and Mr. Rupert Roundtree.”

Gabriella acknowledged the introduction and was prepared to leave it at that.

Leon smiled and took her hand, but his heart was hit with a disappointment.

“Mrs.?” he asked. “Is your husband part of the theater troupe as well?”

“No, he’s not,” she answered and left it at that.

“Ah. Well perhaps we could still—”

She smiled as she would at a pestering child.

“I’m sorry, Monsieur Harden. It has certainly been interesting, but as I said, we have much to do in preparation of an early start tomorrow. Perhaps another time.”

“Yeah,” Jack grumbled. “Speakin’ a lots ta do.”

“Of course,” Leon said. “What town are you heading to next?”

“C’mon, Leon. Let’s go,” Jack grabbed his partner by the arm and dragged him away.

“No, wait a minute,” Leon complained. “What town are you going to?”

But Gabriella simply smiled at him and sent him a polite nod, then turned her attention back to Mr. Connelly.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“What did you do that for?” Leon griped, as they walked toward the hotel. “There was a spark between us. I might have had something going there.”

“Believe me, Leon, there weren’t no spark. She was just bein’ polite. And what do ya mean, meetin’ her for lunch tomorrow? By that time, we better be halfway back ta Elk Mountain, or we’re in trouble.”

“Yeah, I know. But when you meet that special someone . . .”

Jack sighed, shaking his head.

“I ain’t no fool, Leon. I know what this is all about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everything’s gotta be a competition with you, don’t it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come off it. You’re jealous a me havin’ a woman at the Elk.”

“What do you mean, *having a woman*? I don’t recall Haley saying she’s your woman. I expect she can hardly wait to get out from under our roof.”

“Oh, I dunno about that, Leon. We’ve had some nice, private talks, you know what I mean? She ain’t in any hurry to go anywhere. And you’re jealous.”

“I am not. There’s something about Gabriella,” he did a full turn around to look back toward the theater, then faced forward again. “She’s intriguing.”

Jack snorted. “Yeah. I doubt you’d a found her so intriguing’ ifn I didn’t already have a woman at the Elk. Besides, she’s married, so you ain’t gonna get nowhere’s with her anyway.”

Leon shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Her husband’s not with her. Maybe there’s problems in paradise.”

“She said, he ain’t part of the troupe, that don’t mean he ain’t with her.”

“Hmm.”

“Come on. It’s almost midnight. We gotta get ta work.”

CHAPTER SEVEN THE UNROBBABLE SAFE

One o'clock in the morning and, aside from the saloon situated half a block from the Merchant's Bank, all was quiet in this section of town. That is until two ghosts glided along the boardwalk to disappear into the darkness beyond the reach of the streetlamps.

Stopping one building short of the well-lit bank, one of the men knelt by the door of the Durant's Hat Shop and pulled out a small, shiny tool. A quick flick of his wrist, and the door creaked open. The first man reached in and up, searching for and finding the little brass bell right above the door jam. Holding it to keep it silent, he slipped inside, and the second man followed. The door silently slid closed. The music and the laughter coming from the saloon washed into the street and covered any other sounds that might be making the rounds during the night.

Moving through the hat shop, Leon counted the steps to the counter. He reached out in the darkness and touched it, then using it as a guide, got himself pointed in the correct direction for the back door. He counted off his steps again, as he and Jack moved silently through the merchandise, using touch as their guide.

Reaching the correct number of steps, Leon stopped and felt for the knob of the door. Finding it exactly where he calculated it to be, he grinned in cheeky triumph. His other hand reached up, turned the deadbolt, and they exited into the alleyway.

It was just as dark outside as it had been inside, but the men, still using touch as their guide, slunk their way along the back of the building until the structure changed from wood to brick.

"Here it is," Leon whispered. "We should be coming up to the back door of the bank in a few more steps."

"Yeah," Jack murmured as he shifted the saddlebags on his shoulder. "Just don't trip."

Leon nodded and gave his over-the-shoulder satchel a gentle tug. Carrying nitro around while feeling your way along a back alley, during the darkest time of night, wasn't for the weak-hearted.

"Here it is," he breathed. "Take this."

He slid the bag strap over his head and, with great care, passed the bundle to his partner.

"Take what?" Jack whispered. "I can't see anything."

"The nitro," Leon answered. "I'm handing it to you."

DINNER AT THE ELK

Leon heard Jack suck his teeth as his searching hands felt the shape of the box inside the bag. He would never be comfortable handling this unpredictable explosive.

“Be careful with it,” Leon cautioned. “The last thing we need is to get blown up right outside the back of the bank.”

It was a good thing it was so dark that Leon didn't see the look of disdain that was sent his way. He slid to his knees and pulled out his set of heavy-duty lock picks from his breast pocket. Jack took up his usual position of watching for any interlopers showing up at an awkward moment. There was no telling if a deputy made this back-alley part of his usual nightly route. Keeping an eye on the local law the previous evening hadn't suggested that they did, but it was always best to keep an eye out.

“C'mon, what's takin' ya so long?” Jack hissed. “The boys will set things off too soon, ifn ya don't get that door open.”

“And if you don't stop talking, I'll never get it open. Stop worrying, we've got time.”

“It's my job ta worry. It's your job ta get that door open.”

“Shhh.”

Click.

Leon's teeth gleamed in the darkness. “We're in.”

“Any bars?”

“No.” Leon's tone held a tinge of bewilderment. “It amazes me. They put bars on all the windows and the front door, but completely ignore the back door. We're doing these folks a service.”

“That's one way a lookin' at it,” Jack said as they made their way inside. “Here, take your nitro back so's I can get the light out.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Leon took the box back and waited patiently.

Jack set his saddlebags on the floor and felt around until he found the small lantern safely stashed away in one of them. He struck a match and lit the wick, but kept it turned down low, providing them with just enough light to make out the shapes of the desks and counters inside the structure. With the window blinds down, and the street lanterns lighting the front entrance, the thieves had no worries of someone taking note of activity inside the bank.

Leon crept forward. He had a good idea of where the safe was kept from his casual survey of this establishment earlier that afternoon. Even without that, most banks were designed in much the same manner, so finding certain items was not generally a problem.

Within moments, they stood in front of the safe. To the average citizen, the heavily reinforced box appeared foreboding and secure. Leon gazed

upon it in admiration. He could feel his heart rate quicken with excitement, and his eyes glittered with the anticipated challenge of cracking this monster open.

Letting go a breath, he stepped forward, setting the box of nitro on top of the safe, then laid a caressing hand upon the cold metal surface.

“Hello darlin’,” he cooed, “you want to dance?”

“Ya ain’t here ta make love to it, Leon,” Jack reminded him, as he checked his pocket watch. “We got less than an hour before the boys set up a ruckus.”

“You have no appreciation for the arts, Jack,” Leon accused him. “This lady’s special; she needs to be pampered.”

“Kiss and make up later. You got the putty?”

Within forty minutes the safe was ready to go.

The thieves settled in behind the counter to wait for the second part of their plan to come together. Leon sat quietly holding the fuse as the ready, but as time ticked by, Jack became increasingly restless.

“What are they doing in there?” he grouched as he checked his watch for the umpteenth time. “They shoulda set off them fireworks ten minutes ago.”

“I wonder sometimes, if either of them can tell time,” Leon mumbled. “Sometimes I catch Malachi counting his fingers instead of watching the clock.”

Jack sent his uncle a scathing look. “And you set them up on a time-sensitive job like this?” He caught the cocked eyebrow of his partner and realized he’d been set up. “Dammit, Leon. Stop foolin’ around.”

Leon shrugged. “It helps pass the time. They’ll get—”

Loud cracking explosions cut in on the conversation, and the flickering lights outside the bank windows indicated that the fireworks show was in full swing.

Leon grinned. “There they go.” He struck a match and set the fuse alight. “Get ready.”

The fuse sparkled and danced as it made its way toward the safe.

Jack and Leon covered their ears and ducked lower down behind cover, waiting for the explosion that would signal success.

When it came, it wasn’t as loud or jarring as the thieves expected. It was more like a loud ‘POP’, followed by a louder clanging as the safe door fell open upon the floor.

The fireworks display continued.

The partners grinned at one another then scampered around the counter to inspect their plunder.

DINNER AT THE ELK

Waving smoke away from their faces, they sat in front of the ravaged safe and gazed in upon the spoils of their efforts.

“Wow, look at it all,” Jack murmured, his eyes wide with awe. “I dunno ifn we can get this much into the saddlebags.”

“We have the sack that carried the supplies,” Leon pointed out, as he picked up a solid gold brick. “We’ll take as much as we can. Although, I sure hate to leave anything behind for lack of room.”

“No need ta be greedy,” Jack said, and took out a small case. He slid the lid open and was met with a dazzling array of jewels. “There must be over \$100,000 in here.”

“More like \$200,000,” Leon said, as he began shoveling jewels into the sack. “C’mon. We can put the gold bricks in the saddle bags, and the jewels and bonds into the sack.” He began to giggle, as the adrenaline rush hit full force. “We showed them, eh, Jack? There’s not a safe in the country that’s going to stop us. Ha, ha!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jack said while stuffing the bags. “It ain’t at the Elk yet. We still gotta get outta town.”

Feeling their way down the back lane, they skipped by the hat shop and headed for the side alley that was lit up by the ongoing fireworks display. Slipping out to the main street proved easy, as everyone was watching the show. Gus and Malachi were busy, shooting their guns into the air and throwing good whiskey around, while the deputy in charge tried to get them under control. The late-night party-goers weren’t helping much, as they got into the swing of things, and all the patrons moved from the saloon and into the street. Everyone was having a wonderful time.

The partners went unnoticed as they strolled along the boardwalk toward the hotel. Leon smiled and, jabbing Jack with his elbow, he nodded at the hotel night clerk who was also outside and enjoying the pyrotechnics display.

“This is workin’ out better n I hoped,” Jack said as they hopped up the stairs and entered the hotel lobby.

The place was deserted.

“Yeah,” Leon agreed. “C’mon, if we hurry, we can get this stuff stashed away in our room, then get outside and join the fun. Then we can mossey on back and get the key from the clerk, once he remembers his job and gets back behind the counter.”

“Yup.”

Despite the weight of their baggage, the two men scampered up the stairs to the second floor and stopped at the door to their room. Leon glanced around to ensure privacy, then, with an ease of long practice, whipped out his lock pick and had the door to their room opened within seconds.

They shoved the bags under the beds and made a hasty retreat. Within moments they were back outside, enjoying the festivities.

The following morning, even the late hour of 9:00 am found the café filled with bleary-eyed customers. Most folks hadn't got much sleep the previous night, and the effects were being felt all around. Coffee flowed fast and disappeared as quickly as a new brew could be brought out.

Jack and Leon sat at a corner table, enjoying a fine breakfast of fried eggs and steak, when the door to the café banged open and a concerned citizen barged in upon the domestic scene.

"The bank's been robbed—"

All conversation stopped as attention focused on the new arrival.

"What?" asked a concerned patron. "When?"

The messenger shrugged. "Dunno. Sometime durin' the night."

"They didn't get into the safe, did they?"

"Sure did. Dang thing's busted wide open."

"But, Mr. Murtree himself, guaranteed that his new safe was burglar-proof."

Another shrug. "Well, that's what the Navarre Safe Company told him. It would appear that whoever robbed it ain't heard a that guarantee."

The air filled with grumbling and cursing, along with the scraping of chairs, as breakfast was interrupted and citizens moved for the door.

"Ah, excuse me, sir," Leon called out and stopped the messenger before he could leave. "Did the thieves take everything that was in the safe?"

"I dunno," he admitted. "Did you fellas have money in it?"

Leon's smile was regretful. "Unfortunately, yes. We put it there for safekeeping while in town, not wanting to leave it laying around in the hotel room, you understand."

"So much for that idea," Jack grumbled. "Next time we keep our money on us, no matter how many assurances the bank manager gives us. There's too many damn thieves around for anything ta be safe."

The messenger nodded. "You sure got that right."

"But the bank has insurance, doesn't it?" Leon asked.

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Sure. All ya gotta do is report it to the sheriff.”

“Well then, maybe not all is lost,” Leon said. “Thank you, sir. My friend and I will finish our breakfast, and then we’ll look into it.”

“Glad ta be of help.”

An hour later, the partners led their heavily laden horses out of the barn and were in the process of tightening the girths, when a shout from across the street caught their attentions.

“Hey, you there. Hold on a minute. I want a word with you fellas.”

“Yes, Sheriff?” Leon asked, as the lawman came over to them.

“Where are you rushing off to?”

Leon and Jack exchanged a confused look.

“Well, ah,” Leon explained. “My friend and I have a job waiting for us in Wyoming. Is there a problem?”

“I got word that you two fellas had money in the safe,” Sheriff Connors explained. “If you expect compensation then I have to know about it. Why didn’t you file a report before leaving?”

“Oh. Well,” Leon began, “we decided it wasn’t worth it. I understand that it can take some time before any claims can be settled, and we need to get to this job.”

“Uh huh.”

“And we didn’t have all that much in the safe, Sheriff,” Jack continued. “What we’ll make at this new job will more’n pay it back.”

“Uh huh. I’d still like to know how much you lost. That way we can get a better idea of how much those thieves got away with.”

“Oh, well.” Leon glanced at Jack. “It was about \$60.00, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, about that.”

“That’s a fair chunk of change,” the sheriff insisted. “Come over to my office and file a report. All you have to do is show me the receipt and leave me a forwarding address. I’ll send you the compensation once things get sorted out. You won’t get all your money back, but—”

“Honest, Sheriff, we don’t have the time,” Leon insisted. “As we said, this new job will make it back. But, just out of curiosity . . .?”

“Yes?”

“Any idea who it was? I heard that the safe here was supposed to be unrobbable, and yet. . .” He shrugged to make his point.

The sheriff’s shoulders slumped. “That’s what Mr. Murtree was told. That safe was top of the line. It wouldn’t have been just any old penny-ante thief, that’s for sure.”

“So,” Leon continued, “someone with some know-how, someone with more brains than the average criminal?”

“Yup, must a been,” the sheriff concurred. “But we’ll know more once the detectives have a chance to examine the safe.”

“Examine the safe?” Jack asked.

“Uh huh. Mr. Murtree just sent a telegram to Wells Fargo, and they’re going to send a couple a fellas to figure out what happened here. Once they know how it was done, well then, maybe they’ll have a better idea who did it.”

“Oh yeah?” Leon grinned. “How about you, I mean, in your professional opinion, who do you think did it?”

Stubby fingers scratched a stubby chin. “Well, I can think of a couple, off hand. Luke ‘The Spider’ Johnston, Liam Gunderson, Napoleon Nash, Chuck Jordan . . .”

“Hmm, Napoleon Nash, you say?”

“Maybe,” the sheriff confirmed. “He’s awful young and usually only works Wyoming, but,” he shrugged, “you never know.”

“Don’t you think we oughta get goin’?” Jack suggested. He was none too comfortable with this line of talk.

“Yeah, yeah, in a minute,” Leon assured him, then turned his attention back to the lawman. “So, these Wells Fargo detectives, they should be able to narrow down the field of possible suspects?”

“That’s the whole idea a them comin’ out here. Why are you so interested?”

“Oh, well,” Leon gave a shy smile, “I’m kind of an amateur criminologist myself. What a shame we can’t stick around to hear what they have to say.”

“Yeah, but we can’t, can we,” Jack persisted. “We got that job—”

“So, do you think that fireworks show last night might have been part of it?” Leon continued, while Jack rolled his eyes.

“Oh, I dunno,” the sheriff considered. “Them fellas are in my jail right now, gettin’ over that drunk. They don’t strike me as bein’ smart enough to be up ta this job. I’ll be askin’ ‘em some questions, once they wake up, but I expect I’ll be lettin’ ‘em go. It’s more likely the bank robbers simply used that disturbance as a convenient distraction.”

Leon nodded. “Why aren’t you out chasing them down? That would be quite a feather in your cap.”

The sheriff snorted. “Chase ‘em down? They got at least six hours head start. We don’t even know what direction they went. You fellas best be careful if you’re heading into Wyoming. If it was Nash, that’s likely the direction they would go.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

“Oh, we’re not too worried about that, Sheriff,” Leon assured him. “Like you say, they’re likely long gone by now. Still, you’re thinking it was Nash?”

The sheriff shrugged. “Hard tellin’. I hear, he’s a real bright lad. It’s a shame, really.”

“What?”

“Well, a young fella who’s as smart as rumors say, and yet he turns to crime for his career. It’s a waste, that’s all. I don’t care how smart a man is, if he turns ta crime, he’s gonna come to a bad end.”

“Hmm,” Leon nodded. “You could be right there, Sheriff.” He held out his hand for shaking. “Thank you for your time.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, young fella.” He shook Leon’s hand, then extended the courtesy to Jack. “Like I say, you two fellas take care out on the road. That Elk Mountain bunch is real active this time a year.”

“Yessir, Sheriff,” Leon agreed. “We’ll surely keep our eyes open.”

“Yeah,” Jack concurred, “we sure don’t wanna be runnin’ into them fellas.”

“Good day to ya.” The sheriff tipped his hat and walked off toward the bank.

“Kinda pushin’ our luck there, weren’t ya, Leon?”

“Yeah, I suppose. But I wanted to find out where we stand.” A wicked grim stretched across his features. “It’s going to be at least a week before they figure out who and how, and we’ll be safe, back in the Elk, by then.”

“Uh huh,” Jack commented as they mounted up. “Mind you, that sheriff thinks you’re gonna come to a bad end.”

Dark eyes sparkled. “All the more reason to have fun along the way.”

The two men sat upon their saddle blankets, their saddles making a convenient support for their tired backs. A small fire crackled close to their crossed legs, sending some comfort, if not warmth to the spring night. Normally, they would be sipping coffee and frying up a quick supper, but tonight was not normal, and, despite their newly gained wealth, the men were grumpy.

“Whose idea was this, anyway?” Jack grouched. “We don’t even know if they’re gonna show up.”

“They’ll show up.” Leon’s words were confident, but his tone hinted otherwise. “The sheriff said he was going to let them go.”

“Yeah, well, I ain’t met a sheriff yet who couldn’t change his mind.”

Heavy sigh from the genius. “Damn, I need a coffee.”

“An’ I need some food,” Jack complained. “We coulda packed enough with us just for tonight.”

“They’ll be here,” Leon insisted. “I’m almost certain of it.”

Jack was about to respond when a branch was deliberately snapped, just outside the rim of light.

Leon grinned. “Howdy boys.”

Sounds of horses approaching was followed by the appearance of the two men themselves.

“Hey, Nash. Kid,” Gus greeted them. “Have any trouble?”

“No,” Leon answered. “Everything went smoothly. How about you?”

“Naw,” Gus waved it away. “Everything went fine. That sheriff was real accommodatin’.”

“Yeah,” Malachi moved into the light. “He even fed us breakfast afore sendin’ us on our way.”

“That’s good,” Jack said. “Did ya bring food?”

“And coffee?” Leon added.

“Yeah, sure,” Gus said. “You got the money?”

Leon frowned. “What? You’re holding the food for ransom now?”

“No, no. Just wonderin’.”

“Hmm,” Leon responded. “Okay. Give us the supplies. We’ll get supper going while you fellas tend to your horses. Then we’ll tell you all about it.”

The four men sat around the dwindling campfire, savoring a final cup of coffee before calling it a night.

“You lucked out,” Gus grumbled. “I was expectin’ ta hear that whole bank blow sky-high. Didn’t expect ta even need a diversion, since you was gonna end up killin’ yourself anyway.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” Leon countered. “I worked everything out. Nothing could go wrong.”

Gus snorted.

Malachi grinned, nursing his coffee. Admiration for his boss gleamed in what was left of the firelight.

Jack sat in silence, knowing a line of bull when he heard it.

“So,” Leon continued, “in the morning, we split up the supplies and the money and take separate trails. That way, if any of us get caught, we won’t be losing the whole cache.”

“We know the drill,” Gus stated. “I notice you ain’t told us how much the cache is.”

DINNER AT THE ELK

Leon grinned at Jack, then back at Gus and Malachi.

“I figure, \$250,000, at least.”

Gus choked on his coffee.

Malachi’s grin widened. “Yahoo. That be our best take, ever.

“Uh huh,” Leon own grin widened with delight. “This is going to make us number one.”

“As long as them detective fellas figure out it was you,” Gus said. “By the time we left, the local law was comin’ up with every name but yours.”

“That’s not what he said to us,” Leon remarked.

“You talked to the sheriff?” Gus asked, his brow rising. “Dammit. You’re one cocky son-of-a-bitch. Ya always gotta blow yer own horn, don’t ya?”

Leon shrugged. “He stopped us. I simply made the best of the situation.”

Finally, Jack could stay silent no longer. “He only stopped us, ‘cause you started askin’ questions at the café, tellin’ everyone we had money in that safe.”

Malachi giggled, admiration for his boss increasing.

Gus wasn’t so easily impressed. “And they call you a genius. That was plum stupid. You’re gonna come to a bad end, one of these days. I hope I’m there ta see it, but outta range. The last thing I need is ta go down ‘cause a you.”

Jack sent Leon a smirk. “It seems the sheriff ain’t the only one with that opinion.”

Leon groused. “You don’t seem to mind sharing in the spoils.”

“Strike while the iron’s hot,” Gus answered. “I’ll run with ya, as long as we’re earnin’. But you can bet, I’m always gonna have a back-up plan. You’re just plain crazy.” He stood up, tossing the last of his cold coffee into the fire. “I’m goin’ ta bed. We got an early start tomorrow.” He stalked off into the bushes to tend to business.

“How about you, Malachi?” Leon asked. “You feel the same way?”

“Hell no,” Malachi grinned, as he nursed his last smoke for the night. “This is the most fun I ever had.”

Leon puffed up and grinned at Jack.

Jack sighed.

CHAPTER EIGHT GABRIELLA

Five days on the trail, and Leon was wearing out.

The four men had split the food and the money, then separated, each taking their own route back to the Elk. But with \$75,000 in his saddle bags, there was little room for food and other necessities of the trail, so Leon had been forced to enter towns along the way to replenish. Picking out a recognizable spot along the way, he always took the time to hide his expensive saddlebags, then head into the nearest town, unhindered. He didn't dare spend the night, but he did splurge on a steak supper when he could and made do with biscuits and coffee for breakfast.

He finally crossed the border into Wyoming and stopped in Lone Tree to again replenish when the headline on the local paper caught his eye. He stood up, reached over and snatched the newspaper from the empty table beside him. Pushing his steak supper away from him for now, he spread the paper out and settled in to read all about himself.

NAPOLEON NASH ROBS UNROBBABLE SAFE IN DENVER!

What is now being considered the biggest bank robbery to date, took place here in Denver last week, when the new, combination/timer Navarre safe was broken into. Though not going into details of how the safe was cracked, Wells Fargo Detective Frank Carlyle has determined that the notorious and prolific Elk Mountain Gang from Wyoming is to blame.

"Napoleon Nash was stumped by a similar safe last fall, and having studied Nash and his techniques, I expect he spent the winter working out how to overcome these new locks. He's not a man who likes to lose," Carlyle stated. "He is intelligent and not afraid to take risks, and that's exactly what it would have taken for someone to break into this safe the way he did."

When informed of the unplanned fireworks display that happened on the same night as the robbery, Carlyle stated that he doubted the diversion was a coincidence. "That's typical of Nash," he continued. "He gets his gang to set up a commotion, then he and his partner take care of business. It's

unfortunate that Sheriff Connors had members of the Elk Mountain Gang in his jail and then let them go.”

Sheriff Connors assures the public that telegrams have been sent out to all the towns between here and Medicine Bow. “Rest assured,” Sheriff Connors stated, “now that we know who is responsible, we know what direction they are traveling in. This gang will be tracked down and brought to justice. I also want to assure the citizens here that the safe was insured, and anyone who had money or valuables stored there will be compensated.”

Leon sat back and returned to his steak supper. He hoped to be back at the Elk before he was labeled as the culprit. Now, he was going to have to be doubly careful about staying out of town. Too many people in Wyoming knew what he looked like, and he couldn't take the chance of being spotted.

“There's apple pie coming, and would you like some more coffee?”

Leon jumped, his nerves tingling. He breathed a smile up to the waitress holding the coffee pot.

“Oh. Yes, thank you. That was a fine steak supper.”

“I'm glad you enjoyed it,” she said, as she refilled his cup. “I'll let the cook know.”

She picked up his empty plate and carried on with her duties.

Leon sipped his coffee and focused on reading the article again.

Frank Carlyle. I've never heard of him, but apparently, he's heard of me. Then he smiled. ‘. . . the biggest bank robbery to date.’ Yeah, I like that.

He was distracted from his musings by the plate of pie appearing.

“Is there anything else you would like?” the waitress asked him.

“No thank you. Ah, what time does the mercantile close tonight?”

She glanced at the grandfather clock leaning against the far wall. “He closes at six, so you have another hour.”

“Perfect.”

Leon walked out of the mercantile with new saddlebags, filled to the brim with trail essentials, flung over his shoulder. He also carried a light sack with draw strings that he had intended to hang off the saddle horn, but his equine companion let him know this was not a good plan.

Before he'd even reached his horse, the animal's nose twitched, as it drew in the sweet scent of oats and barley. A horse head reached out and lips smacked, then grabbed at the bag, in an effort to procure supper.

“Hey, not yet,” Leon scolded the animal, then drew the bag out of reach. “You’ll get some when we’re settled for the night.”

The horse didn’t agree. Leon came in close to the saddle and tried to loop the drawstring over the horn, but the nose followed him, and the teeth commenced to nip and tug at the material, hoping for an appetizer. Leon waved the persistent nostrils away but realized that this plan was not going to work. He set the sack onto the ground by the horse’s hind legs and, swinging the full saddle bags over the rump, he tucked them up under his coat behind the saddle.

He was just about to lift the sack, when that same rump shifted away from him and the horse tried to come around. He was stopped by the tether to the hitching rail, and the head rose in irritation, his ears going back, as he pranced on the spot, trying to work out a solution.

Leon gave him the solution with a quick slap on the rump.

“Stop it!”

The horse blew in agitation, but he knew better than to push his luck. Standing tense, but still, he had no choice but to allow his human to tie the enticing sack to the back of the saddle, where the horse had no chance of reaching it.

Satisfied that all was secured, Leon then mounted. He did a quick scan up and down the street, then headed out of town at a casual lope. He wondered if he should come at his hiding place by a roundabout route, but it was still getting dark early, so he didn’t think he had the time. Besides, if it would soon be too dark for him to find his way, then it wasn’t likely any posse would be able to track him, either.

With that comforting thought in mind, he disappeared into the gathering dusk.

The next two days were uneventful. He kept to the back country, using trails only known to outlaws and Indians, and slowly made his way toward home and safety. He was ready for it. His familiar bed was a far cry better than sleeping on the ground, and he found himself counting the nights before he could sink into its mattress.

A smile flicked across his face at the thought of the celebration they would have once everyone was back at the hideout. When they converted all the gold, bonds, and jewels to cash, the whole gang would be living high for some time to come. They’d have to wait a little while for things to settle down, but there was enough cash from the robbery to keep everyone happy for a time. He had a reliable connection who was happy to earn his

commission taking care of the fencing end of the business, so all was in order.

His thoughts were on good times ahead when he came out onto a bluff where he could see across open land. There was a road winding its way along beside Cooper's Creek, and Leon frowned, noticing dust rising, and the faint outline of wagons moving along at a snail's pace.

Now, what have we got here? Idiots. They're asking for trouble without an escort.

He sighed, wondering what he should do about it. If anything.

I need to get back to the Elk. Let them find their own way. He sighed again. *Dammit!*

Turning his horse's head to a downward route, he got onto level ground and kicked the animal into a gallop, heading toward the dust cloud.

As he got closer, the dim shapes solidified into four loaded wagons and a coach. There were also three horsemen riding shotgun to the small caravan. One of the horsemen held up his hand to stop the wagons, and all eyes turned to the stranger approaching them. Seven rifles aimed in Leon's direction.

Leon slowed to a trot, then stopped within hearing distance. He smiled and raised his hands to show that he held no weapon.

"Hello!" he called out. "You folks all right?"

"What makes you think we ain't?" the apparent leader answered back.

"This is dangerous country," Leon said. "Especially when you're hauling freight and women folk. Do you know where you are?"

Two of the horsemen exchanged a look. Some words passed between them as they decided what to do. Finally, a decision was made.

"We're on our way to Laramie."

Leon's jaw dropped.

"Laramie?" he repeated. "I hate to tell you folks this, but you're long past Laramie. Why didn't you follow the rail line? That would have taken you right there and kept you in more civilized territory."

The leader jerked his thumb toward his subordinate.

"Percy here thought he knew a short-cut."

"Ha! No sir," Leon countered. "You're way off track."

"Can you help us get back on track?"

"I could," Leon agreed. "Do you mind if I put my hands down and ride in?"

"That's fine. Come on in."

There's your second mistake, Leon mused. You should have taken my guns first.

But since he had no intentions of robbing these people, he simply smiled and rode up to the group.

“Howdy,” the leader greeted him. “I’m John Wilcox, and our great tracker here, is Percy Jones.”

“Afternoon,” Leon said. “I’m Josh Harden.”

“Good to meet you.”

“John.” All three men looked toward the woman who had stepped out of the coach. “It’s getting late in the day, why don’t you ask the gentleman to stay to supper and spend the night?”

“Oh.” Leon wasn’t sure about this. “I don’t—”

“No, no, we insist,” John said. “It’s the least we can do for you getting us un-lost. I thought we’d be in Laramie two days ago.”

“Yup, that sounds about right.”

The caravan busied itself getting camp prepared. Most of the men unharnessed horses and got them settled for the night, while the women busied themselves with preparing the evening meal. Fires were stoked, and soon, the enticing aroma of wood smoke and frying meats would permeate the campsite.

Percy took charge of the riding horses, and was about to lead them away, when Leon stopped him.

“Oh, wait a moment,” he said, “let me get my saddlebags.” He grabbed the ones on top, leaving the second set with his supplies to go with the horse. He regretted not stashing his cache away before riding down here, but he hadn’t intended on staying the night. Slinging the bags over his shoulder, he followed John toward the circle of wooden benches being set up around the cooking fires.

“What are you folks doing out here?” Leon asked. “I mean, aside from getting lost. Do you have business in Laramie?”

“Oh no,” John said. “We’re a theatre company. We travel from town to town, giving performances.” He twinkled a smile. “Some might even call us gypsies.”

Leon’s heart skipped a beat. “A theatre company?”

“Yes. We finished a couple of shows in Cheyenne and decided that Laramie would be the next logical stop. But, as you know, things have not gone as planned.”

Leon was still getting over his surprise, when a young woman, slicing bacon, caught her breath and shot upright. Her green eyes went wide with surprise.

Leon stared back.

It was Gabriella Tanguay.

When she had walked into the Mercantile in Denver, the voice she heard was pleasant enough, but the uneducated accent had put her off. She was an intelligent woman, and she had always been attracted to that same trait in a man. His physical appearance didn't matter, nor did the size of his pocketbook, but he better have some gray matter between the ears, or she was not interested.

She spoke to the man at the counter only out of courtesy. She had truly been concerned for his safety. He was obviously an uneducated lout. If he'd had any education at all, it was likely he had been pulled out of school to work his family farm or some such. He obviously had no idea how to handle nitroglycerin. She felt it was within her duty, as a concerned adult, to warn him of its dangers.

Then he had turned those chocolate eyes upon her, and his smile lit up his handsome face. It was all she could do to keep the breath in her body. Then he spoke. The uneducated lout was gone, to be replaced by a rich baritone smoldering with intelligence and sudden sex appeal.

She focused on keeping her composure. She wished her heart to slow its beating, her palms to stop sweating. Hopefully, her voice did not quiver. He was beautiful, and he was looking at her. He was interested, she could tell. But she couldn't go there, not now. It was too soon. Besides, they had not been formally introduced.

She removed herself from his presence as soon as it was deemed civil.

Final show in Denver! What a success it had been. Their take was the best so far, but the evening was too busy with breaking things down, for them to wallow in success. Backstage was in turmoil. Make-up off, costumes removed and stored away. Props and accessories of the craft needed to be packed up and loaded onto the wagons. It was already midnight, and if the troupe was to get any sleep that night, they had to bustle to get everything ready for an early start.

Then, Josephine showed up with a dandy in tow. Damn! Still, one must be civil. Josey had connections in Denver, and she had helped them get the permit to take over the theatre for a few nights. Their successful run would never have gotten off the ground, if Josey hadn't been willing to pull some strings.

Be civil, Gabriella. Smile and bat your eyelashes at this sleaze in a suit.

And then, there he was again. That gorgeous man with the charming smile. Despite his educated accent and his gentlemanly manner, she was sure he was a rogue. And yet, her heart was in her throat. Her fingers tingled as he took her hand. Now they have been formally introduced, and she could find no way out.

Tell the truth, Gabriella. Throw a cold bucket of water upon his flirtations. It's too soon for a romance, especially with the likes of him. He's trouble.

And now, here he was again. Out here in the middle of nowhere. As soon as she heard that rich baritone voice, the air died in her lungs.

She was a woman normally in control of her emotions, and she scowled to herself at the reaction she experienced upon seeing him again. But she couldn't help it, and those warm chocolate eyes showed just as much surprise as she knew hers did.

“You two know one another?” John asked as they all sat down to supper, plates on laps and coffee or water set on the ground at their feet.

“Oh, just casually,” Leon said. “I was at your last show in Denver, and a mutual friend introduced us.”

“You were in Denver that night?” John queried, and Leon nodded. “Wasn't that something? The bank robbery there? It's a good thing we didn't have any of our funds in that safe. I always insist on keeping our money stored in our own safe in my wagon.”

Leon smiled. *It sure is a good thing I'm not here to rob these people. Ole John is telling me everything I would need to know.*

“Apparently they think it was Napoleon Nash and the Elk Mountain Gang,” John continued. “That sure took nerve. They say that young man is a genius, but after something like this, I'd say he has more balls than brains.”

John's wife, Clara sent him a scowl. “John, mind your mouth. There are ladies present.”

“Sorry, dear.”

Leon smiled at the minor interruption, then continued. “What did he do that was so daring?”

“I heard a rumor he used nitro,” John said. “I don't know much about explosives, but I know that stuff is unpredictable as sin.”

As soon as the word *nitro* was mentioned, Leon noticed Gabriella frown, but she continued eating and stayed out of the conversation.

“Nitro?” Percy repeated. “Sheesh, that's gotta take guts.”

“Hmm,” Leon nodded. “Still, I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. Which brings up another point.”

“Yes?”

“You folks really do need to be more careful,” Leon explained. “If it was the Elk Mountain Gang that pulled the job, well, their hideout is in this area. You don’t want to run into them out here, especially if they’re loaded down with that much money. They might not appreciate you being in their territory.”

Percy sat up straighter. “Oh. We’re close to their hideout?”

“Well, it’s a way west from here,” Leon assured him. “But this is one of the routes they might take to get back to it. It’s a wild area. I doubt the Indians will bother you, but—”

Gasps cut him off.

“Indians?” Clara said, her hand coming to her bosom.

She wasn’t the only one upset by this announcement, and concerned chatter took over the supper conversation.

“Yes ma’am,” Leon confirmed. “Shoshone, Cheyenne, maybe some Sioux. But things are quiet for the moment. If you don’t bother them, they aren’t likely to bother you. It’s the outlaw gang I’d be more concerned about.”

“You don’t seem to be bothered by them,” Gabriella commented, no longer able to remain quiet. “And you’re traveling alone.”

Leon sent her a smile. Her obvious intelligence attracted him like an unrobbable safe. “I know this area, ma’am,” he told her. “I know how to avoid them.”

“Perhaps you can give us some tips on that,” Gabriella suggested.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Come Gabriella,” Clara told her. “Stop interrupting the men with their talk. You were a married woman; you should know better. Come, help with the clearing up.”

The look of irritation Gabriella sent to no one in particular almost made Leon laugh. She obviously would have preferred to stay and listen to the discussion. But knowing it would only cause a scene if she argued, she stood and began collecting dishes.

Leon watched her with a keen interest. Clara’s words had caught his attention. “You *were* a married woman”. *Now, isn’t that interesting?*

“Oh ho,” John laughed when he caught the look in Leon’s eyes. “You watch yourself there, young man. That one’s a wild cat. It amazes me that she was even married, once upon a time. I can’t imagine her ever taking to the harness.”

Leon’s desire grew.

John chuckled. “Come, come. Back to the business at hand.”

“Oh, yes of course.” Leon cleared his throat and took a drink from his coffee cup. “Ah, you’re long past Laramie now, and you’d be passing through dangerous territory to get back to it. I’m surprised that you haven’t run into any trouble yet. I recommend you head for Medicine Bow. It’s a sizable town, and they have a theatre. Nothing like the one in Denver, but serviceable.”

The men gathered around and listened.

“How far is that?” Percy asked.

“Oh, about three or four days,” Leon told them. “But if you head east, you’ll come to the train tracks, then follow them north. There’s plenty of small towns along that route, so you won’t be all on your lonesome. I suppose you could stop at any of them if you wanted. But Medicine Bow is the biggest in this area.”

“Well,” John asked the company, “what do you fellas think? Do you want to do that, or head back to Laramie?”

“I don’t want to go back,” stated Clancy. “Sounds like more trouble than it’s worth.”

“I agree,” said Hans. “After what this young fella has told us, I think we’d be foolish to turn around. I would like to get back to civilization.”

Heads nodded, and all were in agreement.

“Would you care to join us?” John asked. “Surely it would be a safer route for you as well.”

“Oh, no that’s fine,” Leon answered. “That route would take me too far out of my way. And like I said, I know these parts. I won’t have any trouble with the outlaws. I’ll be happy to spend the night, then I’ll be on my way.”

“Where are you heading, Mr. Harden?” Clancy asked.

Leon didn’t skip a beat. “Rawlins.”

Darkness settled over the evening, and the camp quieted down into small discussion groups before everyone retired to bed.

Leon went to the dying fire and, using the mitt, poured himself a re-fill of coffee. Then walked to the young woman sitting by herself.

“Ma’am,” he greeted her, “may I join you?”

Gabriella snapped a glance up at him but saw no way to decline without being rude.

“If you wish, monsieur.”

Leon sat down beside her. “Monsieur? That’s a bit formal, isn’t it? Why not simply ‘mister’?”

Gabriella shifted, uncomfortable with the stirrings his proximity created inside her. “It’s French, and appropriate.”

“You told me you weren’t French.”

She sighed. “My husband was, and therefore French is what we spoke.”

“Oh. Twice now, I’ve noticed your husband being referred to in the past tense. I take it you’re no longer together?”

Gabriella frowned. “My but you’re nosey for being on such limited acquaintance.”

“Well, how else can I expand our acquaintance?” Leon asked. “I expect we will be going our separate ways in the morning.”

“Then why bother?”

Leon smiled. “Because I find you fascinating. I want to know you better. And I think, you’d like that too.”

“You are far too presumptuous.”

“Not by half.”

The closeness of the words in her ear took her by surprise, but this was nothing compared to the emotion caused by his lips brushing against her cheek.

She gasped and looked around to see if anyone had noticed.

“How dare you,” she whispered.

“You liked it. You’re blushing.”

“I am not.” But the rising heat in her cheeks belied her statement.

“You like me.”

“I’m in mourning,” Gabriella insisted. “I have no interest in seeking male companionship. I don’t even know who you are.”

“I’m Josh Harden.”

She cocked a brow at him. “Are you? The same man buying nitroglycerine right before the safe was blown by nitro? That Josh Harden?”

Leon grinned. He loved this little cat and mouse game she was playing.

“I was buying it for my employer, who owns a mine.”

“Using an uncouth accent to hide your true self.”

“Says a Scottish woman pretending to be French.”

“Argg! I’m not pretending anything,” she snapped at him. Then she stood and stomped off toward her wagon, muttering under her breath. *Je ne peux pas croire l’impolitesse de certaines personnes. Ton départ ne peut pas arriver assez tôt pour moi. Je me repens le jour où je mets les yeux sur toi. Enculé. . .!* Her voice trailed off as she disappeared into the darkness.

John knelt by the fire to replenish his coffee. “I told you she’s a wild cat.”

Leon grinned. “Yeah.”

Leon jerked awake. He opened his eyes to find that darkness still encompassed the camp, though he knew dawn was not far off. He stretched, wondering what had awakened him, then he froze as a sound that was not part of the night, wisped by his ears. He frowned and gazed in the general direction of its source, squinting to make out any shapes.

“Monsieur Harden?”

The whisper sent a tingle to his heart.

“Gabriella?”

He heard her approach, then felt her touch his shoulder.

“Let me in.”

Leon grinned and opened his bedding for her.

She slipped in beside him and snuggled into his arms. “Are you interested?”

Leon’s brows shot up and he almost laughed out loud. “Interested? Was I too subtle? Funny, I’m not generally known for being subtle. I’ll have to up my game, if you—”

“Shhh.” she put a finger to his lips. “Don’t you ever shut up?”

He grinned. Taking her fingers in his hand, he set them in his mouth and sucked on them. They were cold, but they didn’t stay that way for long.

But then Gabriella pulled them away and propped herself up on an elbow. “This is business, you understand? I’m not interested in anything more than that.”

“Sure. I understand. A lady’s got to make a living.”

“Yes, she does.”

Leon got the hint. Rolling over, he undid the strap on the saddlebag he kept close at hand. He slipped his hand inside and pulled out a bill. He didn’t know what denomination it was, but, at this point, he didn’t care. Desire grew within him, and he wanted to get on with it.

Snuggling back under the blanket, he was surprised to find his hand come up against soft, naked flesh.

Gabriella was fully dressed, but apparently was not wearing anything under the presentable layer. She had unbuttoned her jacket, presenting her breasts for her companion’s pleasure.

Leon grinned once he got over the surprise, then his breath quickened as his fingers caressed her nipple.

“Where are you going to put this?”

Gabriella took the offered currency. “Let me worry about that. Thank you.”

“Oh, no. Thank you.” Leon leaned in to kiss her, as his hand played with her breast.

She shifted her position so she could hoist her skirt.

Leon couldn't believe his luck. Still kissing her, his hand travelled south. His searching fingers found their way past the folds of material until they touched naked flesh again. He felt her move her legs apart, and his hand slipped in between, found her bush, then pushed into her warm succulence.

She moaned with pleasure. Her legs opened wide, inviting him to mount her.

He hastily undid the buttons on his long johns and accommodated the lady.

He knew this was going to be a night he would never forget.

Dew still lingered, as the early light of dawn promised another warm day coming. In the meantime, though, it was cold. Gabriella was happy to stoke the breakfast fire, simply to be able to stand within the circle of its warmth. Still wrapped in her shawl and blowing on her fingers to warm them, she fumbled with the coffee pot as she set it on the grill to heat. Coffee first, always first. Bacon and flapjacks came later.

She turned to get bacon from the larder and gasped in surprise when she bumped into Leon.

“Oh. Mr. Harden. You're a little early for coffee.”

“That's all right,” Leon smiled. “I came to see you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I was hoping for a real kiss before I rode out of your life forever.”

She sighed, the chilly air making her breath mist. “You are the most forward man I have ever met.”

“Thank you.”

“It was not a compliment.”

Leon shrugged. “Oh well. Can I have a kiss?” He leaned in and whispered in her ear. “A real one, this time. For free.”

“No. Now go away. I need to begin breakfast preparations.”

Other people emerged from wagons, bringing with them their contributions to the morning meal.

Leon backed off, knowing he had missed his chance. He sent Gabriella a smile so warm it melted her heart, but she certainly wasn't going to let him know it.

Oh, that scoundrel! He could charm a nun out of her habit, but he won't charm me! Business is business.

“Good morning,” John greeted the pair, as he and Clara joined them at the fire. “Are you still planning to head off on your own today?”

“Yes,” Leon confirmed. “I’m afraid I need to.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Yes, it is,” Leon agreed, and a look of regret flashed across his eyes as he watched Gabriella lean over to cut the bacon. “There is nothing I would like better than to stay on for a few days.”

“Hmm,” John commented, again taking note of Leon’s glance. “Perhaps, we’ll see you in Rawlins.”

Leon snapped his eyes back to John. “What?”

“In Rawlins. Isn’t that where you said you were heading?”

“Oh. Yes. Perhaps, I will see you there. Perhaps, I’ll make a point of it.”

“Well, come on,” Clara pushed them out of her way. “Go sit and have your coffee, we women have work to do. You’ll at least be staying for breakfast, won’t you, Mr. Harden?”

“Oh, well.” Leon scanned the brightening horizon, feeling the need to push on. “I really do need—”

“Nonsense,” Clara told him. “Some flapjacks and bacon will stick to your ribs, and I’ll pack a lunch to take with you. And I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Oh.” Leon grinned, his dimpled smile causing even the seasoned Clara to flutter. “Well, if you put it that way.”

Leon tightened the girth on his gelding as he prepared to hit the trail again. It was still chilly so he wore his coat, but he flung his first set of saddle bags over the horse’s rump and tied them down. He turned to do the same to his second set, and a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature ran down his spine.

Clara Wilcox had come up behind him, carrying with her a small parcel wrapped in brown paper.

“Here’s some lunch for you,” she stated. “I’ll put it in these saddlebags here—”

“No!” Leon dashed forward, stopping her in the process of unbuckling the strap.

She stepped back, startled, her eyes showing fear.

“I’m sorry,” Leon said, smiling, as his persona of charm replaced the outlaw. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just, ah, I have supplies in those

bags that don't mix well with food. Give it to me and I'll put them in this bag here." He held out his hand, nodding assurance.

Clara hesitated. The open, friendly face of the man standing before her was that of the Mr. Harden she had come to know. Had she simply imagined it? That instant when a storm cloud passes over the sun, and the light diminishes, only to shine forth again and belie the darkness. He was so young, handsome and fresh-faced. Yes, she must have just imagined it.

She smiled back and handed him the parcel.

"There's plenty in there to keep you going the rest of the day," she told him. "I hope your journey is without consequence, Mr. Harden. And thank you for your assistance."

Leon tipped his hat. "You're welcome, ma'am."

She walked away, and Leon's smile faded.

Damn, that was close. It's high time I got out of here.

He stowed away the lunch parcel, tied the heavily laden saddle bags on top of the first set, then mounted and headed north-west. He tipped his hat to those members of the troupe who saw him pass, but all the while, he searched for one face in particular. He felt sincere disappointment when he didn't find her, but he had to move on. Maybe he would make a point of heading into Rawlins once things got settled.

From inside the coach, Gabriella peeked out from behind the window curtain, watching him ride away. He was casual in his farewells, but she could see his eyes roving, and she knew he was looking for her. His eyes darted to the coach, and she nipped back against the seat, hiding within its confines. He would not see her here, not unless he rode right up to the coach and peered in, and that wasn't likely to happen.

She waited a few seconds, then peeked out again. He rode away, heading toward the tree line at a casual lope. She watched him go, unable to take her eyes from him. He looked so fine, straight-backed with strong shoulders, and he moved with his horse as though they were one and the same creature. Any woman would have been pleased to have such a man show her attention.

But she was no fool. Nor did she believe in coincidence. She recalled how he had skirted around the nitroglycerin topic, still claiming to have bought it for his employer. But on the day before the safe was blown with nitro? And that ridiculous accent. No, she knew who she was looking at. She'd known it when she crawled into his bedroll. It was the only reason she had crawled into his bedroll; she needed the money.

She smiled. He wasn't out here in the middle of nowhere, heading for Rawlins. He was heading home, home to Elk Mountain.

CHAPTER NINE

BACK AT THE ELK

Jack rode into the hideout and was pleased to see that the other participants of the Denver job were all present and accounted for.

He pulled up outside the barn and handed the horse over to Malachi then snatched up the saddlebags.

“Everyone get back all right?”

“Sure.”

“Good.”

“Everyone but Nash.”

Jack stopped in mid-stride. “Leon ain’t back?”

“Nope.”

Jack looked toward the cabin and saw Mukua sitting on the porch, watching him.

“Damn.” He sighed and hoisted his full saddlebags over his shoulder. “Once you get my horse tended to, bring us a couple a drinks.”

“Sure.”

Jack climbed the steps to the porch, dumped the saddlebags by the front door, then he sat down in the second chair.

“Leon ain’t back yet?”

“No,” Mukua confirmed. “I’m thinking if he’s not back in another day, I should go looking for him.”

Jack frowned. “Yeah, maybe. Word got out faster than we thought it would. He coulda run inta trouble.”

“Hmm.”

“Damn.”

“Hmm.”

“Well, how is Haley doin’?”

Mukua shrugged. “She prefers the company of the other women now.”

“What?” Jack sat up straighter. “Ya mean she’s down in the bunkhouse?”

“No, she is still here. She will not come out of her room. The other women come here and tend to her. It is the way it should be.”

“She ain’t come out of her room, yet?”

“No.”

“Is she eatin’?”

Mukua shrugged. “Some. I hear her crying sometimes.”

“Cryin’? What about?”

“She was treated badly. It upsets her.”

“Well, yeah. I suppose that’s understandable.”

“Hmm.”

Jack sighed. "Leon ain't back yet."

"No."

"Damn."

"Hmm."

Malachi exited the barn, carrying two mugs of beer, and headed for the cabin. He grinned as he set them on the railing.

"Good ta see ya back, Kid," he said. "We was gettin' worried about ya."

"Yeah, and now I'm worried about Leon."

Malachi dropped his smile. "Yeah, well . . . it ain't like this is new fer 'im." The toothy grin returned. "He's always goin' off on his own. He's probably hurrahin' some lady down in Rock Creek, or somethin'. He'll likely come ridin' in here tomorrow, all smiles, and wonderin' what you was worried about."

"He'll be worried about his own neck if he does that," Jack grumbled, but he hoped Malachi was right. It did sound like something Leon would do.

"Bess'll be up shortly with some rabbit stew," Malachi continued. "It's real good, too. She added some leaves and sticks to it. They're crunchy."

With that, he turned and headed back to the bunkhouse.

Jack cocked a brow at Mukua. "Leaves and sticks?"

"Hmm. Herbs from the garden. Put them in a stew while it simmers, and it adds to the flavor."

"Oh."

"Normally, one does not eat the sticks."

The two men sat with their own thoughts as they watched the afternoon light ebb into evening. Jack alternated between being angry with his partner and being worried about him. It would be just like him to ride straight into an ambush.

"I knew we shouldn't a split up," he finally mumbled.

"It is normal," Mukua reminded him. "We always split up after a big job."

"Yeah, but this one was different," Jack continued. "The law musta brought in some high-end detectives ta check out that bank, for them ta piece the whole thing together this quickly. Once they knew it was us, they woulda sent telegrams ahead to try and cut us off."

"True. Another good reason to split up."

Jack sighed. He wasn't going to win this one.

Jack couldn't settle. It was full dark outside and still no sign of Leon. He should have been back by now. He ambled over to the stove and poured himself another cup of coffee, this time taking a bottle off the high shelf and adding a splash of brandy. He already knew he was going to need help getting any sleep this night.

The door to Haley's room opened and Bess came out, carrying a basin and other supplies required in her tending of the young woman occupying the room.

"Has the Preacher gone back to the bunkhouse?" Bess asked.

"Yeah. He liked your stew, by the way."

"Good. How about you?"

Jack shrugged. "Yeah, it was good."

"But your mind is on something else."

He smiled. "Yeah."

She set the supplies on the counter and helped herself to a cup of coffee, adding a touch of sugar from the dish on the counter.

"Do you have a minute?" she asked, as she pushed a strand of graying brown hair away from her eyes. "I know you're worried about Leon, but I need to speak with you about your lady in there."

"Oh. Yeah, sure, Bess." Jack pulled out a chair for her, and they sat down, both nursing their coffee. "What's up?"

"You might have taken on more than you thought with this one," Bess explained.

"How do ya mean?"

"Well, you know, I've been tendin' to her in areas that are . . . delicate."

"Well, yeah," Jack conceded. "It's a good thing you and Mary are here for that kinda stuff. I don't think she'd appreciate even Preacher seein' her that way."

"Yeah." Bess hesitated, looking into the dark depths of her coffee cup.

"What is it?"

"She's been used awful bad, Jack," Bess said. "She ain't a maiden."

"Yeah, no kiddin'," Jack's tone rose with his anger. "Not after the way Snake treated her. Maybe I shoulda killed that bastard."

"No, I don't mean from that," Bess continued. "Jack, she's got scarrin' in there—old scarrin'. Some fella's been abusin' her in the most shameful way, ever since she was a young'un."

Jack went quiet. A tingling fear that he couldn't explain hit him in the gut.

"Ya mean her pa used her—that way?"

Bess shrugged. "Her pa, her uncle, maybe even a brother. Maybe all of 'em. But she's been done wrong by someone she shoulda been able ta count on. Now, it's happened again and with a stranger. She may not be too quick ta trust. You go slow with her, Jack. You treat her kind."

Jack was offended. "Of course, I'll treat her kind. I ain't gonna force her inta nothin. Dammit, Bess, I figured you knew me better n that."

Bess nodded. "I do. But it's just you an' her in here, with Leon not back yet. I thought I better make sure there weren't no temptation. Maybe I should spend the night here. I'll explain it to Wes. He'll understand."

"I don't need babysittin'," Jack said. "I won't bother her. I won't even knock on her door, and she don't have ta come out until she's ready to. I'll leave her care and feedin' ta you and Mary. I promise. How's that?"

Bess looked at Jack and seeing the sincerity in his eyes, she nodded. "All right. I believe ya. Make enough breakfast for both of ya, and Mary will be up, first thing, ta help her with her morning toilet."

"Yeah, okay."

"All right. Well, I better get back down there. Wes don't like it when I'm out after dark, even here. Try and get some sleep, Jack. We all know what Leon is like. I wouldn't be surprised if he rides in here tomorrow mornin', all fresh as a daisy."

Jack snorted. "Yeah, I know. You're probably right."

"Good night."

The next morning, Jack hardly had time to get his trousers on when Mary showed for her shift.

Though much younger than Bess, she still had that worn out look that comes from being an outlaw's wife. Not that she and Luke were legally married, but just done the best that could be, with Mukua presiding over a ceremony. Better than nothing, but it wouldn't likely stand up in court. Still, it was a far cry from the life of a whore, and when Luke offered her a place with him, she was glad to take it.

"Good morning, Jack," she greeted him. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Naw, not much," he admitted. "I might ride out later today and look around Bear Creek. They mighta heard somethin'."

"A bit early for them to get word," Mary commented. "You might be better off taking Mukua with you and look for what news the ground will tell you."

Jack lit the stove and set the coffee pot on to boil as he considered Mary's suggestion.

"Yeah. I might just do that."

“Good. Mukua is getting ready to go out with you.”

By the time Jack finished with breakfast and headed out to the barn, Tuffy and Buckwheat were saddled and loaded up for an extended ride. Best situation would be that they run into Leon along the way, but Jack doubted that would happen. He trusted his gut instincts, and they were telling him that Leon was in trouble. Obviously, Mukua felt the same way. There was no telling how long they might be gone for.

Once they were past the sentries, they rode onward but with caution. If the law knew that it was the Elk Mountain Gang who pulled that job in Denver, there was no telling who might be in the area, watching the roads. For this reason, they picked a trek that was relatively unknown to the law, even though it was a hazardous trail and would take twice as long to traverse as any of the others.

“Do you know which way he planned to use?” Mukua asked, as his eyes scanned the ground and the horizon, each in turn.

“Yeah. He was gonna take the most eastern one, goin’ by Cooper’s Creek. Then cut northwest once he figured he was in the clear.”

“Hmm.”

They rode on in silence for most of that day, each looking for any signs that a rider had passed through the area. None presented themselves.

The following morning started out much the same. A quick breakfast, and they were on the search again. They were running out of empty space in this direction. Another day of steady riding would find them close to the small town of Cooper’s Lake, and Jack hoped they wouldn’t find his partner there.

Unlike Bear Creek, the residents of Cooper’s Lake didn’t take kindly to the outlaws living in their back yard. If Leon was there, then he was likely in jail, unless he’d already been moved to Medicine Bow. Either way, it would take some planning to break him out and his \$75,000 would likely be lost.

Still, Jack would gladly forfeit that money, if it meant getting Leon back home safe. But as they rode on, Jack’s hopes diminished. It was as though his partner had vanished off the face of the Earth.

Then Mukua stopped and dismounted. He squatted and brushed his hand over a section of the grassy dirt. He stood, moved forward and squatted again.

Jack sat and silently watched. He knew better than to ask. Mukua didn’t take kindly to his tracking being interrupted, and he would tell what he knew when he knew it.

The old Indian reached forward and dabbed at the ground, then stood up, looking at his fingers.

“Blood,” he said. “It’s been here a while. Two, three days, maybe.”

“Crap. What else?”

Mukua walked around the area, squatting now and then to check a particular patch of grass, then moving on, but always staying within a certain diameter. Finally, he stood up and sighed.

“He is captured. He was shot, out there,” he swept his arms to the rear, indicating the great expanse behind them, “but managed to stay on his horse to this point. Here, he fell.” His eyes went to the ground, his arms sweeping the diameter. “Six, maybe eight horses come and stopped here. He was taken. They headed off in that direction.” And he pointed toward Cooper’s Lake.”

“Aw no,” Jack moaned. “We gotta get ‘im out.”

“He is injured,” Mukua stated. “Rescuing him will not be an easy matter. We need time to plan it.”

“So, we just leave ‘im?”

“For now, yes. He will get better care in town than he would at the Elk. He lost a lot of blood to still be bleeding here. It would not be easy to move him. We go home. Perhaps send Rex into the towns to scout around and see if he can find out anything. We will then know where he is, how to plan his escape, and he will be stronger.”

“I don’t like it,” Jack grouched. “Leavin’ ‘im in the hands of the law. We should go after ‘im now.”

“And if he is too weak to move, or dead? We only put ourselves at risk. We wait.”

“So, we just go back to the Elk, empty handed?”

“No,” Mukua stated. “Napoleon is no fool. If he knew he was being followed, he would have headed for Banker’s Rock. These tracks lead from that direction. We should go and see if he stashed his cache there.”

“Yeah, if he knew,” Jack grumbled. “You know what he’s like. He coulda been readin’ his damn book while ridin’ and not even knowed a posse was comin’ up on ‘im, until it was too late.”

“Hmm.” Mukua nodded. “True, he is an inward thinking man.” Jack snorted. “But I do not think he would be so careless under these circumstances. We check Banker’s Rock. If he did not leave the money there, then we can assume it is lost to us.”

“I don’t care about that now,” Jack stated. “I just want my uncle back.”

“I know. I too, wish him back. But if he hid the cache, it was because he did not want the law to find it. We owe it to him to look.”

Jack sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Hmm.”

Mukua mounted and, without the need of tracks now, they pushed the horses into a gallop and headed toward the established hiding place.

Twenty minutes into the ride, both men pulled up beside an outcropping of rocks that carried on up a small incline. There was shrubbery here and some scraggly tress, but its best attribute was a convenient hole about mid-way up that was nicely hidden from view, but easy to access if you knew where it was.

Mukua hopped down, ground tied his horse and scrambled up the incline. He tucked into the rock pile, deftly maneuvering around obstacles until he came to the spot. Squatting, he pushed aside the brush that hid the hole, then held up the set of saddlebags that had been stashed there, safe and sound. He smiled with triumph and headed back down to the horses.

He tossed the bags across his appaloosa's back. Opening the one bag, he looked inside, then nodded.

"Yes, it is here," he announced. "He knew he was being hunted and took what precautions he could. We will take this home. Then, we will find out where he is and take time to plan his rescue. It is a good day."

The ride back to the Elk was a difficult one for Jack. He couldn't help feeling that he was going in the wrong direction. His partner was hurt and in trouble, and it wasn't in Jack's nature to leave him in that state. His common sense agreed with Mukua though, and this was the only reason he was heading home rather than to Cooper's Lake.

Riding up the trail, leading past the lookout, Jack fired his Colt into the air to let the sentry know of their presence, then they continued. Halfway up the track, Lobo met them, hoping for information.

"No luck?" he asked.

"Yeah, some," Jack told him. "It ain't all good, though."

Lobo's keen eye noted the extra set of saddlebags. "Looks like ya found the money. That's good news as far as I'm concerned."

Jack bristled. He wasn't in the mood for Lobo's venal motives.

"Yeah, but you can also take note that we ain't got Nash with us."

Lobo shrugged. "That ain't nothin' ta me. With my cut of this haul, I can move down ta South America and live high on the hog for the rest of my life."

"Well, maybe you best do that," Jack sniped. "If you ain't interested in helpin' us find Nash and get 'im home, then you ain't of no use to the gang."

Lobo shrugged. "Didn't say I wouldn't help, if there's a chance a findin' 'im," he backtracked. "Him not bein' with ya, I figured he was

dead. No point hangin' around this dump, if Nash was dead. I'm makin' good money with him leadin' this bunch."

Jack pushed his horse past Lobo. "Glad ta see you're so loyal there, Lobo."

"Yeah. Now that ya found the rest of the money, me and some a the boys might head into Bear Creek and celebrate. You wanna come?"

"No, I don't wanna come," Jack said. "I ain't celebratin' nothin' until Nash is back here."

Lobo shrugged. "Suit yourself. How about you, Preacher? You like your liquor well enough. Ya wanna join us?"

"No," Mukua answered. "I prefer some time alone tonight. It is good that you are all heading into town. It is hard to think when there is useless chatter surrounding me."

Lobo snorted. "Fine. Your loss. Ain't nothin' more borin' than sitting around all on your lonesome. Anyway, I gotta get back to the lookout. Rex gets scared up there by himself."

He kicked his horse forward and loped off, taking a turn to the right that would head him back to his post.

"Sheesh," Jack pushed his horse onward. "I wonder sometimes, why Leon keeps that bastard on here. He ain't got a clue about loyalty."

"He's reliable," Mukua pointed out. "As long as there's money involved."

"Maybe, but I don't trust 'im."

"I don't trust any of them," Mukua stated. "They are all thieves and, therefore, not worthy of trust."

Jack sat on the porch of the leader's cabin, nursing a cup of coffee. The night air was warm, hinting at the summer days to come, and Jack preferred it out here than in the cabin right now. The cabin felt lonely without Leon there, but then, so did the porch. They spent a lot of time sitting out here, talking about the day's events or discussing a new job. It was their favorite place when the weather was accommodating. But now, it felt eerily empty.

Mukua was settled outside the deserted bunkhouse. He had a small fire going and sat cross-legged before it, the flickering flames casting dancing shadows upon his face and bare chest. He sat still, with his eyes closed, while he softly chanted to the spirits in his Shoshone tongue.

Jack didn't need to wonder what Mukua was asking of his spirit guides, because Jack was sending out requests for the same thing. Watching Mukua communing with his gods made Jack feel like he was missing out

on something. He had no strong spiritual view, no belief in a higher power that would make everything turn out okay, if you just prayed long enough. There were times, like this, when he wished he did. Maybe it would help. In the meantime, Mukua's belief would have to do for both of them.

"This place has a different feel to it when the men are all away."

Jack jumped, nearly spilling his coffee. "Dammit." He looked up to find Haley standing beside him, a gentle smile tugging at her lips. "Oh. Sorry, ma'am." He stood up, offering her the second chair. "Ya really shouldn't go sneakin' up on me like that. I mighta hurt ya."

"I didn't realize I was sneaking up," Haley said, as she stepped past him and sat down.

Jack returned to his chair. "Oh, yeah. I guess my thoughts was elsewhere."

"Not surprising, on such a lovely evening." she glanced in the direction of the bunkhouse. "What is Mr. Mukua doing?"

Jack struggled to swallow his mouthful of coffee upon hearing the formal title. He finally did get it down.

"It's just Mukua," he told her. "And I suspect he's prayin' for our friend's safe return."

"Oh yes, Mr. Nash. Bess told me he had not returned. I take it, you did not find him."

"No ma'am. We found the money where he'd hidden it, but he appears ta be in the hands of the law."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Will you be planning a rescue?"

"Yes, ma'am. Rex is new ta our gang, and not too well known, so, hung-over or not, he's ridin' inta Cooper's Lake tomorrow ta hear what he can hear."

"That's lovely. Would you like some tea?"

"Ah, no ma'am." He raised his mug. "I'm fine."

"Oh yes. Well, if you don't mind, I think I'll make myself a pot."

"That's fine, ma'am." Jack stood up to allow the lady to pass. "There's still hot water on the stove, and Bess brought a container of tea up. I expect it's on the counter, there by the sugar."

"Yes. I know where it is."

"Okay."

She disappeared into the cabin, and Jack sat down again.

That was weird. She ain't been outta that room for weeks, then when she does come out, she acts like nothin's happened. I don't understand women.

The next morning, Jack awoke to the enticing aroma of coffee brewing. Mary must have got an early start to the day. Yawning, he stretched until he felt his bones crack, then swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. It wasn't that late, but the morning chill was off the cabin, so the stove had been on for a while already. Then he smelled bacon frying.

Hmm, I could get used to this.

He dressed and left Leon's room to enter the common area of the cabin. Just as he suspected, a young, blonde, woman was preparing breakfast, but when she turned at the sound of him, he was surprised to see Haley and not Mary, after all.

The smile she sent him was radiant.

"Jack. Good morning. Coffee's ready, and breakfast will be soon."

"Oh. Thank you, ma'am."

"No need to keep calling me 'ma'am'. We are living together, you know."

"We are?"

"Oh, Jack. Don't be silly. Go tend to your morning duties, and your breakfast should be ready by the time you get back."

"Oh. Yes, ma'am."

The walk to the outhouse was filled with confusing signals.

What does she mean, we're livin' together? I mean, yeah, we're in the same cabin, but, we ain't 'livin' together', ifn I take her meanin' the way I think she means it. Maybe she's blocked stuff out or just don't wanna think about what happened. I better watch my step with this one or Bess will have my hide, for sure.

Walking back toward the cabin, Jack noticed signs of life at the bunkhouse and made a sudden detour.

He knocked on the door, then stepped inside. The atmosphere was subdued, as some of the fellas still weren't out of their bunks, and doors leading off to separate rooms were shut tight. Those few who were up, appeared bedraggled and bleary-eyed as they nursed morning coffee. Nobody paid the boss any mind.

He went to the cook stove where Mary was preparing a light breakfast for herself and Bess, since none of the men seemed to have any appetite.

"Mary," he said, as he touched her elbow, "did you come up to the cabin earlier, ta help Haley?"

"Yes, I did," Mary told him. "But she didn't want any help. She's all healed now, physically, anyway, and she said that she wanted to make breakfast for you. It seemed like a good sign to me. Is there a problem?"

"No. It's just kinda sudden."

“Bess said it likely would be. That one day, she’d simply decide to come out and join society again. You’re not to make a big deal about it.”

“Well, yeah, but . . .”

“What?”

“It’s like she thinks we’re . . . involved.”

“Well,” Mary smiled. “You are living together.”

Jack sat at the table, savoring his first cup of coffee and wondering how he was going to deal with this.

Haley placed a plate of bacon and egg-soaked fried bread down in front of him and refilled his cup. She then sat down opposite and prepared to enjoy her own breakfast.

“Darlin’,” Jack commenced, “do you remember your name?”

She frowned, a forkful of eggs hesitating on its way to her mouth.

“Yes. I’m Haley Sherman.”

“Do ya know where you were goin’?”

“I was heading for Medicine Bow. I heard there might be work there for a young lady in need.”

“Are you sure it’d be the kinda work you want?”

“What’s wrong with being a school teacher?”

“Oh,” Jack smiled. “Sorry. I thought . . . well, it don’t matter what I thought. Are they expectin’ ya?”

She shrugged. “Yes, I suppose. But I also suppose they’ve given the position to someone else by now. This was all rather unexpected.”

“Yeah. Can ya turn around and go home?”

Haley put her fork down and gazed at the food on her plate.

She shook her head. “No.” Her voice was tight and small, and Jack suspected she was crying. “I have nowhere to go back to. I’m alone.”

“Oh. Do ya remember what happened? At the train?”

Her shoulders began to shake, and Jack didn’t have to suspect anymore. He stood up, the scraping of the chair legs sounding loud and rasping in the strained silence. He walked to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

“It’s all right, Darlin’,” he assured her. “You don’t need ta talk about it.”

He felt her shoulders stiffen, as every muscle in her body tensed.

“You should have killed him,” she growled, her voice hard with anger. “He was a rabid animal. He didn’t deserve to live.”

Jack sighed. “Yeah, well, maybe not. But killin’ don’t solve nothin’. He’s gone, and he’s gonna be sportin’ a nasty scar as a reminder a what he done. He won’t be touchin’ you again.”

She sniffed, using her napkin as a handkerchief. “And what about the next woman he runs into? Can you promise her the same thing?”

Jack sighed and returned to his chair and his breakfast.

“There ain’t nothin’ I can do about that. Maybe I shoulda killed ‘im, I don’t know. But I didn’t, and that’s the end of it.”

Haley dried her eyes and nodded. She took a sip of coffee, then looked Jack straight in the face.

“Can I stay here?” she asked. “At least until I figure out my next step.”

“Sure. Maybe I can help ya with that once we get our current situation sorted out.”

She sent him a wet smile. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER TEN

RUN 'IM DOWN

Three days previously

The small caravan had been on the road for less than two hours when a rising dust cloud upon the horizon indicated more company coming. They stayed their course, knowing they couldn't outrun men on horseback, but the ladies took cover inside the coach, while the men took a bearing with their rifles.

John and Hans took the lead, watching the riders become visible through the dust as the strangers galloped toward them.

The group of riders slowed as they approached, and the leaders of each party waved to each other.

"How can we help you?" John called over.

The opposing leader moved his horse closer.

"I'm Deputy Marshal Stewert. This here is a sheriff's posse out of Carbon. Can we approach?"

"You can," John said, "but your friends can stay there for now."

"Fine."

The marshal rode forward, and it was only then that the badge he wore was revealed through the layer of dust upon his clothing.

"Howdy, Marshal. I'm John Wilcox, leader of this group. How can we help you?"

"We're looking for some outlaws," Stewert told him. "You may not realize it, but you're in Elk Mountain territory, and a notorious gang inhabits this region. The bank in Denver was robbed recently and this gang is suspected of doing the job. They're headed back this way, and we'd like to cut them off before they get home. Have you folks come across any strangers recently?"

John and Hans exchanged a quick glance.

"Yes, actually we have," John said. "But he was helpful in pointing us in the right direction and showed no intentions of robbing us. I doubt he would have been one of these men you speak of."

"Hmm. Do you mind if we come into your group and talk to the others? One of them might have noticed something."

"You're welcome to, Marshal," John agreed, "but I would appreciate the rest of your men wait here."

"Fine," Stewert agreed. "I'll go back and tell them."

John nodded then turned to Hans.

"Go back and inform them I'm bringing a lawman in to talk."

“Sure.”

Hans turned and loped back to the wagons.

John waited for the marshal to return, then escorted him to the group.

By the time they arrived, all the members were assembled. Some looked worried, but mostly they were simply confused.

John and the marshal dismounted, and Stewert tipped his hat to the assembly.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” he said. “Mr. Wilcox here says that you’ve recently had a visitor. Can you describe him?”

“He was just a young fella,” Percy commented, “friendly enough and helpful, but he was kinda ordinary. I can’t say as he was much ta look at.”

A few of the ladies sniffed at this opinion.

“On the contrary,” Clara said, “I think the ladies here thought him to be quite the handsome young man.” Feminine heads nodded. “And he was very helpful in getting us turned around. We were lost out here, and goodness knows what would have happened if he hadn’t come upon us.”

“Hmm hm,” Stewert commented. “Young, helpful, friendly. Handsome by a lady’s point of view.” He turned to his saddlebag and pulled out a stack of papers. Flipping through them, he found the one he wanted and presented it to the group. “I realize this is a basic drawing and description, but does it resemble this fella at all?”

The group pressed in, gazing upon the wanted poster.

“Napoleon Nash?” Percy stated. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh no, that couldn’t have been him,” Clara agreed. “He was a kindly man.”

“Hmm,” Stewert nodded. He looked at the poster himself and read the description. “Born around 1850 - ’51. That would put him in his early twenties. Dark brown hair, almost black. Brown eyes, slightly darker complexion than white, suggesting mixed blood. Normally clean shaven. Stands about 5’ 11. Slim build. Does this sound like your guest?”

“Well . . .”

“But he was such a nice young man.”

“Don’t let that fool you,” Stewert stated. “Nash can charm a snake out of its skin if he wanted to make a pair of boots. He’s highly intelligent and comes across as an educated man. But he’s an outlaw, through and through. I suspect the only reason he didn’t steal from you folks is that they’d just pulled the biggest bank heist this side of the Mississippi, and he was feeling generous.”

Clara gasped, and all eyes looked to her.

“Ma’am?” Stewert asked.

“Oh dear,” Clara said, her hand to her bosom. “I thought I was imagining things. He was always so open and friendly. But now . . .”

“What is it, ma’am?”

“This morning,” she continued, “I brought him some food to take on the trail. He was busy tending his horse, so I thought I would put it in his saddlebag for him. He had two sets and the one he kept with him was setting on the water barrel behind him. I was about to open it when he stopped me. But . . . oh dear. I thought, well, I was sure I had imagined it, it was so sudden and then gone instantly. I just didn’t think.”

“What, ma’am?” The marshal tried to be patient.

“Well, he changed. I was suddenly afraid of him, as though I was face to face with a wild predator. But then, it was gone so quickly, and that open, friendly smile was back. I was sure then, that I must have been mistaken.”

“No, ma’am,” Stewert told her. “You weren’t mistaken. What you saw there was Nash, the outlaw, with his mask ripped away. That bag you were going to open likely held his share of the bank loot. It’s a good thing you didn’t open it, or the ending to this story coulda been a whole lot different.”

An ominous silence settled over the group. This was an unsettling revelation.

“Oh dear,” Clara breathed, her complexion pale. “Do you really think he would have hurt me?”

Stewert sighed, thinking about the scenario.

“I don’t rightly know, ma’am,” he admitted. “From what I do know of Napoleon Nash, he’ll use violence only as a last resort, especially with regular folks, like yourselves. But if he felt trapped,” he shrugged, “well, it’s likely he would have pulled his gun, but we don’t know Nash well enough to predict what mighta happened. I know how these things can escalate. Again, I’m just glad you didn’t actually open that bag.”

“He did seem like such a nice young man.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ella,” John turned to her. Gabriella jumped, startled out of her private musings. “That young fella took a liking to you. And you said you met him before, in Denver, the very same night that bank was robbed.”

“Oh.”

Stewert’s brows jumped up. “Is that right, ma’am?”

“Well, yes, it is, now that you mention it. We’re a theatre troupe, and he and his friend came backstage to meet me after the show. I really didn’t think anything odd about it.”

Gabriella was confused. She despised outlaws, and this news concerning Mr. Harden’s identity came as no surprise to her. She should be telling the marshal all she knew about this compelling man who had

suddenly dropped into her life. She should be helping to bring about his capture, and yet . . .

Stewart nodded. "Yes, ma'am. But you're sure it was the same night that the bank was robbed? He and his friend were there?"

"Yes. I know because I was a bit irritated at having to converse with him. He was showing too much interest, and we had to get packed up and ready to leave the next morning. Then, of course, it turned out to be a noisy night."

"Yes ma'am. Did you see him at any other time?"

"No, I don't recall . . ." her heart skipped a beat, knowing she was telling a lie, but now it was out there and she couldn't take it back. *Why am I lying to protect that man? He's a thief, a criminal. He needs to be brought to justice.*

"Thank you," Stewart said. "This has been helpful. I think it's safe to say that the man you encountered was indeed, Napoleon Nash. I suggest you check all your belongings and valuables, just in case, but I suspect he was too loaded down already to be bothered with the pittance he might find here. He left this morning, you say?"

"Yes," John confirmed. "About three hours ago, now."

"He said he was heading for Rawlins," Percy piped in, trying to be helpful.

Stewart shook his head. "He's not heading for Rawlins. He's heading into the hills, to his hideout. If we hurry, we just might be able to cut him off. Thank you, folks. You've been real helpful."

Leon was uneasy. He knew his mind tended to wander; there was so much information circulating about, so many ideas and plans to consider, that focusing on the trail in front of him was soon lost in a sea of "what about this?" ideas. When he was with Jack, it didn't concern him, as he knew his partner was forever on the alert. But it wasn't a healthy habit when he was alone.

On this occasion, he forced himself to stay alert and aware of his surroundings. They had just pulled off the biggest bank job of his career, and he knew the closer he got to the Elk the more likely he was to run into opposition.

He wished he had Fanny with him but taking their own horses all the way to Denver would not have been feasible, the train being so much faster, as well as indiscriminate. But now, he would have paid \$50.00 to have his mare along for this final approach to the hideout.

He gave the gelding an apologetic pat on the neck as he stopped, then turned to look at the trail behind him.

He had no pressing reason to feel anxious; the countryside appeared void of all living things, but still, sometimes you didn't know a posse was there, until . . .

"Come on," he told his gelding, as he changed direction and set off at a lope. "It's time we headed for Banker's Rock."

After two miles at this gait, he brought it down to a trot and headed into uneven terrain. It was slower going here, but it was also easier to escape searching eyes, and the many rocks and crevasses make for convenient hiding places. It was also in this area that Leon had set up the gang's own personal "deposit box", a hiding place that only Leon, Jack, Mukua and Gus knew about. If feeling threatened, and if they had opportunity without being seen, it was better to stash the evidence of a robbery in a safe place, rather than be captured with it. They hadn't had to use this safety measure yet, and Leon hoped that, if for any reason he couldn't get back this way, his partner would think to check it.

Trotting along the dirt trail, he scanned the rock croppings until he spotted the signs he'd been looking for. A smile tugged at his lips as he halted his horse.

"Whoa," he said, then dismounted. "Sorry, fella," he commented as he tied the reins to a scrubby tree, "I trust Fanny to stay ground tied, but I don't know you well enough yet." He gave the gelding another pat on the neck. "Just wait here."

The gelding sent him a look of long-suffering patience then set about nibbling on what little foliage the tree had to offer.

Leon untied the saddlebags and hurried up the track, skirting around boulders and scrub brush, until he got to the spot. After a quick look around, he knelt and pushed aside a scraggly bush to reveal a dark crevasse under a dark rock slab. In went the saddlebags. He shoveled dirt over top of them then released the scrub brush to settle back over the opening. Grabbing a loose handful of tough grass, he used this to brush away his footprints until he backtracked to harder ground.

Feeling lighter in more ways than one, he untied his horse, mounted and got underway again. He stayed in the rocky terrain as much as he could, but eventually, he found the going too rough and was pressured to ride out in more open country. He didn't like it, and his anxiety returned. Though feeling an urge to hurry, he kept the horse to an easy, ground-covering lope. He still had a long way to go and the last thing he needed was a tired horse under him.

Then he got punched in the back. He heard the distant crack of a rifle shot as he was shoved forward, into the horse's mane. A vice squeezed his chest until he couldn't breathe, then pain took over his consciousness.

His horse, startled by the sudden change in dynamics, jumped forward and broke into a panicked gallop. With what was left of his awareness, Leon again regretted not having his reliable mare with him. Fanny knew this area, and, under these circumstances, she would have outrun any threat and lit out for home. All Leon would have to do is hang on.

But the gelding was lost. He galloped, head-long and scared, not knowing where to go now that he had no one guiding him.

Leon clutched the horn, hanging on with what little strength he could muster. The reins flapped loose, and the thought to reach down and grab them didn't enter his foggy consciousness. They continued the head-long gallop across open country until Leon felt his hold on the horn slipping. The horse's mane slapping against his face became jumbled with images of the ground flying by beneath them, and then the sky jerking along with the gallop, only to be replaced again by the straining neck and stinging lash from the mane.

Then all Leon saw was the horse's shoulder pounding along in the rhythm of the gallop. Then a dusty blur that was the ground, then Leon was falling, and the blur became a hard and rocky landing pad for his body. He punched the earth with his shoulder, the impact sending needles of pain to his brain, then he rolled twice and was finally planted on his back, into the dirt, staring up at a deep, blue sky.

He groaned, then a long, drawn-out wheeze fought to bring air back into his lungs. He felt like he was suffocating, but he had no control over what his body was doing. His brain shouted at him to get up, to get to cover, but all he could do was lie there while his lungs sucked in whatever air they could while he stared up at the surreal heavens.

He felt them coming before he heard them. Vibrations caused by galloping hooves came up through the ground and set his nerves to jangling. Panic rose in him and, again, he tried to listen to his brain, tried to make his limbs respond to his desire. But nothing moved, and he lay there, like a bug pinned to a board, as the posse surrounded him.

The dust kicked up by the horses' hooves caused Leon to cough and gasp, as the lawmen dismounted. One man knelt beside Leon and put a hand on his chest.

"Nash, can you hear me?"

Leon looked at him, focusing on the marshal's badge pinned to the shirt, then he met the eyes looking down at him. He blinked and tried to nod.

“I’m Deputy Marshal Stewert,” the lawman continued, “and you’re under arrest. Not that you’re likely to make a run for it.” He pushed Leon onto his side to get a look at the wound. “Hmm, nasty hit. You’re lucky it was a distance shot and didn’t go too deep, or it woulda punctured a lung and you’d be dead by now.”

Leon gasped at the sudden movement, pain hitting his stomach in the form of nausea. He thought he was going to throw-up, then he was on his back again and the nausea settled. He closed his eyes, wishing he could simply pass out and not have to deal with this pain anymore.

Stewert stood up and looked toward the group standing around Leon’s horse.

The animal had more training than Leon gave him credit for. As soon as Leon fell from the saddle, the horse had stopped and remained ground tied, as the posse horses galloped up to them. Now, he was the focus of attention, as the saddlebags he carried were searched.

“Is it there?” Stewert asked.

“No,” Deputy Morin told him. “He must a dumped it somewhere.”

“Dammit,” Stewert said. “Okay, Morin, you and Mailho back-track and see if you can find where he stashed it. In the meantime, we’ll try and meet back up with that caravan. If Nash can stay in a saddle long enough, that is.”

The two deputies nodded and returned to their horses.

Then, one of the men, still standing by Nash’s horse, took three quick strides over to the stricken man and, squatting beside the prisoner, grabbed his shirt and shook him.

“Dammit Nash. What did ya do with it? Where’d ya hide that money? We know ya had it when ya left that caravan, so where is it?”

“Sheriff Erikson!” Stewert grabbed the sheriff’s shoulder and shoved him away from the wounded man. “It’s bad enough you shot him in the back, but you will not mishandle a prisoner in this manner—not while I’m in charge.”

Erikson stood up and rounded on the marshal.

“Mishandle?” he snarled. “You don’t know this man, Marshal. I do. I know what he’s capable of. It wouldn’t surprise me one bit if he’s fakin’ the degree of his injury, just waitin’ for a chance to make a break for it. I’m warning you, Marshal, if you underestimate this man, you’ll lose him.”

Stewert raised a brow. “You’re warning me? Watch your step, Sheriff. I welcomed you to join this posse because you know Nash on sight, but that doesn’t mean you’re in charge. Perhaps you should take a look at that wound in his back, since you’re the one who gave it to him. He may not

even live long enough to stand trial, let alone ‘make a break for it’. Leave him be; we’ll find the money.”

Erikson snorted. “Fine. Good luck with that.” He glanced down at the outlaw, who appeared to be unconscious and, with a shake of his head, he turned to his horse.

“Erikson,” the marshal said, “how about you ride to that caravan and get them to bring a wagon back here. We know they were heading for Carbon, so if you cut across, within half an hour, you should be able to head them off.”

Erikson scowled. “I’m not here to run petty errands, that’s what your deputy is for.”

“We need to get that bullet out before moving Nash anywhere,” Stewert explained. “And, to be quite honest, Sheriff, I don’t trust you to do it. You’ve already tried once to kill him; you just might try it again.”

Erikson hooted. “Fine, I’ll go get the wagon. Chances are, we’ll be haulin’ a corpse into town anyway.”

He mounted his horse and rode away.

Stewert ignored him and motioned to his one remaining deputy, “Perry, get your hunting knife. That bullet’s not too deep. Let’s see if we can dig it out.”

Perry nodded. Going to his horse, he rummaged around in his saddlebag until he found the knife in its sheath, and a small bottle of alcohol that was kept wrapped up in padding. This was the extent of their mobile medical kit, and it would have to do.

The two men sat down by the prisoner. Stewert grabbed Leon’s shirt and pulled him into a sitting position and held him there, leaning him against his shoulder. Deputy Perry poured alcohol on his hands, on the knife blade and then on the wound in Leon’s back.

Leon’s eyes shot open, and he gasped with the sudden, unexpected pain.

“Dammit,” Stewert mumbled, as he held Leon tighter. “I thought you were unconscious. This would have been a lot easier on you, if you were.”

Leon gritted his teeth and took hold of the marshal’s shirt. He wished he was unconscious, too.

Perry tore away the blood-soaked section of material and, using the alcohol, washed away what blood that still surrounded the injury. He glanced at the marshal, and Stewert nodded.

“Go ahead,” he said, “I’ve got him. We’re ready.”

“No, we’re not,” came a weak, barely audible comment from the patient.

A smile tugged at Stewert’s lip. Nash might be an outlaw but he had gumption.

“Let’s just get this done,” he said and again nodded at his deputy. “Go ahead, Perry.”

Perry nodded then touched Nash on his shoulder. “Keep still, Nash. This knife is sharp as a razor. One slip and it’ll cut through you like butter.”

Leon groaned. He felt the marshal’s arms tighten around him, as his own fingers dug into whatever was at hand.

It was the worst ten minutes of Leon’s life. Consciousness slipped away with every cut yet returned with each withdrawal. Tears squeezed their way out from Leon’s clenched eyelids, and his body stayed knotted against the pain, even during those brief instances of blackness.

Please, God, he prayed, let me pass out and stay there.

But God wasn’t listening, and Leon suffered through the ordeal until, finally, Perry held up his bloody fingers with the offending bullet shining between them.

“Got it.”

Both the marshal and Leon relaxed with relief.

Perry rinsed off his knife with more alcohol, then returned it to its sheath. He splashed more on the wound, then pressed some padding against it. They removed what was left of Leon’s shirt and used that to wrap around his torso and hold the padding in place.

“Well, that’ll have to do,” Perry stated. “Let’s hope them folks in the caravan will have better bandages.”

“Good job, Perry,” Stewert told him. “It’ll do for now. Well Nash, do you think you can sit on a horse?”

Leon groaned. He couldn’t even sit on the ground without assistance.

“I’ll ride double with him,” Perry offered. “Hopefully, the sheriff has found them folks and is heading back this way.”

Forty minutes later, the slow process became even slower. The two lawmen rode side-by-side, with Stewert leading Leon’s horse. Leon himself was in the saddle of the deputy’s horse, with Perry sitting behind him. Both men did their best to ensure that the injured man did not fall off. It was awkward and uncomfortable for all of them.

“Naw, Marshal,” Perry commented after a stretch of silence. “We gotta stop. He’s bleedin’ again.”

“Dammit. Well, let’s head for those trees. They’re pretty scraggly, but they’ll offer some shade.”

They turned their horses and made for the shelter.

Helping their prisoner to dismount was much easier than it had been to get him mounted. He simply slid into their arms and allowed himself to be settled in the shade beside a boulder. Stewert got his canteen from his saddle and helped Leon to sit up.

“Here, have some water,” he pressed the spout to Leon’s lips and let him get a few swallows down. “There, that’s enough for now. We need to ration it, in case things don’t go as planned.”

Leon nodded. “Thanks.”

Perry checked the wound and changed the padding. He had loaned the outlaw his spare shirt, so he wouldn’t burn in the sun, and this shirt, as well, had blood soaking into it. Perry shrugged and slipped it back over Nash’s shoulders. There wasn’t much they could do about that now.

“Okay, I’m done,” Perry said. “He shouldn’t be laying on his back though; that’ll encourage him to lose more blood. Maybe we can set him against this boulder for now.”

Stewert nodded, and the two lawmen scooted him back to lean against the rock.

Leon clenched his teeth, his face covered in a sheen of sweat that had nothing to do with the temperature.

“Damn Erikson,” Stewert said. “What does that man have against you, anyway? We had you in sight, and we knew where you were going. We had a plan to split up, with two of us getting around you to cut you off, and the other three pushing you toward us. We would have caught you, Nash, either way. But then that damn sheriff took his shot at you and we’re stuck out here in the middle of outlaw territory dealing with an injured man.”

“Sorry, Marshal,” Leon commented. “I didn’t mean to inconvenience you.”

“Ha. Yeah, I bet. What did you do to Erikson to make him so all-fired pissed off with you?”

Leon mimicked a shrug. “Oh, umm, I got one up on him, that’s all. He doesn’t seem to be a man that can take a joke.”

“Hmm,” Stewert nodded. “Well, I’ll tell ya, this whole thing could go a lot easier for you, if you’d tell us where you hid that money.”

“What money?”

“Ahh, you’re going to be like that, are you? Well fine. I’m sure my deputies will find it.”

Leon managed a half-smile. He doubted it.

“Somebody’s comin’!” Perry announced from his perch on the boulder.

Stewart stood up and got his rifle from the boot just as Perry jumped down and the two men stood with guns ready as they watched the dust cloud come closer.

“Is it a wagon or just horses?” Stewart asked.

Perry shook his head. “Can’t tell yet.”

The two men waited and watched.

Leon listened with interest for the verdict. A wagon would mean he was still in custody. Just horses could be his gang coming in search of him. Mukua’s doctoring would have him up and moving around in no time, whereas bouncing around in the back of a wagon until he could even get to a doctor did not appeal to him.

“There,” Perry pointed, “it is a wagon.”

Leon’s heart dropped.

Stewart shielded his eyes from the setting sun. “Yup, sure is. It looks like more than one. I’d say that whole caravan is heading this way.”

Leon’s heart jumped. Gabriella.

It took another twenty minutes for the caravan to arrive at the scene. The dust and commotion set up by the animals’ hooves and the wheels of the wagons made breathing a torturous necessity for the wounded man. Then John and Clara were kneeling next to him, concern drifting down to him though his hazy vision.

“Easy, son,” John said. “I’m just gonna lean ya forward for a minute.”

Leon closed his eyes, steeling himself against the pain he knew was coming.

John eased him forward off the boulder. He loosened the bandages and did a quick examination of the injury.

“Oh my,” Clara gasped. “We must get him into the wagon. Hans can get that cleaned up. Hans! Hans, come and help John carry him into the wagon.”

Within seconds, Leon felt someone grab his ankles, then John got his hands under his shoulders, and he was lifted from the ground. Searing pain shot through him and, finally, he passed out.

When consciousness returned to him, it was with a groan and a sinking heart. Room had been made for him inside one of the covered freight wagons. Sacks and barrels filled with supplies were pushed aside, stacked, then tied securely, so nothing would fall upon the wounded man.

He found himself lying on his stomach, upon a stack of pillows and blankets. They had been positioned to support him, so even if he wanted to move, he couldn't. He'd been stripped down to his long-johns, and he was naked from the waist up, but the padding and bandages wrapping around his torso took care of any modesty he might have felt.

Still, his foggy mind rebelled at finding himself in this vulnerable position. He tried to force his right arm under him, so he could push himself up, but his limbs refused to follow his instructions.

Then he heard a soft laugh from somewhere behind him. He attempted to lift his head, to look over his shoulder, but again, nothing happened. He sighed and gave it up.

"Wise choice," came the feminine voice. "Even if you could stand up, you'd only fall over again. Hans gave you a strong dose of laudanum, that's why your brain is so foggy."

"Who is that?" Leon managed to mumble. "Gabriella?"

"Yes."

He managed a smile. "Why don't you move so I can see you?"

"I'm comfortable where I am."

"It's nice to know you care enough to watch over me."

"Nonsense. It was simply my turn for the duty."

"Oh. Lucky me."

"Yes. You are lucky. Hans said if that bullet had gone much deeper, it would have punctured your lung."

"Yes, how fortunate. Now I can look forward to spending ten years in prison."

"You get no sympathy from me. They call you a genius, you know. Apparently, those who know about such things feel that the job you pulled there in Denver pretty much confirms it."

"What's your point?"

"It's a waste, that's all," she snapped at him, her voice raising with emotion. "A man with your intelligence; you could have been successful at anything you chose to do. Yet, you chose to become an outlaw. As far as I'm concerned, you're getting what you deserve."

Leon was surprised at the anger in her tone

"I didn't choose it, so much as it chose me," he mumbled.

"Excuses," she countered. "You have the makings of a decent man. But I abhor your profession, and anyone who's involved with it."

"And yet, once again, here you are talking to me."

"I told you; I have no choice. I was hoping you would not awaken during my shift."

A particularly sharp jarring from the moving wagon caused Leon to gasp. He heard, rather than saw, Gabriella suck her breath. She almost

came to him before she stopped herself and returned to her nonchalant demeanor. He smiled but didn't comment on it.

"We'll be in Carbon by this evening," she said. "Marshal Stewert will be able to put you in a cell where you belong, and we won't have to be bothered with you anymore."

"Hmm. That's nice."

He felt his eyelids becoming heavy and, despite the movement of the wagon, sleep pushed itself upon him. As he drifted into unconsciousness, he was comforted by the thought that at least in a jail cell he could make his escape. If he still had his lock picks and if he could stand up.

By the time evening rolled around, Leon was awake and sitting. He was still stiff and extremely sore, but he felt his strength returning.

The caravan parked just outside Carbon, and Leon could smell the cook fires doing their job preparing the evening meal. He wondered if he would be permitted to stay in the wagon one more night and ride into Carbon in the morning. He hoped so. If he played up his weakness, he just might be able to sneak out of camp.

The rear flap of the wagon flipped aside, and Leon's hopes rose.

Gabriella? Oh, no, it's Mrs. Wilcox. Heavy sigh.

"You're looking better this evening, Mr. Harden," she commented, then dropped her eyes as she recalled his predicament. "Oh, I suppose I should call you Mr. Nash, shouldn't I?"

Leon sent her an engaging smile. "Leon will do."

She cocked a brow at him as she set a tray of food on the wagon floor then climbed in to assist him with his meal.

"I've brought you some stew with biscuits and coffee. The marshal said you could have one last meal before they take you into town later."

"One last meal," Leon repeated. "That's appropriate."

"Oh dear," she said, as she sat opposite him and set the tray on his lap. "That didn't sound right, did it?"

He picked up the wooden spoon, and his eyes asked the question.

"Oh," she explained, "I wasn't to give you anything that could be used as a weapon. I suppose, if you really wanted to, you could over-power me with or without a small wooden spoon, but then you'd have to deal with Sheriff Erikson who is camped right outside the wagon."

"I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing," Leon said as he tucked into his stew. He really was hungry. But as he ate, he felt a tension settle between them, and Clara would not meet his eye. "Ma'am?"

She glanced at him. "Yes?"

“I wouldn’t have hurt you. You startled me, that’s all.”

“Oh, yes. Well . . .”

“Besides, there really wasn’t anything of any value in those saddlebags. Just dirty laundry.”

“Oh.”

They locked eyes for an instant, then Leon went back to his meal.

He was lying, smooth as honey, and they both knew it.

Clara smiled. *But, oh my, what a handsome young man he is. Those eyes could melt gold.*

The sun dipped toward the horizon as the posse got themselves organized for the ride into town. Leon was fully dressed, his left arm in a sling to prevent any unnecessary movement that a horse might cause. He glanced around, hoping to spot Gabriella, but again, she made herself scarce, and he rode away from the caravan disappointed.

It was only two miles to town, and even though it wasn’t quite dusk yet, the lights from the many establishments could be seen from the road they travelled along. Leon looked for any advantage but found none. Erikson rode up front with the deputies, Perry, Morin and Mailho riding on either side. Marshal Stewert brought up the rear. So, even though Leon had been pleased to discover that his set of lock picks had not been discovered, he found no opportunity to use them.

“Someone’s comin’,” Erikson announced.

“Just keep going,” Stewert called forward. “Probably just some fella heading for home.”

The single horseman continued toward them, his horse moving at a comfortable jog trot, and within moments, the riders came abreast. Nobody slowed down, but greetings did pass between the men.

“Howdy.”

“Good evenin’.”

“Nice night, ain’t it?”

“Sure is.”

“Safe journey.”

“And you.”

Leon watched the young man ride past him, and the long, stringy blond hair sticking out from under a worn hat, was unmistakable. Add to that the handlebar mustache and squinty blue eyes, and Leon knew he had not been forgotten. The two men locked gazes for just an instant, then the lone rider passed them and continued on his way.

Leon kept his eyes forward and his expression neutral, but he now had hope.

Rex had found him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STRANGER IN A DARK SUIT

Jack was getting used to having Haley around to keep him company. If it wasn't for the worry over his partner, he would have been in hog heaven.

Rex had been gone for four days. This, in itself, suggested that he hadn't found Leon right away. If he was doing a search of all the towns along the rail line that had a sheriff's office, then that would take him about a week to check them all out and get back here. Jack had known it might take this long, and longer, but still, he was antsy. He wanted to know what was going on, but he was too well known in those towns to be able to do the search himself. He'd just have to wait it out.

"Dinner's ready," Haley announced.

"Oh, thanks, darlin'. The aromas comin' from that stove have got me good and hungry for one of your fine meals."

Haley beamed a smile.

"Thank you, Jack. I'm pleased you like my cooking."

"Oh, yes ma'am, I surely do."

He stood up from the porch rocking chair and followed her into the large sitting room. The table was nicely set with clean dishes and even some wild flowers that Haley had found out back of the cabin. The whole place smelled heavenly.

"Now, you sit yourself down," Haley told him. "I'll dish out your supper."

Jack followed instructions and soon, a plate full of sliced venison roast, mashed potatoes with gravy, and fresh vegetables from the garden was set down in front of him. His stomach growled.

Haley giggled. "You are hungry."

"Oh yeah."

"Well, dig in. There's plenty more."

Later in the evening, as the night shadows required wicks to be lit, Jack sat at the cleared off table, cleaning his handgun. Haley sat in the sofa, working on a crochet pattern that Mary had given her. She hummed a tune as she worked the needles, the shadows from the lamp dancing across her contented features.

She glanced up from her work to find Jack watching her.

She smiled at him. "Would you like me to rub your shoulders?"

"Sure."

Setting her crocheting aside, she came over to him. She was about to go behind him when he caught her hand and stopped her.

“Let’s sit on the sofa,” he murmured.

“Okay, if you’d rather.”

“Yeah. I’d rather.”

Her heartbeat quickened as she allowed him to lead her to the couch.

“Come and sit with me,” he said as he brought her down to sit beside him, her back resting against the upholstered arm. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He smiled and kissed her hand. She didn’t move away from him, so he moved on up, kissing along her arm as he went. His hands moved up with him, seeking out her breasts through the material of her dress.

He could feel her breathing quicken, and he felt encouraged to carry on. Shifting his position, he eased her underneath him, his one hand supporting her back, and the other sliding down to caress her buttock. She shifted under him even more, her own arms wrapping around him, pulling him in close.

He kissed her neck and he felt her tremble. Looking into her eyes, he saw invitation there, so he came down on her mouth, gently at first, then with more passion. She opened for him, allowing his intrusion, and their bodies reacted to one another as passions escalated. He felt the need to escape from the restrictions of their clothing, and after one more lingering kiss on her soft, warm lips, he eased up and began to unbutton the front of her blouse.

He felt her tense. Everything that had been supple and inviting an instant before, was now strung like taught wire.

Her hands came up, stopping his. “No, don’t. Stop.”

“Stop?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“Oh.” Disappointment softened his advances.

“I’m sorry,” she said again as she struggled to get out from under him. She was close to panicking as she pushed him away and got to her feet. “I like you very much, Jack. But . . . I can’t do this.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Jack sat on the sofa, feeling dazed. What had just happened?

“I’m going to bed now,” Haley announced.

“No.” Jack stood up and reached out a hand to her. “You don’t have to rush off. You like to make tea in the evening before bed. Why don’t you —?”

“No. I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

She turned and disappeared into her room, soundly closing the door behind her.

Jack stood in the middle of the living room and tried to figure out what he'd done wrong.

The following morning, Haley behaved as though nothing had happened. The coffee was perking and she happily hummed a tune as she sliced bacon for breakfast.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked as he joined her by the stove.

She smiled up at him. "Of course. What a beautiful morning it is. Perhaps we can go for a picnic later. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Ahh . . . yeah, I suppose."

"Here, coffee's about done. Why don't you take a cup and go sit on the porch with it while I get breakfast going?"

"Oh."

Before he knew it, there was a cup of coffee in his hands and he was being shuffled toward the door.

"I'll call you when it's ready."

"Yeah, okay."

He went onto the porch, but instead of sitting in the rocking chair, he carried on down the steps and headed for the barn. He knew that Malachi or Mukua would be in there by now, feeding the horses, and he felt the need for some male company.

Leon sat on the cot in his cell, holding a tin cup of water with laudanum mixed in with it.

Dr. Pike had been summoned as soon as the posse got to town, and he had been prompt in coming over to examine the condition of the prisoner. The wound was checked, cleaned, and re-banded, with a new sling set in place. Dr. Pike was confident that, barring infection, the injury should heal up fine. In the meantime, the good doctor prescribed laudanum to help the outlaw sleep.

But Leon didn't want to sleep. His set of lock picks burned a hole in his boot. He needed to stay awake, alert to any opportunity to open the cell door and make his escape. He could just sit and wait it out for his gang to come rescue him, but that might take a few days, maybe even a week, for them to get something organized, and Leon wasn't sure he had that much time.

"I don't need any laudanum, Doc," Leon protested. "Honest, it doesn't hurt at all. I'll sleep fine without this."

“You’ll do as you’re told,” the doctor harrumphed. “I think I know what’s best for you. Now, drink it down, lad, and no more arguing.”

And there Leon sat, looking up at the doctor, his big doe eyes beseeching leniency.

The doctor glared daggers back at him, making it clear that he wasn’t going anywhere until the great outlaw leader had downed his medication.

Leon sighed. He saw no way out of this. He looked down at the contents of the cup, then back up at the doctor.

That expression had not changed.

Accepting the inevitable, Leon raised the cup and drank the contents. Maybe he’d have better luck tomorrow night.

The following morning, Leon was still feeling groggy from the laudanum when he heard the key clang into the lock of his cell door. He opened his eyes to view his visitor, then shut them again when it turned out to be Erikson.

“Come on, Nash, wake up,” the sheriff ordered. “Get on your feet.”

Leon sighed but did as instructed.

Erikson took hold of his good arm and seemed about to lead him from the cell.

“Ahh, do you mind if I use the pot first?” Leon asked. “I mean, I just woke up.”

Erikson sighed and sent him a look of disgust, as though what he was asking for was beyond reasonable.

“Fine. But hurry it up. You’ve got an appointment.”

“I do?” Leon asked as he tended to business. “With whom?”

“You’ll see. Come on.”

“Yeah, yeah. Buttons aren’t that easy to handle with just one good arm.”

Leon finished, and the sheriff ushered him out of the cell and into the office area. He expected to be taken outside, perhaps to the doctor’s place for a check-up, but it seemed his appointment had come to him.

A man stood before him, a most unusual looking man. He was older than Leon, but his dark hair and mustache showed no signs of graying. He was taller too, and thinner, but ramrod straight in his posture and manner. When Leon met his eyes, he felt as though black spikes were boring into his very soul. Everything about the man was tight. Where Leon’s face was roundish and open, this man had edges. His features were sharp, his eyes narrow and squinting, even indoors. His nose was straight, and his mouth pressed into a thin line of determination.

Leon gulped. A strange premonition hit him that this man was not only dangerous, but he was going to have a profound influence over whatever the future held for the up-and-coming outlaw.

The man looked Leon up and down, then snorted.

“Napoleon Nash, eh? Well, they do say that a man’s reputation is often bigger than the man, himself. I can’t see this taking very long.”

Leon frowned. Not only at the insult, but at the supposition that he would be an easy man to deal with.

“Who might you be?” Leon asked.

“Well, he speaks. It’s good to know you have a tongue, son, so you can’t blame inability. I’ve had ‘em do that, you know, act like a cat got hold of their tonsils.” He stepped forward and gave Leon a pat on the arm.

Leon flinched; this man gave him the creeps.

The thin mouth stretched into a smirk. “Jumpy, huh? Ha. Good instincts. Take him into the back room.”

Erikson grabbed Leon’s arm again and took him through a door into a smaller room, then plunked him down into the only chair beside a small, empty desk.

The strange man followed, then stood on the other side of the desk, assessing the outlaw.

“Thank you, Sheriff. You can leave now.”

“What? What to ya mean, leave? I’m part a this.”

The beady eyes turned on the lawman.

“I work alone,” he snarled. “Get out.”

“Well . . .” Erikson stopped; his blustering complaint pinned to the back of his throat. “Fine. I’ll be right out there in the office, so—”

“Shut the door behind you, Sheriff. And lock it.”

Erikson hesitated. He didn’t like this one bit, but there was nothing he could do about it. He sent a quick glance to the prisoner, then turned and walked out.

Leon gulped again. It wasn’t often he felt fear, but this stranger in a dark suit had his heart trembling.

The man sat on the edge of the desk, facing the prisoner.

“To answer your earlier question,” he said, “my name is Frank Carlyle. I’m a detective with Wells Fargo. It seems you’re making quite a name for yourself, and not in a good way.”

Leon knew that name; he remembered it from the newspaper article. The man came across as just another blow-hard detective then, but now that Leon was meeting him in person, he knew he was in trouble. He pressed himself into the back of the chair, instinctively trying to put distance between himself and this threat. Then he cursed for letting his

anxiety show. He steadied his trembling and forced his eyes up to meet those black pools.

“Oh, I’m not anybody special,” he said. “Just trying to make a living.”

“Mm hmm. I notice you didn’t say ‘honest living’.”

Leon twitched a smile. He tried to turn on his charm but it decided to take the day off.

Carlyle stood up and walked around behind the outlaw. He didn’t touch the prisoner, but Leon still felt his skin crawl.

“That was quite an impressive job you pulled in Denver,” the gravelly voice sent tremors down Leon’s spine. “Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That’s a lot of money. If you wanted the Agency’s attention, well, now you’ve got it.”

Carlyle completed his circle, coming around to the desk and setting on the opposite corner.

He smiled. “You can make this easy or difficult. It’s up to you. All you have to do is give me the answer I’m looking for to a very simple question. What have you done with the money?”

“I don’t know what—”

“No. Now, we’re not off to a very promising start, are we? We know it was you, Mr. Nash. Why, we even have an eyewitness who puts you and your partner right there the night that safe was blown. Denying it is just a waste of time. What did you do with the money that was on you?”

Leon gulped then tightened his lips in irritation. He needed to stop doing that; it was a sure sign of nervousness.

“We split up,” Leon admitted, knowing that to tell a partial truth could be a good way to avoid telling all of it. “Everyone took a share. I gave my share to my partner. I expect they’re all back at the Elk by now.”

“Uh huh. So you’re saying that you didn’t have a share on you, yourself? You handed it all over to other members of your gang.”

“That’s right.”

Carlyle smiled like a wolf. “Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“It’s the honest truth.”

A hand slammed into the top of the desk, causing Leon to jump.

“Don’t patronize me, Nash. To you, the honest truth goes as far as what you think you can get away with.” He leaned in closer, bringing his pointed nose up close to Leon’s face.

Leon squirmed, breaking eye contact. Dammit.

Carlyle’s narrow eyes narrowed further.

“Let me make this easier for you, just so you have some guidelines.” The detective stood up, walked around to the front of the desk and leaned upon it. “You had two sets of saddlebags when you left that troupe of actors, one of which you were, apparently, very attached to. And yet,

when you were arrested you only had one set with you. Where is that extra set of saddlebags, Mr. Nash?"

"You said I only had to answer one question." Leon couldn't help himself. "That's two."

The atmosphere in the room became heavy, and Leon regretted his flippancy. Sometimes he couldn't help what came out of his mouth.

"Oh, I think they're one and the same," Carlyle growled low. "Mrs. Wilcox says that you were very protective of that set of bags. She went so far as to say that you turned dangerous when she got too close to them. Why was that?"

Leon shrugged. Carlyle noted the body language, indicating that what was about to come out of the outlaw's mouth was a lie.

"Those bags had my dirty laundry in them," Leon said, then smiled. "I didn't want a lady to see my soiled long-johns."

"Well, we're making progress," Carlyle noted. "At least you admit to having an extra set of saddlebags. And you didn't have them when you were captured." He smirked. "If all they had in them was dirty laundry, why would you take the time to hide them? Especially when you were already in a hurry."

"I'm a private man, Detective. You can hardly blame me for wanting to keep my dirty laundry—"

Slap! The open-handed blow came from nowhere.

Leon was shocked more than hurt, though his cheek stung from the unexpected assault.

Carlyle sat back on the desk corner again and folded his arms as though nothing had happened.

"Let me remind you of the rules. You give me the answers I'm looking for and you can go back to your cell. Simple enough. Now that I've clarified them, let's start again."

It was early afternoon and Jack had just returned from exercising his horse, when two shots from the look-out indicated a gang member returning home.

Jack stopped on his way to the cabin and headed back toward the barn. Rex was the only member not accounted for, and he felt a surge of hope that, if he didn't actually have Leon with him, he had some good news.

Ten minutes later, Rex, riding a dust-covered bay horse, came into view. The horse was so exhausted he stumbled and almost went down, and Rex was so tired he did nothing to help pick the animal up again. The horse slowed to a foot-dragging jog, automatically heading for the barn

and stopping right in front of Jack. There he stood, head down and legs trembling, as Rex slid from the saddle and fell to a heap in the dirt.

“Dammit, Rex,” Jack squatted by the young man, helping him to stand up again. “What the hell happened?”

“I needed ta get back as soon as I could,” Rex mumbled. “I seen ‘im. I seen Nash.”

Some of the fellas came up from their various duties, also wanting to hear news of their leader.

Mukua stepped forward and took the exhausted horse in hand.

“I will get this fella settled,” he said, “then come to the cabin to tend to Rex. I have a tea that helps with fatigue.”

“Aww no, Preacher, that’s okay,” Rex mumbled. “I’m fine, really. Just some food and a good sleep is all I need. Honest.”

“Hmm.” And Mukua led the exhausted horse away.

“Ya found Nash?” Gus asked. “Why didn’t ya bring ‘im back?”

“I couldn’t. He was injured and surrounded by lawmen. There weren’t nothin’ I could do. I thought best ta get back here as fast as I could and let you fellas know.”

“You left ‘im in the hands of the law?” Gus snarled.

“Back off, Gus,” Jack said, as he got between Rex and the older outlaw. “If it’s like he’s sayin’, he couldn’t a done nothin’.” He turned back to Rex. “Where’d ya see ‘im?”

“They were ridin’ into Carbon,” Rex said. “Him and five lawmen. He had his arm in a sling, so I know he was hurtin’, and he didn’t look so good. There was nothin’ I could do, honest. Ya gotta believe me.”

Gus snorted.

Jack sent him a look then turned back to the younger man.

“I believe ya, Rex. C’mon, I’ll help ya up to the cabin. Haley’s cookin’ will put ya ta rights. Then some of Mukua’s tea—”

“Aww no. Not the tea. That stuff tastes like bear piss.”

“And how would you know that?” Jack teased him. “C’mon, it’ll help ya sleep. And ya know you’ll feel better for it.”

“I ain’t gonna need help sleepin’,” Rex insisted, as Jack assisted him to the cabin. “Some food and a shot a whiskey’s all I need. I’ll be right fine in the mornin’.”

“So, Nash is in Carbon,” Jack announced. “I guess the question is, what are we gonna do about it”

The gang members were settled in various seating arrangements around the common room of the bunkhouse. An impromptu conference was in session as the group worked on a plan to rescue their leader.

“That’s a fair-sized town,” Gus said. “Kinda hard ta sneak ‘im outta there.”

“We can’t just leave ‘im there, though,” Hank commented. “There’s gotta be some way.”

“We could dynamite the jailhouse,” Malachi suggested, his tobacco-stained grin spreading over his face. “We got enough.”

“If he’s still got his lock picks with ‘im, he can get his own self out,” Lobo said. “Hell, he’s done it enough times already. Why should we risk our own necks when he’s likely already got a plan?”

“That’s a pretty secure jail in Carbon,” Jack reminded them. “Even if he still has them picks, and he do break out, he’ll have ta get a horse and find his way back here. We know he’s injured. He might not be able ta do it.”

“He was ridin’ a horse when Rex saw ‘im,’” Lobo said. “He ain’t that bad hurt.”

“Ridin’ a horse into town, is one thing,” Jack said. “Ridin’ one durin’ an escape attempt is another.”

“Considerin’ who he is, and what we just done,” Gus pointed out, “the law might not even keep him in Carbon. Rawlins ain’t that much further. I guess it depends on where the circuit judge heads to.”

“Yeah,” Jack pondered. “That could work in our favor though.”

“Yeah,” Malachi declared. “We could waylay the judge and one a us could impersonate ‘im.”

Gus took off his hat and gave his buddy a smack.

“What?” Malachi complained. “It’s a good idee.”

“Yeah,” Lobo said. “Preacher could do it. He’s solemn enough.”

“No, that won’t work,” Jack said. “Everyone knows what the circuit judge looks like. Besides, what’s Preacher gonna do? Declare Leon innocent and let ‘im go on his way? Not likely.”

“Hmm, yeah.”

“No, that wouldn’t wash.”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “I’m thinkin’, once Rex is rested up, a bunch of us can head back down ta Carbon. We’ll stay away from town, but Rex can go in and keep an eye on things. He can see if Leon is still there, and if they’re plannin’ on movin’ ‘im. Ifn they do that, well, we can hit ‘em along the way.”

“On the train?” Gus grumbled.

“Stoppin’ trains is what we do,” Jack pointed out.

“Yeah, but not there,” Gus countered. “That section a track is littered with towns. We’d never get away with it.”

“And what if they don’t move ‘im?” Hank asked. “What if the judge stops in Carbon, and Nash gets tried right then and there?”

“Well, if that’s the case, at least we’ll know it,” Jack said. “And we can make plans from there.”

Some grumbling went around the bunkhouse, but nobody argued.

“Preacher, Gus, and Malachi, get organized.” Jack straightened up, indicating the meeting was over. “We ride out tomorrow mornin’. Hank, you’re in charge while we’re gone.”

“Sure thing.”

Carbon, Wyoming

Leon’s stomach growled. He hadn’t eaten all day, and by his reckoning, it was well past noon and, more likely, nearer to supper. Wasn’t he ever going to get something to eat? The only promising thing about it, was that Carlyle hadn’t eaten either, and he must be getting hungry as well.

But the detective kept pushing, and Leon was getting restless.

“Can I have some water?” he asked.

Carlyle stood up straight and glared at him.

“Tell me what I want to know and you can have all the water you want.”

“Look, I told you, repeatedly, that there was nothing in those saddlebags. I threw them away because I didn’t want the sheriff nosing around in my private underwear.”

“Where?”

“What?”

“You admit you threw the bags away,” Carlyle pointed out. “Where did you throw them?”

“I don’t remember,” Leon felt testy. “That posse was closing in, so I dumped them, out there, somewhere.”

“Don’t give me that, Nash. You know that territory like the back of your horse’s neck. You have a spot, don’t you? A special place to dump the loot in case you’re being chased. I know the way you outlaws think. Yessir. You act like you’re so much smarter than the rest of us, but I know what goes on in that mind of yours. You’re no mystery to me. Talk.”

Leon slumped, tired of this badgering. Surely Carlyle couldn’t go on any longer than Leon himself could. Even the detective had to eat and sleep at some point.

The attention of both men was drawn to the sound of a key in the lock of the office door.

Carlyle smiled at the large man who entered.

Leon frowned. The newcomer looked as though he had taken Carlyle as a fashion statement and decided to dress exactly like him.

Carlyle stepped forward to meet him.

“Is it that time, already?”

“Yup,” the second suit in an extra-large, stated. “Five o’clock on the dot.”

“Fine, fine.” Carlyle turned to the prisoner. “This is my associate, Detective Hoag. He’s going to take over here while I go get a well-deserved supper. After that, I just might head for the saloon for a couple of drinks and maybe even a poker game. Then a few hours shut-eye, and I’ll come join you again.”

Leon groaned. Carlyle had a partner.

“How is it going?” Hoag sized up the prisoner. “He doesn’t look like much. To be quite honest, I’m surprised you need me here at all. You must be losing your touch.”

Carlyle grinned. “Oh, well, we were just having a pleasant chat together, weren’t we Nash? Taking our time to get acquainted.”

“Well, off you go, Frank,” Hoag said. “Now, it’s my turn.”

“Yup. See you in the morning, boys.”

With that, Carlyle turned and left the room, closing and locking the door behind him.

Leon watched him go, then brought his gaze back to meet the cold, blue eyes of the replacement.

“How are you feeling, Nash?”

“I could use some food and a cup of water, not to mention, a bed. Oh, and the keys to that door would be nice, too.”

Hoag chuckled and sat on the corner of the desk.

“Still got a sense of humor, eh? Well, we’ll soon wring that out of you.”

“Like I told Mr. Carlyle,” Leon explained, “I don’t remember where I dumped that saddle bag. It’s a big territory out there.”

Hoag waved the disclaimer away, snorting his disdain.

“Those saddlebags are Carlyle’s interest. You see, we kind of have a little competition between us when we’re asking a prisoner for answers. We each have our own question, and we put a little wager on which question gets answered first.”

Leon shifted. Disappointment washed over him, as he realized that this was far from over. He sat silently, his lips tightening over a dry and sticky mouth.

Elk Mountain

Pre-dawn chill hovered over the men on horseback, as they prepared to leave their sanctuary. Stamping hooves and misty vapor from snorting nostrils indicated the restlessness of the horses, while the humans made final preparations.

“How are ya feelin’, Rex?” Jack asked the young man. “You think you can handle another ride into Carbon?”

“Yeah, sure,” Rex answered. “I guess the Preacher’s concoction did help. I ain’t feelin’ too bad, this morning.”

“Ya hear that, Preacher?” Jack prodded. “That there was a compliment.”

Mukua cocked a brow. “Hmm.”

“Let’s get goin’,” Jack said. “If they move ‘im ta Rawlins before we can get him, that might just be the end of it.”

Gus snorted. “I still don’t see why ya need the rest of us goin’ along. The three a you can handle this rescue easily enough.”

“Now, I thought we went over this,” Jack said, as he mounted his horse. “We don’t know what the situation is. We may need Malachi’s talents, especially if he’s on the move by train. We need you along in case they’re movin’ ‘im by horseback. The more people we have for an ambush, the better. I’d say that five of us is a good number. Large enough ta get the job done, but small enough ta stay hidden.”

“Well, we better stay hidden, the law in Carbon County knows us by sight,” Gus continued to protest. “If we gotta go into town ta break ‘im out, chances of us bein’ recognized is pretty dang high. I think we’re puttin’ ourselves at risk fer nothin’. I’m willin’ ta bet that little, upstart of a boy genius has already rescued hisself.”

“If he has, then we’ll probably run into ‘im on the way there,” Jack countered. “But I ain’t gonna just sit back and count on that. We’re all goin’.”

“What do Preacher think?” Malachi spoke up for the first time in this argument.

All eyes turned to Mukua.

The old Indian sat for a moment, considering.

“I have thought much on this,” he finally stated, “and I believe we should split up. Rex is safe to go into Carbon, so he can check on things there. We can lay low, outside of town. We keep in touch. Once we know where Nash is, then we can make a plan.”

“That ain’t no plan,” Gus grumbled. “We got wanted posters up in all them towns. Hell, they’re in the telegraph offices.”

Mukua shrugged. “Keep your head down.”

“This is still the best plan,” Jack said. “We can’t organize a rescue, if we don’t know where he is. Just be careful.”

Gus growled. “Fine.” He booted his horse forward, pushing through the others. “I still say it’s a waste a time.”

Carbon, Wyoming

“We don’t cash in the bonds,” Leon insisted for the umpteenth time. “We divvy up the cash, sell the jewels to the highest bidder and burn the bonds.”

“Now why would you do that?” Hoag asked. “In that Denver job, for example, the bonds are worth more than the cash and jewels put together. Why would you burn those?”

Leon’s head drooped, his eyes were heavy and burning. A sharp slap on the desk jerked him awake again.

“Focus!” Hoag ordered. “Who’s your go-to man? I know you’ve got one, Nash. Tell me who he is and you can get some sleep. Tell me who he is.”

“No,” Leon shook his head. “Don’t have a go-to man. We burn the bonds.”

And so it went on, hour after hour, the same question, over and over again.

It became a blur, and Leon lost track of time. He no longer felt hunger, he was just thirsty, and tired. He wanted to sleep, but Hoag wouldn’t let him, and the question was pounded at him again . . .

Leon felt himself being shaken as his awareness was forced up into consciousness.

“Wake up! If I’m not sleepin’, you’re not sleepin’.”

Leon’s eyes burned with exhaustion. When had Hoag morphed into Carlyle? He couldn’t remember. Everything was a blur.

“C’mon,” Leon mumbled. “Leave me alone.”

“I’ll leave ya alone when ya tell me what I wanna know.”

“I dunno.”

“Oh, don’t give me that, boy. You dumped that money somewhere. Give it up.”

“No.”

Carlyle grabbed Leon’s shirt and dragged his face down to the top of the desk. A map showing the rail line, the towns spaced out along it, and the surrounding landscapes, lay spread upon the surface. The detective’s slender, sharp finger pointed to indications of rocky, uninhabited terrain.

“We know you dumped it somewhere between here and here. Just point, boy. Ya don’t even have ta speak. Just point.”

“No.” Leon shook his head, the movement causing vertigo, and he leaned dangerously toward the floor. “Leave me alone.”

Carlyle pulled him up straight and gave him another shaking.

“We’ve been here for two days now,” he pointed out. “You’re not gonna last much longer. Just point to where you dumped it, and I’ll be done with ya.”

“I don’t remember.”

Leon slumped forward, darkness enveloping him again. Then lights exploded behind his sealed eyes, and the sting of a slap reddened his cheek.

“Wake up!”

Anger replaced exhaustion. His injury made him less resilient, and he couldn’t take this anymore. With his last wisp of energy, he hoisted himself from the chair and came at Carlyle. He had no idea what he was going to do; the room was locked, with lawmen in the main office, so, even if he did overpower the detective, there was nowhere for him to go. There was no logic to it, just anger and the consuming need to sleep.

Carlyle side-stepped him with ease. He diverted Leon’s impulsion, causing him to run into the desk, then collapse hard onto the floor. He lay there, groaning and barely conscious, with blood seeping from the newly opened wound.

Carlyle stood over him, a tight smile cracking his features. “I gotta hand it to you, boy, you’re tougher than I thought.”

The office door opened and Hoag arrived to take over his shift. He smirked at the moaning man on the floor, then shook his head.

“What a mess. Doesn’t look like you got much out of him.”

“Nope, not yet. What are you doing here? My turn ain’t over yet.”

“I thought I’d give you a hand. Maybe the two of us together will get him to open up.”

“Hmm.”

Carlyle grabbed Leon by the shirt lapels and dragged him to his feet. “C’mon boy, we’re not done with you yet.”

Leon felt himself being shaken awake, then plunked back down into the chair.

“Leave me alone,” he mumbled.

A hand slapped the desktop again, but Leon barely reacted. His ears buzzed.

“Tell me where you dumped those saddlebags,” Carlyle yelled at him.

“I dunno. Leave me alone.”

“Where do you take those bonds to cash in? Who’s your go-to man?”

“No.”

Time became a loop.

Carlyle stood on one side of him, and Hoag on the other. Both men bombarded him with the same questions, over and over again. Any attempt on Leon’s part to cover his ears or push them away was met with more shaking and face-slapping.

Leon couldn’t take it anymore. His throat burned as tears of exhaustion leaked from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He tried to yell out his frustration, but his parched throat only permitted a rasping whisper.

“What was that?” Carlyle asked him. “You have something to say, Nash?”

“Water . . .”

The map was dragged in front of him again.

“Point to it,” Carlyle said. “Just point to the spot and you can have your water.”

Then, Leon thought he was hallucinating when a tin cup filled with water appeared on the desk in front of him. He couldn’t believe his eyes. His right hand reached out for it, but Hoag was faster and pushed the cup just out of Leon’s reach.

Leon’s hand rested upon the map as his eyes focused on the water.

“Just point to it, Nash,” Carlyle said. “Point to it and you can drink.”

Leon’s finger twitched as he fought the impulse. The spot of their hiding place was right there within an inch of where his hand rested. He could see it. There was a water mark left behind from the cup, and it circled the location, tempting the outlaw to succumb. His hand trembled toward it, and there was nothing Leon could do to stop it. Fear clutched his heart, then anger erupted from deep down in his soul.

Leon’s parched throat emitted a roar. He lunged to his feet, hands grasping at Hoag’s neck and squeezing with that manic strength that only comes to the desperate.

Carlyle grabbed him from behind while Hoag easily broke the outlaw’s hold, then gave him a punch in the gut for good measure.

Leon’s knees buckled. He didn’t remember passing out, or the slow sink to the floor, as his knees gave way. All he saw and felt was blessed darkness and an end to the torment.

Hoag and Carlyle stood, hands on hips, gazing down at the tattered figure laying at their feet.

“Well,” Hoag commented, “I guess we’re done. He’s tougher than he looks. We’re not getting anything out of him now. I suggest we move him to a more secure location.”

Carlyle frowned. “Hmm.” A booted toe nudged the motionless body, “I suppose you might have a point.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Stewert glared at the detective. “That’s my prisoner and you had no right—”

“I have every right, Marshal,” Carlyle snarled back. “You arrested him, and you’ll get credit for that, but I was charged with getting information out of him, any way I saw fit.”

“By killing him?”

“Killing him? Ha. He’s just a little tired. So are we. So what? We’re well on our way to getting all the information we want from him. The hard part is done now. When he comes around, he won’t want to go through that again. Once we get him to Cheyenne, he’ll be ready to turn on his own mother.”

“Cheyenne? The circuit judge is on his way here. You can’t—”

“I have seniority over you, Marshal, whether we’re in your district or not,” Carlyle pointed out. “You’re more than welcome to contact Mr. Hume. I’m sure he would be happy to clarify.”

Stewert stood silently, his jaw working with impotent anger.

“Fine, Mr. Carlyle. You have it your way, for now. But I will be getting in touch with your boss.”

“That’s fine, Marshal. As I said, the hard work is already done. I think my associate and I will get some dinner and relax for the evening. If, by chance, the prisoner wakes up, no food or water. You understand? He gets nothing until he talks. See you tomorrow morning, Marshal. Sheriff.”

Carlyle snatched his hat from the hat stand, sent the local law officers a crooked smile and the two detectives left the office.

Marshal Stewert growled. “What a bastard.”

For once, Erikson had to agree with him.

Leon lay on the cot, staring up at the ceiling without really seeing it. He tried to get his mind thinking clearly, but his body ached in places he didn’t know he had, as well as the ones he did know about. He vaguely recalled the doctor giving him water, laced with laudanum, but once the fierce thirst had been eased, his need for sleep had won out over hunger.

When he awoke, it was dark and he thought it odd that he had slept for such a short time. Then, when Deputy Morin came to check on him, Leon was informed that he had actually slept through the night, the following day, and most of the next night. No wonder he was so ravenous.

Now, here he was, his thirst had been sated for now, but his mind and body were still sluggish. He needed to get out. If Carlyle had another go at him, he might lose control and give him the names of their network. The fact that he had already come so close to giving up the location of their hiding place, scared him to his core. It wasn't the information itself that matter, as Leon was sure the saddlebags had long since been retrieved and was now secure in the safe at home.

No, it was the fact that he had almost succumbed, and he didn't know if he would have been able to hold out much longer. He feared losing control again. He feared what the detectives would do to him in the second round. He knew they had seniority here, and if they moved him to a more private place, they would commence with a vengeance. And, because they had come so close to attaining the answer to that one question, the interrogation would only continue until Carlyle had everything he wanted, or Leon died from the torture.

I have to get out of here. I can't wait for Jack. And if Carlyle moves me to Cheyenne, I'll really be stuck.

He sighed and glanced at the bars of his cell. The early morning sun cast shadows through the barred, outer window, lighting up dust particles as they danced and floated in the warm air. It would have been a relaxing scene if it weren't for extenuating circumstances.

Closing his eyes, he used his right hand to haul himself up and swing his legs over to a seated position. Shards of pain jabbed through his back, but he couldn't let that stop him. He opened his eyes, took two deep breaths, then using the heel of one booted foot, he pulled off the boot from the other. Picking it up, he held it with his slung arm, then his right hand slipped inside the boot, going directly to the pouch where he stored his lock picks.

Getting his boot back on was a challenge, but he did it.

He approached the door to his cell, listening for any movement in the outer office. All was quiet. Removing his arm from its sling, he forced it into service. Taking a pick in each hand, he slid his hands through the bars and, using his left to slide the instrument into the keyhole, he used his right to manipulate the tumblers into releasing.

Another minute and he would have it, but then a key slid into the lock of the cell block door, and Leon knew he had run out of time.

"Crap," came out as a terse whisper as he snatched his picks out of the lock and deftly returned his left arm, along with the picks, to the sling. He

stepped back from the bars just as the door opened and Carlyle stepped into the block.

“Well,” he sent Leon a crooked smile, “you’re up early. Planning your escape, are you?”

Leon frowned, uncomfortable with Carlyle second-guessing his every move.

The detective moved closer to the bars, a frown pinching his forehead as his black eyes dropped to the sling.

Deputy Morin walked into the cell block, carrying a tray of breakfast, but Carlyle stopped him with a glare and a raised hand. “No.”

“But the doc said he needed ta eat somethin’.”

“I don’t care what the doc said,” Carlyle snarled. “It’s bad enough he had overridden my orders and gave him water. He’d likely be begging me to let him give up the information if it wasn’t for that. Trying to help him has simply prolonged the inevitable. So, no food or water until he gives us the answers we want.”

“But—”

“Get out!”

Morin sent Leon a quick glance then turned to leave the block.

“Wait,” Carlyle stopped him. “Get me the key.”

Morin nodded and disappeared to the front office.

Those narrow eyes turned to stare at Leon again, but neither man spoke.

A moment later, Morin returned with the key to the cell. Erikson was right behind him.

“There’s no point in bringing Nash out now,” the sheriff stated. “The train to Cheyenne ain’t due for another hour.”

“Did you search this man, Sheriff?” Carlyle asked as he opened the cell door.

“Of course,” Erikson snarked. “You don’t see him with a gun, do ya?”

Carlyle ignored the snipe as he approached the prisoner.

“Remove your sling,” he ordered.

Dammit. Leon felt disappointment hit. “Why? What for?”

The dark eyes darkened. “Do it. I don’t think you want me doin’ it for you.”

Leon couldn’t argue with that statement.

Seeing no way out of this one, he removed his arm from the sling and lifted the material over his head. With some reluctance, he handed the hiding place to the detective.

Carlyle took it and felt the hard, metal instruments that were concealed within its folds. In an instant he had the set of lock picks in his hands.

His lip curled with disdain. “You searched him, Sheriff? Isn’t that what you said?”

“Well, yeah. I . . .”

Carlyle turned on him. “This man is already well known as a safe-cracker and a jail-breaker. He can pick a lock faster than you can sneeze, and you didn’t think to search him for lock picks? What the hell is law enforcement coming to? Search him again. And this time, do a better job of it.”

CHAPTER TWELVE CHANGING LOCATIONS

Carbon, Wyoming

It was still early morning when Leon, his hands, minus the sling, were cuffed in front of him and he was led from the cell. He was alert to everything around him, his brain flashing ideas like quicksilver, yet none stayed long enough to take root. He couldn't allow this posse to get him to Cheyenne, but at this juncture, he could see no way out of it.

His eyes were down, and his thoughts miles away, as they stepped out into the morning sun, and only a small gasp from the side caused him to glance up. His heart leapt to his throat, and he was awash with both exhilaration and embarrassment.

Gabriella's eyes, wide with surprise, stared at him.

Carlyle instantly moved between them. "Back away from the prisoner, ma'am. He's a dangerous outlaw."

Gabriella sent him a scathing look. "I know who he is, and he's hardly dangerous. Especially the way you have him trussed up."

"Oh, you know who he is, do you? So, who might you be and just what are you planning?"

An eyebrow cocked.

"I am not planning anything, Monsieur . . .?" No answer was given her, and her lips pursed with irritation, "Detective," she completed. "My name is Mrs. Tanguay. I am part of the caravan that brought Mr. Nash to town."

"Oh yes? Get friendly with him, did ya? Got plans to help him escape?"

Gabriella inflated to her full height. "I have no such thing. Monsieur Nash is an outlaw. He deserves whatever punishment is coming to him."

Without a second glance to the prisoner, she stalked off, her back arched and her loose chignon bouncing with each indignant stride.

Every man in the group watched her walk away, appreciative smiles tugging at their lips.

Leon noted Gabriella storm past a young man leaning against a railing. As nature would dictate, the man's eyes also followed the lovely figure, but then they turned and locked with Leon's.

Leon's smile twitched with relief. It was Rex again. His gang had not left him to his fate.

Carlyle turned back to his prisoner.

"What are you smilin' about?"

Leon's grin dropped, to be replaced with a look of pure innocence.

"Nothin'."

Carlyle growled and shoved the outlaw toward the train depot.

“Where’s Marshal Stewert?” Leon asked, trying to distract himself from the pain the jolting movement of the train caused him.

“Don’t worry about Stewert,” Carlyle told him. “He’s no longer a part of this. You’re in my custody now.”

Leon sighed and stared out the window. His eyes drooped and he drifted off again until a sharp kick to his ankle jerked him awake.

“No ya don’t,” Carlyle said. “No more sleep for you until we get the answers we want.”

“All the way to Cheyenne?” Leon asked as he looked from one stern detective to the other. “That’s hardly humane.”

Hoag snorted but made no comment.

“You know,” Leon continued. “I’m really not feeling that well. And this train ride isn’t helping my shoulder any. I think it’s starting to bleed again. I just might not make it to Cheyenne. I haven’t had all that much to eat, you know. I’m already feeling a bit woozy. Geez, I can’t remember the last time I ate anything. It’s got to be at least a couple of days, maybe longer. Losing more blood isn’t going to help. I just might pass out from hunger, here on this train. That wouldn’t go over well with the conductor.

“Just because we have this car to ourselves, doesn’t mean you can get away with treating me like this. The way you have me all locked up here isn’t helping either. I mean, you even have my hand cuffs cuffed to the arm rest. What if the train de-rails? It’s been known to happen, you know. And me, all trussed up like this, I wouldn’t have a chance. You wouldn’t get much information that way, would you?”

“And it is pretty stuffy in here, you know. If you’re not going to have the decency to feed me then at least let me have some more water. It’ll be kind of hard for me to tell you anything if my throat is so parched that—”

Carlyle sat forward and sent Leon a look that stopped him in mid-sentence

“Shuddup,” he snarled. “Another peep outta you and I’ll put a gag on ya.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Leon said. “I’m simply pointing out that—”

Carlyle pulled a dirty bandana from his pocket and shook it out, sending dust flying in all directions.

“Are you gonna keep your mouth shut?”

Leon looked at the filthy piece of material and bit his lower lip.

“Yessir. You won’t hear another peep out of me.”

“Good,” Carlyle returned the bandana to his pocket. “Now, I’m gonna get some shut-eye. You keep your mouth shut until I’m ready to listen. Then, by God, you better sing or it’ll get a whole lot hotter than that noonday sun.”

Rex sent out a whistling bird call then approached the concealed camp of his companions.

Jack was the first one to him as Rex dismounted.

“You have news?”

“Yeah,” Rex said. “They’re takin’ ‘im by train.”

“Dammit,” Gus sniped. “There ain’t nowhere along that line where we can stop ‘em. I guess that’s it then. We may as well head home.”

“No,” Rex continued, “they ain’t headin’ ta Rawlins; they’re goin’ the other way.”

“The other way?” Jack asked. “What about waitin’ for the circuit judge?”

Rex shrugged. “He weren’t with the local law, either. Two guys in suits. Maybe detectives.”

Jack slumped. “Detectives? That means they’re probably headin’ for Cheyenne. All the major detective agencies have offices there.”

“I expect,” Rex agreed. “He looked done in, too. Like he’s already been worked over some.”

Jack nodded. “Well, we’re wastin’ time standin’ around chattin’. Mount up. If we’re gonna stop that train, we gotta cut across Bull Elk Gulley ta get ahead of ‘em. Let’s go.”

Malachi grinned. “I get ta blow somethin’ up?”

“I was thinkin’ a somethin’ a little more subtle,” Jack said, causing Malachi’s smile to drop. “Leon could be cuffed to the bench. We gotta get ahead of the train and get on board, then wait ta make our move.”

“Are you nuts?” Gus griped. “Them detectives won’t let anyone get close enough to ‘im for that. We’d just be puttin’ our own selves at risk.”

“Well, maybe Malachi can use his dynamite after all,” Jack considered. “He could make a diversion.”

Malachi’s grin returned. “Yeah.”

Gus snorted.

Jack ignored him. “Let’s go.”

Leon felt himself being shaken awake again and would have come up fighting, if it hadn't been for the handcuffs. He was about to force a protest out of his parched throat when he felt the train squealing to a halt, and Hoag catapulted forward into Leon's chest.

"What the hell . . .?" Hoag scrambled to get back into his own seat, his groping hands getting a little too familiar with Leon's lap.

"Watch it," Leon croaked. "Those valuables aren't up for grabs."

"Shut up." Carlyle said, as he helped his partner back to his seat. "What in tarnation is going on here?"

Leon hooked a smile and shrugged. "Maybe it's a hold-up."

Carlyle growled.

Sounds of activity came from the passenger car ahead. One lady screamed, then hurrying footsteps took over from any other protests that might have been forthcoming.

All three men looked out the window to see men, women and children being escorted from the train and pushed into a group. Two scruffy outlaws made the rounds, snatching up valuables and pocketbooks.

"Dammit," Leon murmured. "How many times do I have to tell Gus not to steal money from the passengers?"

Carlyle dug into his vest pocket and brought out the keys to the cuffs. He grabbed Leon's arms and unlocked the cuffs attaching him to the arm rest.

"Let's go," he ordered. He pulled his gun and yanked Leon to his feet. He then led the way toward the back exit of the car.

Hoag came up behind, his gun out and his eyes on the front door. Both men had a hold on their prisoner, pushing and pulling him toward the rear and away from the group on the ground outside.

Reaching the exit, Carlyle let go of Leon and cautiously opened the door just enough to get a peek out, making sure the way was clear. He nodded back at Hoag, opened the door fully and hustled their captive out onto the landing.

Carlyle grabbed the railing and peeked around the end of the car, again, making sure that the way was clear. They could hear the commotion on the other side of the train where the outlaws were still busy with the passengers, so both detectives felt confident that this side would be clear.

Again, Carlyle nodded and hopped down to the ground. He turned and waited as Hoag shoved Leon down the steps then followed, landing right behind him.

Guns still out and ready, Carlyle pointed in the direction of a rock pile.

"We'll take cover there until they're gone," he said. "If that even is the Elk Mountain Gang, they don't seem to be aware that we have Nash here."

Hoag nodded, and Leon felt himself being pushed toward the hiding place.

This was followed by a gasp from behind, then the sickening thunk of something heavy hitting a skull preceded Hoag collapsing into the dirt.

Both Leon and Carlyle spun around.

Leon grinned.

“Hey, Jack. Was wondering when you were going to show up.”

Jack shrugged. “We didn’t know where you were. Rex had ta do double duty, keepin’ track of ya.”

“I did notice him hanging around. Remind me to buy him a beer.”

“Yup.”

The banter stopped when Leon felt the cold metal of a gun muzzle press against the back of his skull.

“You back off,” Carlyle ordered. “This man is my prisoner and I’m taking him to Cheyenne.”

Jack cocked a brow. “Who’s this?”

“May I introduce Detective Frank Carlyle,” Leon said. “He’s with Wells Fargo.”

Jack grinned. “Oh yeah? Wells Fargo, huh?”

“Yup. And that fella groaning at your feet, is Hoag. I don’t know his first name. Detective, I guess.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Jack commented. “Two Wells Fargo agents. We really are somebody now.”

“Yeah.”

“Will you two stop lollygaggin’,” Carlyle growled. “I’ve got a gun to your friend’s head, and I have told you to back off. Now you—”

A hammer clicked and Carlyle stopped when he too, felt a muzzle press against his skull.

Leon glanced around to see who had come to their rescue. “Hey, Preacher. Nice to see you.”

“Hmm.” Mukua reached over and took Carlyle’s gun from him.

Carlyle fumed.

“You know,” Jack commented. “I didn’t even hear ‘im comin’, and I knew he was there. I swear, I ain’t never met anyone who can sneak up behind someone as quiet as a full-blooded injun.”

“Just how many full-blooded injuns do you know?” Leon asked.

Jack sent him a crooked smile. “A couple. Yer ma sure did it to us, plenty.”

“Yeah. She was good at that, wasn’t she?”

“Uh huh.”

More groans emanated from the region of Jack’s feet, and the body there began to shift.

“Well, c’mon,” Jack grabbed Hoag’s arm and hauled him to his feet. “Back onto the train with ya.”

“Wh . . . wha’ happened?”

“You just got smacked on the head, that’s all,” Jack informed him.

“I . . . don’t remember.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay. I’m sure your partner will be happy ta fill ya in, while you’re waitin’.”

“Waitin’ for what?”

The passengers had all been allowed back on the train by the time Jack finished cuffing the two detectives to the arm rests. He tucked the keys into his shirt pocket, then as he exited the car, he had to maneuver his way around Leon, who was seated on the landing steps, gulping water from Mukua’s canteen.

Liquid ran down from the corner of Leon’s mouth and dripped in a steady stream from his chin. The front of his shirt was soaked, and yet he kept on gulping.

Jack frowned and grabbed the canteen from him.

“Damn, didn’t they give ya no water?”

Leon gasped for breath and held out his hand for the canteen, but Jack kept it out of reach.

“You’re gonna make yourself sick, gulpin’ it like that. Slow and steady.”

“Okay. Give it to me.”

Jack handed it back.

Leon snatched it to his lips and again, sucked down the contents. Then he did choke and began to sputter and gasp as he fought to get his breath back.

Jack snatched the canteen away again. “Told ya.”

“Yeah.” Cough. “Give it to me.”

“Too much, too soon,” Mukua said. “We will give you more, later.”

Leon slumped. “Fine. I’m just glad to be away from that pair. Who would have thought Wells Fargo had agents like that? They used to play fair.”

“Yeah, well, I think we kinda pissed ‘em off,” Jack said. “That was a big haul.”

Leon grinned, despite his discomfort. “Yeah. Did you get the saddlebags from Banker’s Rock?”

“Oh yeah, we got ‘em, all right.” Jack answered.

“Good.”

“But the money weren’t in ‘em.”

“What?” Leon tried to stand, but his legs protested and he grabbed the railing to keep from falling. “What do you mean the money wasn’t in them?”

Jack and Mukua exchanged glances, and Jack shrugged.

“Just that. We found the bags all right, and at first glance, the money looked ta be in ‘em. But when we got back to the Elk, it turned out that someone had taken the money out and stuffed the bags full a newspaper and such, then put some real money on top ta make it look like it had the full amount still there.”

Leon frowned as he allowed himself to sink back down to the step.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “The money was all there when I . . .” he stopped as a chill went through him. “Ahh, no.”

“What?” Jack asked.

“That bitch—”

“Leon. Who?”

“Gabriella.”

“What? Ya mean that actress lady from Denver?”

Leon shook his head like one who couldn’t believe his own idiocy. “Yeah, the actress lady from Denver. Dammit.”

“How could she?”

“I ran into them again, out there on the flats,” Leon explained. “They were all turned around. I got them headed in the right direction, then stayed the night. She came to my bedroll for a romp.”

Jack’s heart sank. “She did?” He had the feeling he knew what was coming.

“Yeah. Let’s just say she earns her living in more ways than one. No wonder Josey knew her.”

“So, you got a poke in, and then you paid her from the money in the saddlebags, right?”

“Well, yeah. But—”

“Aww, Leon. You’re usually the one tellin’ me ta be careful with whores we don’t know. What the hell?”

Leon knew his disclaimer: “But she was different.”, wasn’t going to wash with Jack, so he simply sighed and hung his head, too weary to feel anything but regret.

“That is an expensive whore,” Mukua stated. “Maybe you should bring her home and make her your wife. It might be cheaper that way.”

Leon and Jack sent Mukua long suffering looks, but Mukua simply shrugged.

“Makes sense to me.”

The rest of the gang showed up then, bringing their horses to a halt beside the group on the ground.

“Well, what do ya know? There he is,” Gus announced. “Dammit, Nash, you look like shit in slush. Not quite so full a yourself now, are ya?”

“Good to see you too, Gus,” Leon grabbed the handrail and pulled himself back up. “At least you brought me a horse.”

Jack turned concerned eyes to his partner. “Gus do have a point. You gonna be able ta ride back?”

Leon nodded. “I’ll manage.”

Mukua took Leon by the arm and helped him toward the waiting horse.

“When we make camp, I will brew a tea for you. You’ll feel much better after that.”

Leon groaned. “Just water. All I want is water.”

The train whistled up ahead, and as the engine dug in for duty, the men could hear the slack being pulled out of the knuckles, causing the cars to jump and then begin to roll. A window of the passenger car dragged open, and Carlyle stuck his head out as the train chugged past them.

“You ain’t seen the last of me, Nash. This ain’t over yet!”

Then he was gone, as the train pulled around a curve and continued its journey.

“I don’t think I like him, much,” Jack commented.

“Yeah,” Leon agreed. “But I got a feeling he’s right. We’ll be seeing him again.”

By the time the gang stopped for the night, Leon was sick. Now that the stress was off him, his body succumbed, bathing itself in a cold sweat and shaking uncontrollably.

“C’mon, Leon,” Jack helped Leon down from the horse. “Let’s get ya lyin’ down before ya fall down. We’ll get a fire goin’, and I see Preacher is already diggin’ out his bag of herbs.”

“Can’t light a fire,” Leon mumbled. “That train will have reached Howell by now. You can bet Carlyle is coming after us.”

“Not at night, he ain’t,” Jack said. “Besides, we need ta get you warmed up. You feelin’ up ta beans and biscuits?”

“No.”

“How about just some biscuits?”

“No. I’m not hungry.”

“Ya need ta eat somethin’, Leon.”

“I just wanna sleep.”

Malachi had been quick to get a bedroll laid out for his boss, and Leon sank down onto it and got himself snuggled in before Jack had a chance to even pull his boots off.

Jack placed a gentle hand on his partner's shoulder. *Damn, what the hell did they do to 'im? That Carlyle's got some payback comin'.*

Mukua sat down opposite Jack and pulled the blanket down. Leon protested, grabbing it and trying to tug it back.

"No," Mukua said, laying a hand on Leon's other shoulder. "I want to check your wound. Be still."

Leon moaned but settled.

Mukua pulled off the stiff bandages to reveal the injury. Even in the fading light, they could see that the skin around the bullet hole was irritated and puffy. Heat radiated from it as it smelled of infection.

"Oh man," Jack mumbled. "You got somethin' for this?"

Mukua nodded. "A little. Enough to get him home. Once there, I can treat this properly."

Malachi joined the small group.

"Hey, Preacher," he said, "the water's boilin'."

Mukua nodded. "Good."

The five men sat around the small fire, finishing up coffee and making plans.

"Leon's gonna slow us down," Jack surmised. "Preacher and me will stay with 'im, but come mornin', you boys can move out, get back to the Elk as fast as ya can. Ifn we ain't there in three days, well, I guess you can figure a posse caught up to us."

"I don't mind stayin' back and helpin' out," Rex offered. "Even ifn we do get caught, I won't do much time. I'm willin' ta take the risk."

Gus snorted. "Sure can tell you ain't never been in the army. Don't go volunteerin' for nothin'. It never comes ta no good."

"But—"

"Gus is right," Jack said. "Me and Preacher can handle it. Come first light, you fellas head out. We'll be comin' along behind ya."

Rex nodded. "Okay."

"And the other fellas don't need ta know about the loot you took off the train," Jack continued. "That's yours, ta split between the three of ya."

This was met with smiles all around.

"Yeah," Malachi said. "That's worth a trip inta Bear Creek. I ain't had a visit with Louise in ages."

Leon couldn't remember feeling so relieved at the sight of his own bed, in his own home.

Even then, Mukua wouldn't let him sleep.

"Drink this."

Leon groaned. "Aww, more of your tea?"

"No. Bess made broth for you. It is warm and nourishing. You need to drink it."

"I just want to sleep."

"No. Drink this first. I am making a poultice for you. It will help draw out the infection. Drink this now, then you can sleep."

Leon sighed but took the cup and sipped on the broth.

Mukua nodded. "Good."

"You're worse than Jack when it comes to being a nursemaid," Leon protested. "I guess it's my own fault for bringing family into the business."

Mukua smiled. "You are a wise man. Family look out for one another."

Leon smiled. "Yeah, I suppose."

Half an hour later, Leon was snuggled into his own bed. With his tummy filled with warm broth, and his injury wrapped in a healing poultice, he collapsed into unconsciousness and slept the sleep of the righteous.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN ANOTHER ENCOUNTER

Cheyenne, Wyoming
August 1874

Gabriella Tanguay sat in the waiting room of the Wells Fargo Head Office. Even though there were windows open, the area was stuffy, and Gabriella needed her fan to help the air to circulate, if not actually cool down. She didn't even want to be here in the first place. She had a train to catch, and she saw no reason why a Wells Fargo detective would want to speak with her.

The troupe had just finished their last performance of the summer, and most of them were splitting up to visit with family or simply take a break from their busy summer run. The money had been good, and Gabriella looked forward to spending some time with her much older sister, who was, of all things, a doctor, living in San Francisco.

Then this little inconvenience came up. What a bother. But when the sheriff of the town seeks you out and tells you that your presence is required—required, mind you. Not requested—, then a young lady on her own really doesn't have much choice.

She sighed, trying to ignore the sweat trickling down her back. Visions of her sister's parlor drifted into her thoughts, along with her recollection of how comfortably cool that room had been, even in the hottest part of a California day. What is it she'd had installed? Some new-fangled machine that managed to slowly spin upon a central bolt, thereby keeping the air moving and the temperature tolerable.

She glanced up at the ceiling, noting with some dismay, that this modern office building did not come equipped with such a device. More's the pity.

"Mrs. Tanguay?"

Gabriella snapped out of her musings and smiled as she stood. "Yes."

"If you would follow me," the secretary suggested, "the detective will see you now."

"Yes, thank you." *It's about time. He calls me here then leaves me waiting on his convenience. Ohh, if he's not quick about this, I'm going to miss my train.*

The secretary led her down the hallway, passing open office doors that allowed her a quick glimpse into the more mundane of a detective's duties.

How boring. No wonder Teddy chose to—

“Here we are, ma’am,” the secretary stopped at a closed door and knocked. “Mrs. Tanguay is here to see you, sir.”

“Good,” came the muffled voice from inside the room. “Send her in.”

He opened the door and motioned her to step through the threshold. She entered and the door closed behind her, leaving her alone in a private room with a man whom she didn’t know. She was about to turn around and leave when she recognized the tall, dark-haired man, who stood up as soon as she joined him.

“You,” she gasped. “You’re that detective.” Her eyebrow cocked. “That rude detective.”

Carlyle smiled. Though his intent was to appear friendly and reassuring, his thin lips couldn’t quite manage the softness required for those emotions.

“I apologize for my rudeness that day, Mrs. Tanguay, but I had an important job to do and you were a potential threat.”

“Yes. A job you failed to do.”

Carlyle’s smile twitched.

“Well, unforeseen circumstances,” he grumbled. “But now, I would like to remedy that situation.”

“Indeed?”

“Please, have a seat. Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Carlyle. I have a train to catch so I won’t be staying long.”

“Then let me get to the gist of the matter.”

“Please do.”

“I’ve done some looking into your situation,” Carlyle told her as he sat down behind his desk, “and I dare say, I found it extremely interesting. Gabriella tensed. “Why would you be looking into my situation, Mr. Carlyle?”

“Well, I recalled you saying that you knew Napoleon Nash,” Carlyle explained. “I asked some of your fellow thespians, and the general impression was that he was much taken with you.”

“But I was not taken with him,” Gabriella pointed out. “And I certainly had nothing to do with him escaping your custody.”

“No, no, I’m not suggesting that.”

“Then, what are you suggesting, Mr. Carlyle? Please, get to the point.”

“Your husband, Theodore Tanguay—.”

“Late husband.”

“Yes. He was very well thought of in his own circles,” Carlyle continued. “Top detective with the Montreal Police. Was successful in bringing down one of the largest crime rings in that city. One of the

best at undercover work, was a master of disguises, and knew just how to get on the good side of criminals.”

“Until one of them killed him,” Gabriella spit, her anger and grief refusing to remain buried at this unexpected reminder.

“Yes. That was unfortunate. However, it has been made known to me that you were very much involved in your husband’s cases. Being an actress, you were able to help him with creating a persona, ah, with minor make-up, scars and bruising, that sort of thing. But you also helped him solved those cases, didn’t you? In fact, you’re quite the detective yourself, aren’t you, Mrs. Tanguay? Although, of course, you’ve never been officially hired in that capacity, it seems to have been a given, that you were working—ha—undercover, so to speak.”

Gabriella became increasingly annoyed with this line of enquiry and was quick to return to her feet.

“I don’t see the point in this conversation. Now, I have a train to catch, so if you don’t mind—.”

Carlyle stood up with her.

“I do mind, young lady. I’m not done here.”

“But I am. The life I had with my husband is none of your business.”

“Please sit down. You can leave when I say.”

“And what do you intend to do? Arrest me?”

“If I have to.”

“On what charge?”

“How about assisting a dangerous outlaw to escape?”

“I did no such thing. How can you even expect to prove something so outlandish?”

“I don’t have to prove it. All I have to do is detain you until I’m through.”

Gabriella fumed. She stood where she was, her mind jumping back and forth between scenarios. Finally, she sighed and relented.

“Fine, Mr. Carlyle. Have your way. But if I miss my train, you will buy me another ticket. I don’t have money to burn, you know.”

“If you’re willing to take on this job, you soon will.”

Gabriella frowned. “What?”

“Sit down.”

She heaved another sigh and sat down.

“Good.” Carlyle returned to his own chair. “Now, the biggest problem we have with the Elk Mountain Gang, is getting into their hideout. Dammit, we don’t even know for sure where it is.”

Gabriella frowned. “You don’t know where it is?”

“Well, we know the vicinity,” Carlyle said, “just not the actual route taken to get into it.”

“How unfortunate.”

“Yes. Now, the fact that you know Nash, and, even better, that he seemed to be smitten with you, could be used to our advantage.”

“Really? How is that?”

“Do what you do best, Mrs. Tanguay. Infiltrate the gang. Tell Nash that you couldn’t live without him, that you’ll be with him, no matter what. Then, once you get into the hideout, you can start gathering information for us. When his next jobs are going to be, who he uses as his go-between to sell jewels and bonds, that sort of thing.”

“What?” Gabriella was on her feet again. “Whose lame-brain idea was that?”

“Mine, actually.”

“*Tue es fou—*”

“Excuse me?”

“You actually expect me to ride up there, through outlaw territory, and simply knock on his front door? Monsieur Nash is not a fool. Even if I was willing to do it, which I am not, he would never be taken in so easily.”

“I think you underestimate your abilities.”

Gabriella paced the room, her agitation increasing with each lap.

“You said yourself, you don’t even know how to get into it. How do you expect me to be able to find it? And,” she stopped and stood squarely, with hands on hips. “Just what kind of a woman do you think I am? Riding out there on my own and throwing myself at some outlaw. Just how far do you expect me to go?”

Carlyle shrugged. “How far have you gone with your other undercover jobs?”

Gabriella gasped, her eyes and mouth forming into perfect ‘O’s.

“How dare you. The nerve you have. I am a decent woman. How could you possibly think that I would stoop so low as to do what you suggest? This is ridiculous.”

Carlyle sat placidly through this barrage, the smirk upon his face indicating the lack of intimidation.

The vociferous rush eventually ran out of steam, and Gabriella stood, hands on hips and fire in her eyes.

“Well done.” Carlyle clapped his hands. “One would think you were an actress.”

“I never—”

“I doubt that.”

“You—”

“Mrs. Tanguay, let’s stop playing games, shall we?” Carlyle suggested. “I know that working upon the stage is not your only profession. And before you go off on another tangent, let me assure you that I hold no

disrespect towards you for that. You're suddenly widowed, with a young child to raise—what happened to that child, by the way? —you had no means of support. A woman has to do what she can to survive. Still, the world's oldest profession wasn't new to you, was it? Your husband was a very understanding man—”

“How dare you.”

Carlyle laughed out loud.

“Please, sit down,” he said. “I'm not asking you to do anything you haven't done before. And quite successfully, I might add. It'll be well worth your while.”

“I can't imagine any money being—”

“He's worth \$8000.”

“Excuse me?”

“Napoleon Nash is worth \$8000. And his partner is worth \$6000,” Carlyle informed her. “Now, that's a pretty penny for a lady such as yourself. You help us bring down the Elk Mountain Gang, and you can keep the rewards on those two. All we want is Nash and Kiefer stopped, one way or another.”

“Well,” Gabriella sat down and did a quick figuring. “Fourteen thousand dollars. Yes, that is a lot of money.”

“That amount of money could change your whole life, little lady. And all you have to do is be available to a man who already likes you.”

Gabriella considered the offer but then shook her head.

“No, I'm afraid not, Mr. Carlyle,” she said. “You see, I have already come into some money. An inheritance I didn't even realize I had coming. I plan to go to California and live with my sister. I'm afraid you will have to bring down Napoleon Nash and the Elk Mountain Gang some other way. Now, I must be off to catch my train.”

Carlyle shook his head as he stood up.

“Well now, that is a shame, little lady. But, if that's your final word.”

“It is.”

“Good day to you then. I hope you catch your train.”

Gabriella hesitated, surprised at the let-down. “That's it?”

Carlyle shrugged. “If you're not going to do it, you're not. Good day.”

“Oh. Yes, well. Good day, Mr. Carlyle.”

Carlyle sat down again. Leaning back in his chair, he steepled his fingers in front of his thinly smiling lips. That train, heading south, was loaded with just the kind of plunder the Elk Mountain Gang liked best: easy to steal, easy to carry, and easy to turn over. Not many people knew

about it, but Carlyle did, and he was willing to bet that Napoleon Nash did, too.

Mrs. Tanguay was playing right into his plans.

The train's whistle shrilled through the summer heat. Passengers, already tired of the train trip, grumbled as eyes rolled and shoulders slumped.

"Aww no, not again," one gentleman griped. "I have a schedule to keep."

"Better hope it's the Elk Mountain bunch," another pointed out. "At least they just go after the freight and leave us alone."

"That's hardly the point, by good man," the first one responded. "It's bad enough having to take a train at this time of year, without being waylaid by highwaymen. This is most inconvenient, and I shall be lodging a complaint."

This discussion continued as white noise to Gabriella. She sat, staring out the window, hoping to catch a view of the thieves. Though it would be in everyone else's best interest if it was the Elk Mountain Gang, she fervently hoped that it was not.

On the upside, at least she'd had the foresight to wire the money ahead, rather than trust it to the safe. She was too familiar with the ways of thieves to trust the assurances of overly-confident officials.

The train labored to a stop and four scruffy men on horseback came to a dusty, billowing halt right outside her open window, causing her to cough and slam the window shut in disgust. Other passengers did the same, as the outlaws closed in on both sides, preparing to start their day's work.

Three outlaws on each side of the train dismounted, leaving one fellow to hold the horses. One group disappeared into the car ahead of Gabriella's, but the first three appeared at the head of her car. They had their guns drawn and began the usual ushering of people out of the car.

"Must we, really?" the businessman complained. "Why can't we simply remain here, out of the sun, while you rob us blind?"

"We ain't robbin' ya blind," Gus growled, "and ya get off the train. Now."

More grumbling ensued, but the passengers gathered their belongings and stood to begin the procession.

Gabriella mimicked the actions of the other ladies and clutched her handbag to her bosom as though it contained all her worldly wealth, and

joined the group outside. She kept her eyes down but managed to scan the area, looking for, but hoping to not find, two familiar faces.

“I tell ya,” Gus snarked, “with Nash insistin’ we don’t rob the passengers, they’re really startin’ ta get uppity.”

“Yeah,” Malachi agreed, then spit a stream of tobacco juice into the dust. “Nobody appreciates a good turn no more.”

Gabriella’s heart jumped to her throat. *So, this is the Elk Mountain Gang, and Nash was very likely here. Probably in the freight car, opening the safe.*

Good. All he has to do is stay at that end.

She kept herself in the middle of the group with the other ladies. Hopefully she would blend in. As long as Nash and Kiefer stayed away from them, she could simply return to the train with the other passengers and continue on her journey. She began to think she was going to get away with it when she spotted Nash walking toward them.

Oh, hell’s bells.

She looked down, casually moving to put more people between the approaching outlaw leader and herself. She knew her rich red hair shone like a beacon in the sunlight, so she was thankful that it was up in a bun and partially hidden under her bonnet. It was rare that she cursed her unusual coloring, since, in her official line of work, unusual was always appealing. But there were times when she wanted to remain unnoticed, that she would prefer to be a mousy brown.

“All right,” Gus shouted. “All you lot, back on the train. Let’s go.”

Gabriella’s cover began to dissipate. Close to panic, she scuttled in behind a broad-shouldered man who was escorting his wife, in the hopes she would disappear within the family unit.

But then it happened.

“Gabriella!”

Gabriella flicked her eyes up to find herself locked in a commanding stare with her nefarious bedmate.

“Stop her,” Leon yelled. “Gus, grab her!”

“Wh—?”

Having already figured out who Gus was, Gabriella launched herself into him, knocking him backward into Malachi. Malachi, being much smaller, was sent sprawling into the horses.

Rex held on tight, but the animals lunged away from the fracas, nearly running Rex over. He scrambled to get out of their way and still maintain his hold on the reins, but he was losing the battle. Next thing he knew, he was confronted with wide, vivid, green eyes and a flurry of red hair. Then the wind was knocked out of him and he dropped to his knees, gasping for air.

Gabriella grabbed the reins of the nearest horse, and despite her cumbersome attire, she hoisted her skirts, slipped a delicate boot into a stirrup and swung aboard, just as the frightened horse launched itself into a gallop.

Rex rolled to get out from under the scattered hooves of the three remaining horses, as they each tried to get away from the human who was suddenly underfoot. Coughing from the dust, but finally in the clear, Rex shot to his feet, his revolver out and ready for use. He had a clear shot at the woman galloping away, but . . .

“What do I do?” he yelled.

“Stop her—” Gus told him.

“But,” he aimed his gun then brought both hands back to clutch at his hair. “I can’t shoot a woman. What do I do?”

Lobo came through between the cars and assessed the situation instantly.

“I ain’t got no problem shootin’ a woman,” he stated, and to prove the point, he brought his revolver up to take aim just as Leon rammed into him.

“No. Don’t shoot her. I want her alive.”

“Dammit,” Lobo threw at him. “Make up your mind.”

“You hooligans!” the businessman cursed them. “Leave that poor woman alone.”

“Yeah,” agreed another man. “I thought the Elk Mountain Gang didn’t abuse the passengers.”

“You terrible man,” an older lady accused Leon, then began hitting him with her parasol. “How dare you.”

“Hey.” Leon grabbed her wrists and tried to push her away but all this did was cause more of an uprising.

“Get your hands off me, you bully.” She whacked him again, knocking his hat off his head. “You cad!”

Then there was a rush as the male passengers came at the outlaw leader. Someone grabbed his shirt and struck him a stinging blow to the jaw. He fell back against the landing and felt a kick to his ribcage before the gang members stepped in to take control.

Gus and Lobo got between the passengers and their fallen leader, pushing them back and shouting orders. Mayhem ensued, as men yelled threats and shook fists in the air, while women screamed and hustled themselves away from the brawl. Inside the passenger car, a baby could be heard crying.

“Get back,” Gus yelled, and swung a blow himself, knocking the closest rebel to the ground.

Then Malachi got into the spree, throwing punches, and adding to the general confusion.

Rex was too busy dealing with the remaining horses, when Lobo settled things by sending two shots from his revolver into the air.

Men ducked, women, both in the car and on the ground, screamed, and two of them started crying.

“Everybody, back off,” Lobo ordered. “I ain’t above shootin’ anyone a you lot. You’ve had it easy so far, and if you don’t want no blood spilt, then get in line.”

And to prove the point, he aimed his gun at the businessman who had started the whole thing.

That man paled and gulped. It was one thing to be chivalrous when dealing with a gang known for their non-violence, but quite another when looking down the barrel of a gun, being held by a man with a hard edge.

“All right, all right,” the businessman complied. “We were just trying to help the lady. There’s no need for violence.”

“Violence?” Lobo spit in the dirt. “Mister, you ain’t seen violence.” And he took a step forward, preparing to give an example.

“Lobo. Stop.” Leon scrambled to his feet, snatching his hat on his way up. “Where is Fanny, dammit? I need to get after her.”

“Take one a these horses,” Rex suggested.

“None of them will catch up to the horse she took.” Leon was frantic as he searched. “I need Fanny.”

Right on cue, Jack, with Mukua leading Fanny, galloped up to the scene. They reined in the horses, sending more dust and confusion into the group.

“What the hell’s goin’ on?” Jack said. “We heard gunshots.”

“I saw Gabriella.”

“What?” Jack asked. “Here?”

“Yeah. She stole one of the horses, among other things,” Leon griped. “I gotta get after her—” Running up to Fanny, he grabbed the reins from Mukua and jumped aboard. “I’ll see you back at the Elk.”

“But Leon. You can’t—”

“Stay here and get things sorted out,” was Leon’s parting remark as he spun Fanny around and sent her off at a gallop.

“. . . go alone,” Jack finished, then sighed. “Dammit.”

Leon didn’t need to push Fanny into a fast gallop. The mare figured they were done for the day and were heading for home, so slowing down wasn’t part of the game plan. Leon had a good idea of the direction

Gabriella had taken, simply because she didn't know her way around these hills, and the horse she rode did. With the same thought as Fanny, the gelding was certain to be taking the initiative and heading for the hideout.

Leon knew the horse she rode, and though that chestnut was a good solid mount, he was nowhere near as fast as Fanny. He and his mare would soon have the fugitives in sight. Then the fun would really begin.

When half an hour went by and he still didn't see a dust trail, he began to worry. Had he missed her? Did she realize she was going in the wrong direction and turned away from the hideout? Pulling Fanny to a halt, she fought with him, taking the bit in her teeth and shaking her head. She reared and plunged to the side in an effort to get away from the restraint, but Leon was having none of it.

"Come on," he grouched at her and cursed mares for the equine devils that they were. Especially chestnut mares. "Get over," he told her, using both verbal and leg commands, until he had her faced in the direction he wanted. "Now move. Come on, get going."

Fanny flattened her ears and her tail whipped around in circles with her irritation, but she did obey him.

He sent her off in a diagonal direction from the hideout, heading for one of the many lookouts in the hopes of spotting his quarry. Then, as it turned out, he didn't need to. It was habit for riders in this uneven terrain to constantly scan the trail ahead of them. A sure-footed horse was a valuable asset, but sharp eyes could avoid an accident before it happened.

Hitting a stretch of open, hard-packed ground, Leon spotted a disc of metal glinting in the afternoon sun. He pulled Fanny up and jumped down to investigate. He smiled, knowing the cards had just been dealt in his favor. He held in his hand a bent horseshoe, and chances were good it was off the horse he was following.

Knowing he was now on the right track and running down a horse that would soon be lame, if it wasn't already, he gave Fanny a nudge, and they were off again. Coming over a ridge, he finally saw her. She was trotting the gelding across an open stretch, apparently confident that she had outrun any pursuit and could casually make her way back to town.

Leon put an end to that delusion when he saw Gabriella pull up and turn her face toward him. Even from a distance he saw her eyes widen with alarm, and she whipped up her horse to get a move on.

The gelding jumped forward, powered into a gallop and took off, sending up small puffs of dust from behind his pounding hooves. This was flat, hard-packed ground, so being shy of one shoe wasn't going to slow the horse down, but Leon knew that just a mile up ahead, the landscape changed to gullies with rocky trails winding their way through them. It

was easy for the uninitiated to get turned around in those trails, and riding a soon-to-be lame horse, Gabriella might just as well give it up now.

Having spotted the gelding ahead of her, Fanny needed no more encouragement to set out after him. She bounced down the ridge, then hit level ground at a full gallop, and the distance between the two riders shortened at a steady rate.

Leon saw Gabriella glance over her shoulder. She hunkered lower over her horse's neck and took the reins to the animal's rump. Whipping them back and forth, she tried desperately to get more speed out of an animal that was already giving its best.

Then the rougher terrain began. The gelding galloped full speed into it, but three strides along, the horse stumbled. Gabriella picked him up and pushed him onward. He jumped forward, doing his best, but then the shoeless hoof came down on a particularly sharp rock, and he stumbled again. The next step hurt even more, and the horse threw up its head and stopped.

"No—"

Gabriella kicked the horse and put the reins to him. The animal lunged forward, scrambling to get away from the abuse, then grunted as he went down to his knees. Gabriella picked him up and pushed him again, but by then Leon was onto them.

He galloped Fanny to the edge of the rocks, then slowed her and allowed her to pick her own way through the rough terrain.

Her nose came down, as she sought her path, then scrambled through it without a misstep. She brought Leon up beside the gelding, just as that animal came up from another stumble.

"No!" Gabriella yelled again, as Leon grabbed her reins.

She turned on him and used the loose ends of the reins to whip at him rather than the horse.

"Stop it," Leon shouted at her.

He let go of the gelding's head, certain that the animal wouldn't leave Fanny's side, and made a grab for Gabriella's wrists. He got hold of one and tried for the other.

Gabriella fought back like a cornered cougar.

"Let me go!"

"Where's my money?"

"It's not your money—"

"You stole it from me."

"And you stole it from the bank."

"That was legitimate. What you did was—"

"Fair and square."

"—underhanded."

Both parties calmed down, as Gabriella realized she wasn't going to break away from Leon's grasp. She sat her horse and glared at her captor.

"I don't have the money anymore."

"What did you do with it? And don't tell me you gave it to charity."

Gabriella smirked. "I wired it to a place you'll never find."

"Ha! Lady, when it comes to \$75,000, I can be real persuasive."

"Oh yes? Learn some new tactics from Carlyle, did you?"

Leon grimaced. "That bastard—"

Sudden movement caught his eye, but not quick enough to avoid the attack.

Throughout this argument, Gabriella loosened the lariat on the far side of the saddle, releasing the coiled rope. As soon as she had Leon distracted, she swung that heavy rope around and hit him full in the face.

His arm came up to protect himself, but the attack pushed him off balance and he made a grab for the saddle horn.

"Dammit. Give me that—"

"Whatever you say."

Pushing her advantage, she whacked him with the coiled rope again.

Leon's hold on the horn broke, and much to his surprise, he tumbled to the rocky ground.

Gabriella grabbed the reins to his horse and scrambled onto Fanny's back.

Fanny, already tense from the shenanigans, bunched up under this new, unfamiliar rider, and jumped forward.

Gabriella slapped her with the coiled rope. The mare bucked, but then took off at a stumbling gallop, up the rocky incline.

Leon rolled onto his knees and made a grab for the mare, but he was too late, and the mare's amble hindquarters only knocked him to the ground again as she took off.

Cursing, he forced his bruised body upright, then stood, hands on hips, and his lips pulled tight in anger. He took a deep breath, then setting two fingers into his mouth, he blew out, releasing a long, shrill whistle.

Fanny's ears pricked and she put on the brakes.

"No—" Gabriella yelled, and she slapped the mare with the coiled rope again.

That did it. Fanny had enough of this. Her ears flattened, her head went down, and she bucked with intention. As soon as she rid herself of that irritant on her back, she turned and scrambled back to her human.

Leon smiled as the mare approached then gave her a pat on the neck.

"Good girl." He then turned his attention to the woman. "Serves you right for . . ." He stopped and frowned. Gabriella lay where she had fallen. Her hat was gone, and her red hair spread out, loose and tangled upon the

uneven ground. Her body rested in an awkward position upon the rocks, but she made no move to ease the discomfort. Even from a distance, Leon could see red that wasn't her hair, smeared across her forehead. He slumped. "Crap."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A FULL HOUSE

Elk Mountain

Two shots fired from the look-out and Jack breathed a sigh of relief. He never knew what Leon was going to get up to when he went off, half-cocked like that. He still wasn't sure what to expect but at least he was home. There would be time to assess the damage later.

He stood up from his perch on the porch and made the usual walk across the yard toward the barn. Not surprisingly, Mukua was already there, shading his eyes against the sun and waiting for the boss's return. Gus, who considered himself the lead gang member, if not the leader himself, also approached the barn if for no other reason than to know what was going on. None of the other gang members felt that this homecoming was worth the effort.

"What the?" Jack frowned.

The chestnut gelding entered the yard at a limping trot. He was riderless, and as he approached, Jack noted the scrapes and blood on the horse's knees. The animal spied Mukua and, with a snort and shake of his head, he made a beeline straight to the person he knew would look after him.

"One down, two ta go," Gus muttered, then spit. "If Fanny comes in riderless, then we got trouble. Again."

"Don't yell 'till yer hit." But Jack's tone belied his concern. A riderless horse was never a good thing. "Oh, here he comes. Oh, crap."

Gus chuckled. "Man, you two must be losin' yer touch. I never thought I'd see the day when both of ya gotta carry a woman here rather than her comin' on her own steam. Ha, ha. It seems ta me, your cabin is gonna get awful crowded."

Jack sighed. "Yeah."

The partners locked eyes, but Leon turned Fanny toward the cabin and rode right by Jack without a word.

Jack shook his head and followed.

Haley hurried down the steps, full of concern.

"What happened to her?" She turned accusing eyes to Leon. "What did you do to her?"

Leon frowned. "I didn't do anything to her. She fell off her horse."

Haley glanced to where the gelding stood, looking the worst for the wear.

She glared back up at Leon. "You were chasing her, weren't you?"

"Hey, she stole \$75,000 from me—"

“And that makes it all right to abuse her?”

“Abuse her? I didn’t—”

“Listen, darlin’,” Jack came up to Haley and put his hands on her shoulders. “Leave it be. Why don’t you go inside and get a place set up for her?”

“Well fine. Where shall we put her?”

Jack glanced up at his partner. “Put her in his room.”

Haley turned and stomped up the steps, then disappeared into the cabin.

Leon watched her go, his mouth open in irritation. “What the hell was that?”

“Aww, never mind. You know how she can get. Can hardly blame her, really, considerin’ what she’s been through.”

“I know, but I didn’t do it to her.”

“Yeah, yeah. She’ll get over it.”

“Well, help me with this one, will ya?”

Jack came forward and Leon eased Gabriella down into his arms.

“Careful with her. I think her collar bone is broken.”

Jack frowned at the blood on her face. “What happened?”

“Ahh, she lamed up her horse, then got Fanny away from me,” Leon stepped down from the saddle. “I whistled for Fanny to come back, and she did, but not before dumping Gabriella onto a bunch of rocks.”

Jack grinned over the body of the lady he held. “She got Fanny away from ya?”

“Hmm,” Leon frowned. “That’s what I get for being a nice guy.”

“Uh huh. Hey, where’s Mukua? We’re likely gonna need his services.”

Both men looked at the barn just in time to see Mukua and Gus turn and walk into the building, the limping horse following along.

“Oh.” Leon frowned. “I guess he’ll tend to the horse first, then come over here.”

“Uh huh. I get the feelin’ he ain’t happy.”

“Aww, he’ll get over it.” But Leon frowned. It always made him uneasy when that old Indian was mad at him for . . . something. “C’mon, let’s get her inside.”

Leon swung the reins across Fanny’s withers, pointed her head toward the barn and sent her off in that direction.

Fanny pricked her ears and, picking up a tired trot, headed home for lunch.

“I got the bed all made up for her,” Haley waved them into Leon’s room. “Clean sheets and everything. Oh dear, that is quite a cut she has there. Is Mukua coming over?”

“He’ll be here,” Jack said. “He’s tending to the horse.”

“He’s tending to a horse before a person?”

Jack and Leon exchanged smiles as Jack laid Gabriella down on the bed.

“The man has his priorities.”

“Well, I’ll make sure she’s tended to. Get me some hot water and clean cloths, will you Jack? I’ll get her one of my nightdresses, too. She’ll be fine.”

“Uh huh.”

Haley frowned at Leon and he braced himself for another onslaught.

“Napoleon, dear, is that a bruise on your face?”

“What?”

Haley came around the bed for a closer look. She put her hand up to Leon’s forehead and touched the rising welt.

“Oh dear. Whatever happened?”

“Ahh . . .” Leon sent an enquiring look to his nephew. Jack simply smiled. “Ah, well, she hit me with the lariat.”

“Oh, my goodness.”

“A couple of times.”

“Oh dear. Well, you just go sit down in the kitchen, and I’ll get some ice from the box out back.”

“Ahh.”

“Don’t worry about that, darlin’,” Jack said. “I’ll get the ice. You take care a Gabriella.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” She smiled at the partners. “One thing at a time.”

Leon sat on the porch, holding an ice pack against his face with one hand, and a mug of beer with the other. Jack sat beside him, enjoying his own beverage.

“What was that all about?” Leon asked.

“What?”

“Haley. First, she’s at my throat, then she’s all smiles and nurturing. Does she always run hot and cold like that?”

“Yeah. You’ll get used to it.”

Leon cocked a brow. “I will? Is she a permanent fixture here now?”

Jack sighed. “Hell, I dunno.”

“Hey, if you don’t know . . .”

“Everybody else seems ta think we’re a couple.”

“Well, you are living together.”

“Yeah. But we ain’t . . . livin’ together.”

Leon frowned. “I think this bump on my head is causing confusion. How can you be living together but not living together?”

“Let’s just say, you and me’ll both be sleepin’ in the livin’ room, tonight.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean, even with all your boyish charms and good looks, you haven’t won her over?”

Jack sighed.

“Oh. Hmm.” Leon smiled. “I’ll toss you for the sofa.”

Mukua came out to the porch, carrying his pouch of herbs.

Leon looked up at him. “How is she?”

“I think she will be fine. She will needs time to heal, but she will be cared for here. I will watch her. I left some tea for her to drink when she wakes up. She will have a headache.”

“Okay.”

“I left some for you, too.” He frowned and looked at the mug Leon held. “Perhaps you should not be drinking beer.”

Leon slumped. “I’m fine, Ata-i. I don’t need you to nursemaid me.”

“Hmm.” Mukua nodded, then left the porch and strode across the yard to the barn.

“Oh crap,” Leon mumbled.

“What?”

Leon heaved a huge sigh, then set his mug down on the railing.

“He wants me to follow him. I’m in for a lecture now about . . . something.”

Jack glanced to the barn, then back at Leon. “How do ya know? He never said nothin’.”

“Believe me,” Leon pushed himself to his feet. “I know.”

Leon entered the dusty coolness of the barn and smiled at the contented sound of horses munching hay.

He stopped at Fanny’s stall and noted that her hide was still damp from the sponge bath she had received and that she was the source of the

munching noises. She hardly flicked an ear as her human reached over and gave her a wet slap on the neck.

He then moved to the next stall and looked in on the chestnut. He'd also had a sponge bath, but he smelled of one of Mukua's medicinal remedies, so Leon figured there had been more than just water in that bath. He also noted that the gelding's knees were covered in a salve, and the gelding himself stood with a hind leg cocked and lower lip drooping. Life was good again.

He smiled at Fanny as she lifted her head and cocked an ear his way, then went back to eating.

"He has some bruising on his foot as well, but he will be fine."

Leon jumped. "Dammit, Ata-i. You're always sneaking up on me."

"Hmm. Your mare knew I was here."

Leon turned as Mukua retreated to the bale of hay he had been sitting on while eating his lunch.

"You spend more time in this barn than you do in the bunkhouse," Leon said, as he joined the older man. "Even in the winter."

"My room in here is comfortable. Besides, I prefer the company of the horses. Their conversation makes more sense."

Leon nodded. "I see your point." He glanced down at one of the barn cats as she wrapped herself around Mukua's ankle, hoping for a tidbit.

Mukua tore off a small piece of his sandwich and offered it to her.

Leon sighed. "Huh, even if I offer them food, the cats won't come near me."

"You don't like cats. They can tell."

"Yeah, well." Leon put his hand down to the feline. "Here puss, puss."

The cat hissed, grabbed her snack and headed for cover.

Leon snapped his eyes up to Mukua. "I saw that."

"What?"

"You smiled."

"Hmm."

Silence settled between them.

Leon's leg twitched.

"You wanted to talk to me?"

"Hmm. A true warrior does not abuse his woman."

Leon was caught flat-footed. "Abuse . . . my woman? What?"

"She is your woman. You have paid for her. More than I think you should have, but that is up to you. By chasing after her and bringing her here, you have claimed her as yours."

"Oh no. No, no, no. She is not my woman. I was chasing after my money, not her."

"Same thing."

“No, it is not the same thing.”

“Do you have the money?”

“Well, no.”

“Do you have the woman?”

“Yes, but . . .”

Mukua shrugged. “She is your woman.”

“Look, this is not my fault.”

“You will treat your woman with respect.”

“Ata-i, she is not my woman.”

“Hmm.”

Haley sat in the rocking chair in Leon’s room keeping watch over Gabriella. The last thing she wanted was for the poor woman to wake up alone and in a strange place. She would need reassurance of her safety, and who would be better to give that than another woman?

She absently rocked back and forth, occasionally taking a sip of tea from the cup setting on the nightstand. The tea had long since cooled, but she didn’t notice. All her attention was focused on the open book that lay upon her lap.

For an outlaw stronghold, Elk Mountain was home to an extensive library and, since most of these books were stacked in Leon’s room, Haley could only assume that he was the collector. And collect, he did. Haley had originally been drawn to the novels, stories by Mark Twain, James Fenimore Cooper and, oddly enough, for a man’s collection, Louisa May Alcott and Jane Austen.

But the collection didn’t end there. Science books, mathematical journals, philosophy, poetry, and religion all took up space along the far wall of the bedroom.

Out of boredom, Haley browsed through the science and math books, wondering what it was that Napoleon found so intriguing about them. She made no sense of the written words, let alone the numbers and other strange symbols that took up many of the pages. But the wear on those pages indicated that the outlaw leader understood them.

Many of those pages had creases in them, where the page had been marked for future reference. Comments in Leon’s handwriting adorned the margins, and some were even squiggled in between lines and paragraphs. Other phrases or equations were circled or underlined, some with stars beside them.

These books were well-used, and Haley could understand why Gus often referred to their owner as the “boy genius”. Haley wasn’t sure if she

would go that far, but Napoleon Nash was certainly an enigma. He was highly intelligent and obviously self-taught, and Haley found him interesting on that level but she still was intimidated by him.

Then an examination of the religious texts offered another view into the outlaw's leanings. Books examining Catholicism, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, and even Mormon teachings had their place in the collection. She was pleased to see a copy of the Christian Bible and hoped that perhaps he was not such a lost soul, after all.

Until she opened it.

As with the academic texts, this one was filled with written comments, underlined and circled phrases, but unlike those other texts, these additives spoke of anger and resentment. Exclamation marks and X's took over the pages, many of them written with such a hard hand that impressions of the marks still showed up many pages later. She browsed through the other religious texts and found much the same treatment on those pages, as well.

She frowned. Why so much anger toward God and His teachings? These books were meant to convey love and fellowship, hope and glory. Yet, to Napoleon Nash, the main emotion the pages inspired was anger. Why? And did Jack feel the same way? She must ask him at some point. She wasn't sure if she could be with a man who was not God-fearing.

Still, she much preferred Jack's company over any other man she had ever known. Not that she had known many, but . . . Jack was sweet. Now, Napoleon, he could never be accused of being sweet. He could be kind, when he chose to be, and he was loyal to those whom he considered worthy. Haley was certain that he didn't consider her a part of that small group. He was also honorable, in a backward sort of way. Honor among thieves? Yes, that's the best way to describe it. But he was not sweet.

She sat now, rocking back and forth, nose deep in Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. Her forehead creased with an intense frown of concentration as she struggled to make sense of the author's strange concepts. How revolutionary, how blasphemous! She was surprised that the man hadn't been drawn and quartered for saying such things.

Again, many of the sentences were underlined, and passages circled, with quick notes jotted down in the margins. Leon had been through this book, more than once, judging by the state of the pages, and he had found the concepts intriguing. Haley wondered if he actually believed them.

A moan from the bed pulled her attention away from Darwin's strange concepts. She closed the book and put it aside, then placed her hand upon the exposed arm of the patient.

Gabriella drew in a deep breath, then grimaced with the pain it caused her. Her eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened. She lay quiet for a moment,

slowly coming to her senses, and then her eyes opened wide in shock and she sat bolt upright.

Haley came to her feet and took hold of Gabriella's shoulders.

"No, no, you must lie still."

Gabriella caught her breath as the pain shot through her body. Gasping for air, she stared around at her surroundings, then focused upon the woman before her.

"*Où suis-je?*"

Haley frowned at the odd-sounding words then wrote them off as delirium. "It's all right, you're safe. Please lay back down. You've had a concussion, and you broke your collar bone. You must rest."

Gabriella allowed herself to be pressured back into the pillow, but her eyes still gazed around at her surroundings. Her forehead creased as she tried to recall where she was.

"I don't recognize this place." Her free hand came up to her head and felt the bandages there. She groaned. "What happened? How did I get here?"

"You fell off a horse. Don't you remember?"

"No. I," Her eyes widened as her senses cleared. "*Oh non.*" She began her struggles anew, and Haley had her hands full keeping the patient in the bed. "*Je dois sortir d'ici! Lâchez-moi.*"

Haley did not understand the words, but she understood the sentiment. "No, no, you can't. You're safe here. You have nothing to worry about—"

"Safe? No. I must get . . ." Her hand returned to her head as she felt herself swoon. "Oh dear."

"See?" Haley settled her back into the pillow again. "I'm afraid you're not going anywhere for a while."

"Oh no." Gabriella closed her eyes and sighed. When she opened them again, she gazed upon the young woman before her. "Who are you?"

"My name is Haley. I'm Jack Kiefer's woman." She smiled with pride. "You're in the Elk Mountain hideout."

"*Oh non.*"

"You were very fortunate. Napoleon Nash himself found you and brought you back here."

"He didn't find me," Gabriella's tone had as much of an edge as she could muster. "He's the one who did this to me."

"Well, that's what I thought at first, too. But now," she shrugged, "why would he have brought you back here if he didn't care about you?"

Gabriella cocked a brow, then instantly regretted it. She closed her eyes again and kept them closed. "He wants something from me, that's why. I really need to get out of . . ." her voice trailed off as she drifted back down into sleep.

“I need to get in there.”

“No, you can’t go in.”

Leon growled. “I need one of my books, and all my books are in there.”

Haley, her back up against the bedroom door, glanced at the large table in the living room. Its surface was covered by sheets of paper with each page filled with Leon’s particular form of notetaking. Other scribble-covered pages were strewn across the sofa and even upon the floor. A sure sign that the gang leader was busy working out a new job.

She cocked a brow at him. “You can’t go in there. It wouldn’t be decent.”

“Decent? It’s my bedroom.”

“And there is a woman asleep in your bed. Besides, she afraid of you. If she woke up and saw you there, goodness knows how she would react. It’s not surprising really, after the way you treated her.”

“After the way I . . . ? She stole my money—”

“Money that you stole in the first place.”

“I stole it fair and square.”

“So did she. From what I hear, she earned it.”

“What? No whore is worth—”

The slap took him by surprise. His eyes widened with the shock of it, then narrowed into dangerous slits. He grabbed Haley by the shoulders with the intention of simply moving her out of his way.

“No, no!” Haley held onto the door jams and braced herself against the door itself. “You’re not going in there. Let me go. Is being abusive to a woman the only way you know how to behave?”

Leon stopped, her words snuffing out his anger, especially after Mukua’s recent lecture.

“All right. I’m sorry.” He glanced away from her for a second. “But I need to get that book.”

Haley stared at him, more with confusion than fear. She was not used to men backing off, and especially not this quickly. She had anticipated a strike across the face, or rough manhandling with her ending up on the floor, then maybe a kick or two thrown in for good measure. She had not expected him to back down.

Leon sighed. “Look, I’m not going to touch her. I’m not even going to look at her. I just want my book.”

Haley relaxed her stance. “How about you tell me which one you need, and I’ll get it?”

“You don’t know where it is.”

A hint of a smile tugged at her lips. She didn't think it prudent to tell him that she had been through all his books and knew exactly where each one was.

"I can read. Tell me the name of the author, and I'll find it."

Leon stood for a moment, hands on hips, as he pondered this suggestion.

"Okay. It's a math book by George Boole. And while you're in there, you can bring out W.R. Hamilton's book as well."

"Boole and Hamilton." Haley nodded; she could already picture in her mind where they were. "Okay. Wait here."

"All right."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Just . . . wait here."

Leon sighed again as Haley went into his room and closed the door on him. He would have stood there, boring holes in the wood, if not for Jack entering the cabin.

Jack stopped on the threshold and glanced at Leon's workspace. "How's it goin'?"

"Slow. Haley won't let me into my own bedroom."

Jack chuckled. "She won't let you?"

Leon turned away from the door and crossed his arms, indicating frustration. "She says it wouldn't be decent. As if I'm going to attack Gabriella while she's asleep. Damn it. She's also back to blaming me for her injuries."

Jack nodded as he headed for the coffee pot. "That don't surprise me."

"I don't know how you put up with her."

"She's kinda fun, actually." Jack poured himself a cup. "Every day is a surprise. Ya wanna cup?"

"No, thanks."

Jack set the pot back on the stove and leaned against the counter. "Ha. She's kinda like livin' with you."

"Me?" Leon was insulted. "I'm not like that. I don't jump back and forth between emotions." Then he grumbled, "That's a woman thing."

Jack cocked a brow. "Oh yeah? Well, whatever you say, Leon. I'm gonna sit out on the porch while we still got some sun."

Leon frowned as Jack left the cabin.

What did he mean by that? I'm not moody.

His thoughts were interrupted by Haley returning to the living area.

"Here you are." She plunked the two books into his arms.

"Oh."

“Let me know if you need anything else out of there and I’ll be happy to get it.”

Leon returned to his workspace. “How about my privacy.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.”

Haley sat in the porch rocker while sipping a cup of tea. The late summer sun was dipping below the mountain wall, and though the air was still warm, there was a pleasant edge to it that hinted of autumn on its way, yet made the evenings a relaxing respite.

“He’s such a bore when he’s working on a plan. I don’t know how you stand it.”

Jack shrugged. “Aww, I’m used to it. I know how ta read his moods, so . . .”

“He’s so temperamental. I never know who I’m going to be speaking to.”

Jack smiled.

Haley sighed and looked at the horses eating their supper hay in the corral. “I should probably be leaving soon.”

Jack perked up with this. “What? What makes ya think that?”

Haley smiled and patted his hand. “I never had intentions of staying here. I just needed some time to get my thoughts organized.”

“Well yeah, but where will ya go?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.” She gazed into her teacup, chewing her lower lip. “Why don’t you come with me, Jack?”

“Come with you?”

“Yes.” Haley sat up straighter and turned to face him. “We could make a real life for ourselves. Have a home, start a family.”

“I have a home, right here. And I already got a family.”

“I mean a real home and a real family.”

“Leon is my real family.”

“You know what I mean, Jack. Don’t you want children?”

Jack squirmed. “Well, yeah, I suppose. But, I ain’t ready for that yet. Why don’t ya just stay here? Preacher-Man could marry us, sort of, and we could start a family in a few years.”

Haley laughed. “In an outlaw hideout? That would never work.”

“Hank and Wes seem ta be makin’ it work.”

Haley glanced at the bunkhouse where the two couples shared their living space with the other gang members.

“I know Bess and Mary are happy here,” she said. “But I want more than that. I want my own place. Don’t you see? I don’t know how yet, but I want to raise horses and children. Do some good in the community. Living here isn’t going to give me that.”

Jack sat silent; his eyes also focused upon the horses across the yard.

“No, I don’t suppose ya can. But Leon’s my family, and I ain’t ready ta turn my back on ‘im or the life I got now. I ain’t ready ta settle down the way you want.”

Haley sat back in her rocker and set the chair into a slow, creaky motion.

“This life is going to kill you, if you stay in it too long. You’re not well known in the Dakotas. We could go there. Or to Oregon. We could get a fresh start and build something together.”

“Haley, you ain’t listenin’. I like it fine, right here. I like the life I got, right now. I ain’t interested in startin’ fresh somewhere else.”

Haley abruptly brought the rocking chair to a halt.

“Fine. I best get in and start supper.”

She stood up and slipped past Jack.

“Haley.”

He took her hand, but she pulled it from his gentle grasp and disappeared through the front door.

Jack sat back with a sigh. *Dagnabbit.*

The following morning, Jack and Leon saddled Tuffy and Fannie and took them out for some exercise. Just like the previous evening, the air held a chill that hinted of the seasons changing. But considering the heat that the days still brought, this was the perfect time to get out for a ride.

“Did I detect a bit of strain over supper last night?” Leon asked.

“Yeah. Haley’s thinkin’ about leavin’.”

Leon smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, but she wants me ta go with her.”

The smiled dropped. “Oh.”

“I ain’t goin’, Leon.”

“Oh. Well, no, I didn’t think—”

“She’s got some grandiose ideas about breedin’ horses and young’uns. You know, puttin’ down roots and bein’ part of a community. All the things we try to avoid.”

“Well, I suppose it’s not surprising that a young woman would want that.”

“Yeah. I suppose. I suggested she let Preacher marry us and we could start a family right here when the time is right, but,” he shrugged.

“Hmm. We could all pitch in and build you a second cabin. You’d have your privacy then.”

“Yeah, but she wants young’uns now. I ain’t ready for that. One day, maybe. But not now.”

“I know what you mean. It would kind of complicate things.”

“Yeah. But, dang it, I do like her. But she ain’t even willin’ ta share my bed, so . . .”

“There are women who prefer to wait for their wedding night before they pull back the sheets.”

“There are?”

Leon barked a laugh. “Yes. Most of them, actually.”

“Oh.” Jack frowned. “That seems kinda late ta be testin’ out them waters.”

Leon shrugged. “Yeah well, That’s women for you. Besides, you know yourself that she’s been treated rough. She might need more time before . . . you know.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Anyway, it got me ta thinkin’.”

“Oh oh.”

Jack frowned at him. “I get some good ideas, too.”

Leon smiled. “Yeah, I know you do. I’m just teasing. What were you thinking?”

“Well, she don’t have anywheres ta go and no money ta get there if she did. So, I’ve been wonderin’ ifn she’s stayin’ here ‘cause she wants to or ‘cause she has to. Ya know?”

“Hmm. Good point.”

“Last night kinda made it clear that she don’t wanna stay here but she’s stuck. Maybe the only reason she asked me ta go with her, is ‘cause it’s the only way she could think of ta make it work.”

“That’s sound thinking, so far.”

“So, what if we started payin’ her?”

“What?”

“Well, she does all the cookin’ and cleanin’. She tends the garden and us. She’s doin’ a lot ta look after Gabriella. All she’s gettin’ in return is room and board.”

“True, but Bess and Mary—”

“Bess and Mary wanna be here. They ain’t stuck. They both got jobs they could go back to, ifn they really wanted to.”

“Hmm. You have a point there. But paying her to do what she’s already doing for room and board seems a bit extreme.”

“Naw, you ain’t thinkin’, Leon. Your brain is too wrapped up in plannin’ our next job, that you ain’t seein’ beyond the obvious.”

Leon cocked a brow. “And what’s that?”

“You would prefer that Haley left, wouldn’t ya?”

“Well . . .”

“But because she ain’t got no money, it’s kinda hard for her to leave.”

“I think I see where you’re going with this.”

“Uh huh. We start payin’ her, then come next spring, ifn she still wants ta leave . . .”

“She’ll have the money to do it.”

“Right.”

Leon grinned. “I like the way you think, Jack.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A SPY IN THEIR MIDST

Haley and Gabriella sat at the kitchen table, enjoying the peace of a cabin without men in it. The breakfast dishes were done and the ladies settled in for a second cup of coffee before Haley got on with her day.

“It’s so nice to be mobile again,” Gabriella sighed. “Thank you for mending my dress.”

“No problem. Still, you need to take it easy. I often meet up with Mary and Bess after breakfast, but I wouldn’t feel right leaving you alone.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I probably will just go back and rest after this, anyway.” She glanced at the open front door. “Where have they gone?”

“They’re just out exercising their horses. They do that every morning, weather permitting.”

“Oh. How long are they usually gone for?”

“An hour or two, depending.”

“Depending on what?”

Haley laughed. “Depending on what else is going on. Napoleon is busy making plans,” she indicated the paper-covered living room table, “so I doubt they will be more than an hour or so, today.”

“Oh. So I see. Planning a new heist, is he?”

“Oh yes. It’s always something with that one.”

“Prolific, is he?”

“Obsessive is more like it.” Haley rolled her eyes. “That is one man who does not know how to relax.”

“The morning rides are good for him, then. Gives him a break.”

“I suppose. But whatever you do, don’t touch those papers and books. He’s like a bear coming out of hibernation if he notices anything amiss with his plans.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Gabriella yawned. “Oh, I’m sorry. That was rude. I guess I am more tired than I realized.”

“That’s probably Mukua’s medicine. It’s very helpful, but it does make one tired.”

“Oh yes. That’s probably it. Still, I suppose I will go and lay down for a while.”

“All right. I’ll get out for my walk with the ladies then. I’ll see you later. Perhaps you’ll feel up to joining us for lunch?”

Gabriella smiled. “Perhaps.”

Gabriella stood in the bedroom, her ear up to the door. There had been no sounds of movement for the last five minutes, but she still waited, wanting to be certain the cabin was empty. Finally accepting that Haley had gone out for her walk, Gabriella slowly opened the door and peered into the common area. All was quiet.

She considered closing the front door for more privacy but decided not to change anything that might arouse suspicion. She also noted that the opened door would give her warning if anyone came up the porch steps. Especially men wearing boots.

She padded across the room to the large table and scrutinized the notes that Leon was working on. She was careful not to disturb their placement but at the same time, glean as much information from them that she could.

I suppose I'm into it now, she sighed as she browsed. I wasn't going to take Carlyle up on his offer, but since I'm here anyway. And it'll serve Napoleon Nash right, after the way he's treated me. Bringing me here against my will. How dare he? She stopped searching the papers as her eye caught the presence of a safe in the far corner. She smiled. Now that's worth investigating. Not now though. They could be back any minute. Oh, this is going to be fun.

Gabriella waited for the kettle to boil as she contemplated her choices. She could leave any time now, and probably should before the weather turned cold but she likely would not. For one thing, she wasn't sure that Nash would let her leave and for now, this suited her. The

longer she was held here, the more information she could be privy to.

The water boiled and she poured it into the tea pot that Haley had acquired from somewhere. Perhaps it was the Indian's, he seemed to make a lot of tea. At least they had tea here. Another benefit of a woman taking up residence. Gabriella looked around and noted the flowers on the table, and the overall tidiness of the common area. Except for the table by the front window. This was strewn with papers and books and was off limits for any tidy-up.

Gabriella poured tea into her cup as she contemplated taking another quick browse over that table while she still had time.

Then time ran out when footsteps on the porch warned her of company. "You're up." Leon stated the obvious.

Gabriella turned a cocked brow in his direction but didn't answer him. She resolved to show him a cold shoulder.

Leon stopped on the threshold as their eyes met.

My god, she's beautiful. He coughed to cover his inability to converse. *This is ridiculous. The woman stole money from me. Time to forget about how lovely she is.* But thoughts of the one encounter they shared came back to him and the urge to take her into his arms was almost too strong to resist. "You're making tea." He cringed, mentally kicking himself. He knew he was coming across as a fool.

Another cocked brow from Gabriella. "Yes."

"Good. May I join you?"

"I didn't think you drank tea."

"Occasionally, I do. As long as Mukua didn't make it."

Gabriella couldn't help the twitched smile. "He is an odd one. He doesn't really fit in here, somehow."

"He fits in," Leon said, as he came into the common area and got a mug down from the cupboard. "It just takes a while to get used to him."

"Oh."

Gabriella tensed at Leon's proximity. She hated to admit how much she had enjoyed their sexual encounter. Now, the hairs on her arm rose with the electricity of his closeness, as though they themselves strove for physical contact. She swallowed and stepped away as she poured tea into his cup.

"Do you take sugar?"

"No."

That one word took her breath away.

Pull yourself together, Gabriella. How am I supposed to gather information on him, if I allow myself to be distracted this way?

She reached for her cup, but Leon beat her to it.

"I'll take them," he said and glanced at the sling she still wore. "You're handicapped."

She pursed her lips. *Handicapped. Huh, I could still knock you flat, if I wanted to.* But she smiled, though avoided looking into those warm, chocolate eyes. "Thank you."

They sat at the small kitchen table and gazed at each other through the flowers that Haley had set in a vase to pretty the place up. Neither could deny the awkwardness between them.

"This is ridiculous," Leon stated, and took the flowers and set them on the counter. "We need to have a conversation and we can't do it looking through foliage."

"A conversation? What about?"

"You, me, and \$75,000."

Gabriella sipped her tea. "There is no 'you and me'. In fact, as you have already noted, I'm fine, and I'm ready to leave."

"You're not leaving until I get my money back."

Gabriella didn't show her satisfaction. This is exactly what she had counted on him saying.

"I already told you, the money is gone. Some place where you'll never find it."

"Then it looks like you're going to be here for quite a while."

"Oh, don't be daft. Are you going to add kidnapping to your lists of crimes, now? People will already be wondering where I am."

Leon shrugged as he blew on his tea, then took a swallow.

"What do I care? Even if the law figures out you're up here, they don't know where 'here' is."

"Then you're just as much a prisoner as I am." Gabriella stood to replenish her cup. "More tea?"

"No, thank you."

She poured her tea and sat back down. "You show your face outside of this hideaway, and they'll be on to you. Kidnapping is a far more serious crime than stealing."

"As far as Mukua is concerned, it's not kidnapping. You're bought and paid for. Although, he thinks I paid too much."

"Is that so?" Gabriella cocked a brow, as her jaw tightened. "It's not kidnapping, but slavery? Is there no limit to how deep you'll sink?"

"Mukua doesn't approve of wife-beating, so . . ."

"You're disgusting! You think you have the right to use me?"

"I paid for that right. Remember? Even for a lady as lovely as you, \$75,000 is awfully high for just one romp in the sack—"

Gabriella's intake of breath mirrored her widened eyes.

"You cad!" And before she knew it, she was on her feet and landing a solid, resounding slap across Leon's face.

Chair legs scraped across the floor as Leon jumped up and grabbed her by her one free wrist. With his other hand, he pushed her up against the counter and pressed in against her, pinning her right where he wanted her.

She squirmed, anger taking over from the pain in her shoulder.

"Let me go—"

"Tell me where my money is."

"Your money? That's rich. You stole it."

"So did you. And from what I can tell, you don't have any intention of turning it in to the law, either. You're just as much a thief as I am."

"I have need of that money. More so than you do."

Leon pressed against her even more. Suddenly his anger came down a notch, as desire seeped in. Gabriella breathed heavily in her anxiety, and her breasts pressing against his chest, moved with a sensuous rhythm, causing him no end of distraction. He felt her heart racing against his, and then their eyes met.

The green staring back at him had turned to emerald in their anger. Then, slowly, her stance softened as she gazed into those brown pools. There was no anger in them now, only wonder and a little bit of fear. She felt his breath upon her face and then a slight panic as those full, sensuous lips lowered toward hers.

He saw her mouth soften as the tip of her tongue slipped out to caress it. Then they parted in a soft invitation and she tilted her chin up to meet his advances.

“Napoleon! What in heaven’s name are you doing?”

The two people came apart and Leon turned to face Haley.

Haley sent him a look that could wither any arousal, then dashed past him to take Gabriella into her arms.

“You poor thing.” She glared at the outlaw again. “You’re awful, treating a lady like that. No wonder she’s afraid of you.”

“She’s not . . . I didn’t . . .”

“Come along, Dear. I’ll help you back to your room.”

“Thank you so much,” Gabriella whispered. “I don’t know what would have happened, if you hadn’t shown up.” She sent a quick glance to meet Leon’s gaze, and a ghost of a smile hinted in her eyes, then disappeared. “He’s such a brute.”

“I know. Come along. Would you like me to make you some tea? It’s almost lunch time too. I’ll make us some sandwiches and bring them into the bedroom. That way you don’t have to look at him.”

“Oh yes, thank you. I really do appreciate . . .”

The door to Leon’s bedroom closed upon their conversation and Leon stood in the kitchen, not sure if he wanted to scream or laugh. He decided to appreciate an artist at work.

He smiled. This is going to be fun.

Fortunately, when Haley returned to the kitchen to prepare lunch, she decided that ignoring Napoleon was the best way to show her displeasure. She plunked a meat sandwich on top of his paperwork, then with a tray laden with more sandwiches and a pot of tea, she disappeared back into the bedroom.

Leon sighed with relief then ate his sandwich while he looked over the final steps of their next job.

Jack appeared as though on cue.

“How’s it goin’?”

“Fine. Once Hank gets back with the train schedule, we’ll be good to go.”

“Great. It’s gettin’ kinda borin’ around here.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh, lunch!”

Leon glanced up and followed Jack’s grin to the kitchen table.

A place had been set with a sandwich and some fresh vegetables from the garden laid out upon a plate. There was a folded napkin, a glass of fresh water, and the vase of flowers positioned around to offer a pleasant dining experience.

Jack settled himself in front of the sandwich. “Sure is nice havin’ a woman around.”

Leon didn’t respond.

Jack frowned. “Where is she, anyway? Ain’t she havin’ lunch?”

“She’s having lunch with Gabriella in the bedroom.”

“Oh. That’s sweet of her.” He took a bite of sandwich. “It must be nice for her ta have female company.”

“She’s got Bess and Mary.”

“Hmm, but they’re in the bunkhouse. Gabriella’s right here. Hey, maybe she’ll decide ta stay on, too. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Leon sighed. Maybe it wasn’t going to be fun, after all. How did this become so complicated?

Gabriella sat in front of the opened safe, disappointment washing over her. Stacks of currency and a bag of coins still occupied the top shelf, but all the jewels and bonds were gone. They had been there two days ago at her last check, but now they were gone.

How did they do it?

She had been diligent, eavesdropping on conversations, hoping for one of them to drop a name, or give any indication of passing their plunder off to a fence. But not a word had been spoken.

And yet now, those items were gone.

Dammit.

She closed the safe and stood up.

Maybe I should just leave. I have enough money for what I need to do. Carlyle can do his own dirty work.

She had been able to avoid Leon since the day of their close encounter. Haley was right; Gabriella was afraid of him, but not for the reasons that Haley thought. She couldn’t afford to get involved with him. He was an outlaw, and that was the last thing she needed if she was going to succeed with her own agenda.

Standing with hands on hips, she glared at the safe as though it were its fault that the contents had been removed. Then she turned and walked out onto the front porch and leaned against the railing.

She eyed the horses that milled around in the paddock across the yard.

There's no reason why I can't just borrow one of those horses and head for Rock Creek. Not that mare though; she's the devil incarnate. And I know where her loyalties lie. But, one of the others will do just as well. I'll take a stage to Rawlins and the train from there. Helena will wire me the money. Yes. It's time to get on with what needs to be done.

She frowned when Gus and Malachi came into view, walking from the bunkhouse to the stable like two men on a mission.

Gus spotted her and tipped his hat. "Howdy, ma'am."

She smiled and nodded back. "Good morning. Are you going for a ride?"

Malachi grinned. "Yeah. We's off ta meet up with Jack and Leon for our next job—" A quick jab in the ribs stopped him short. "What?"

"Shuddup."

"Well," Gabriella knew this line of enquiry had dried up. "Have a nice day."

She stayed on the porch, watching as more gang members straggled out of the bunkhouse and meandered their way to the barn. Horses were brought in from the paddock and soon after that, the whole gang was mounted and heading away from the property.

Gabriella straightened. She glanced at the bunkhouse and saw no sign of Bess or Mary. Haley was in back, behind the cabin, tending to her garden and would likely be out there for hours. This could work. As long as there was a horse left to be had.

The buckskin appaloosa sauntered into view from the backside of the barn.

Gabriella smiled.

The gelding stopped and, putting his head up, he tugged back on the lead shank.

"C'mon." Gabriella added pressure to the halter. "What's the matter with you? Let's go."

"He does not want to go with you."

Every nerve in her body jingled and she turned around to find her way blocked by the Indian. She took a step back, not sure what to expect from this man. The things she'd heard about Indians were not flattering, and yet, Mukua did not comply with her expectations.

He dressed more like a white man, except for that silly feather he wore in his hat. But he was bare-headed now, and his gray-streaked hair was cut shorter than most Indians she had seen. It was thick, almost wavy, and hung loose mid-way to his shoulders. He looked at her now with humor glinting through narrow, line-rimmed eyes.

“Where are you going?”

“I—” Gabriella sighed and decided the truth might be the best way to go with this man. “I need to get away from here. Mr. Nash is holding me against my will. Can’t you see that?”

“Hmm. You are his woman. Bought and paid for. Looking at you now, I think maybe it was a fair price.”

“*Oh, pour l’amour de Dieu.*” Gabriella stamped her foot, and Buckwheat took another step back. “I am not his woman! I need to get away from here. Can’t you understand that?”

“He says the same thing: that you are not his woman. If you are both in agreement, perhaps that is the way of it, then.”

“Yes.”

“Still, if you insist on leaving, I would prefer that you not take my horse.”

“Fine. Any horse will do. What about that chestnut over there?”

“Rex just bought that one and is working with him. I doubt—”

“Then the bald-faced bay.”

“Malachi’s favorite. He would be upset.”

Gabriella threw up her hands, causing Buckwheat to blow out a snort and pull away from her completely. He trotted back into the paddock, dragging the lead shank with him.

“Fine. You pick one, and I’ll take it. I’ll even leave it in Rawlins to be collected by whoever.”

Mukua considered the suggestion, then shook his head.

“None of these horses are free to take. Perhaps if you ask *nammi tuá*, he will get you your own horse.”

Gabriella sighed again. She didn’t recognize the term, but she could guess the meaning. The chances of Napoleon Nash giving her a horse so she could leave was about as nil to none.

“Why do you insist on being so stubborn?”

“Me being stubborn? All I want to do is leave. You’re the one who won’t let me.”

“Give me back my money,” Leon told her, “and you can go.”

“Your money?” Gabriella fought the urge to stamp her foot. “It’s just as much mine as it is yours. And I need it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t need to answer to you.”

“You stole it from me. Why do you need it so badly?”

“I stole it from a thief. I have just as much claim to it as you do.”

Leon sighed. This was going nowhere.

“I have responsibilities. We need that \$75,000 to get us through the winter.”

Gabriella laughed. “Through the winter? You have more than enough already to get you through the winter. Besides, it’s not \$75,000. I needed three thousand to pad out the saddlebags. Therefore, I only stole \$72,000 from you.”

Leon ran his hands through his hair.

“Fine. \$72,000. It’s getting late in the season, Gabriella. Tell me where it is, or what you need it for, otherwise, you’re going to be spending the winter with us.”

“Goodness knows, I wouldn’t want that,” Gabriella sneered.

Leon lost his temper. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her from the kitchen chair and swung her around against the counter.

“You need it for something, Gabriella,” he said, his face close to hers. “You wouldn’t be fighting so hard to keep it, if it wasn’t for something. Tell me. Do you think I’m such a monster?”

“Yes!”

“What?”

“Yes, I do think you’re a monster. You’re an outlaw: a thief. Exactly the sort of person my husband and I devoted our lives to bringing down. All you care about is money. Why should I tell you anything?”

Leon stood back, releasing her wrist. Suddenly he felt ashamed of himself.

“No, Gabriella. That’s not all I care about. I just don’t like it when people steal from me.”

“Quite a revelation, isn’t it?”

“Why do you always have to snipe back?”

“Why do you keep pushing?”

Leon stared at her, then sighed and shook his head. Without a word, he turned and walked out of the cabin.

Jack Kiefer trotted his horse toward the barn. He glanced at the porch of the cabin and, spying Leon and Mukua there, he sent them a quick wave.

Both nodded back.

He dismounted in front of the barn door and was just about to lead his dusty horse inside, when Mukua took the reins from him.

“Dammit,” Jack complained. “How did ya get over here so fast?”

Mukua shrugged. “I walked.”

Jack snorted. “Yeah, okay. I’ll look after ‘im. It looked like you and Leon were havin’ a conversation.”

“Yes, but he wants to talk to both of us. I think he is worried about what to do with his woman. Perhaps bringing her here was not such a good idea.”

“You’re tellin’ me.”

“Hmm. Go on up. I’ll tend to Tuffy and then join you.”

“Yeah, okay. You wanna beer?”

“I’ll bring one when I come.”

“Okay.”

“Preacher-man says ya wanna talk.”

“Yeah. I think it’s time. Oh, thank you.”

Jack set Leon’s cup on the railing, then pulled up a third chair for himself. He sat and took a swallow of his own beer to cut the dust, then settled back and crossed his ankles. It was good to be out of the saddle.

“Is it about Gabriella?”

“Ha. Is it that obvious?”

“When you pace around the cabin, muttering obscenities, yeah, I’d say it’s obvious.”

“Oh.”

Jack glanced at the front door.

“Where are they?”

“Oh, all four ladies went out to collect herbs and flowers, or something like that. I think it’s just an excuse to gossip about us.”

“Yeah well, it gives us an opportunity ta gossip about them.”

“This isn’t gossip, it’s a discussion.”

“Oh.”

Leon reached over for his beer and took a healthy swallow.

“How was your trip?”

Jack grinned. “Good. Levi was very generous.”

Leon smiled into his mug. “He knows we give him repeat business.”

“Yeah. We still gonna hit that payroll train on the sixteenth?”

Leon cocked a brow. “Yes. Why not?”

“I dunno.” Jack sighed and diverted his attention toward the barn. “I guess I don’t feel right about hittin’ a payroll, is all. People workin’ hard for a livin’ oughta get paid.”

“They will get paid. Eventually.”

Jack turned back to Leon, and his sharp, blue eyes bore into him. “Yeah, eventually. We ain’t hurtin’. Hell, we already got enough ta make this an easy winter, even before Levi paid us. Why don’t we let this one go?”

Leon frowned and confronted those blue eyes. “Let it go? Since when do we let an easy job like this one go? What’s gotten into you?”

Jack shrugged. “I dunno. I just got a bad feelin’ about it, is all.”

“Oh.” Leon rolled his eyes. “Ah, here comes Mukua.”

Jack followed Leon’s gaze.

Mukua strode across the yard, his own beer in hand, and joined the two men on the porch. “You thinking of letting your woman go home?”

Leon frowned. “Does everyone here know what I’m going to talk about before I say it?”

Jack nodded. “Pretty much.”

Mukua grunted. “Yes.”

“Okay, since you already know, what are your thoughts?”

“Folks in Carbon are startin’ ta talk,” Jack said. “It seems her sister was expectin’ her, and when she didn’t show, enquiries were made. Carlyle interviewed some of the passengers on that train, and they’re all sayin’ that the last time they saw her, she was bein’ chased by you.”

“Aww, crap.” Leon ground his teeth. “Carlyle again.”

“Yup. He’s added kidnappin’ to your list a crimes. Some folks are thinkin’ ya murdered her and hid the body. The Women’s Christian Society are suggestin’ even worse: that you’re holdin’ her here against her will and usin’ her in a most un-Christian-like manner.”

“You’re kidding me! That would be worse than murdering her?”

Jack shrugged. “Accordin’ to the Women’s Christian Society.”

Leon slumped. “But if I just let her go, what will the rest of the gang think? If I let her get away with stealing from me, some of those fellas might start getting ideas.”

“No.”

Leon and Jack turned to Mukua.

“No?” Leon asked.

“No.” Mukua shook his head. “They feel it is bad medicine: her being here like this. That it will bring trouble down on everyone. Gus says you

are being typically bull-headed. Lobo figures you are using her for your own pleasure—”

“What?”

Mukua shrugged. “Why else would you be keeping a woman here against her wishes? He doesn’t see anything wrong with it, he’s just jealous.”

“Nothing is going on,” Leon said, his temper rising. “I would never force myself onto a woman. You know that.”

“Yes, I do,” Mukua said. “And they do, too. But, you know, when men get talking . . .”

Leon pursed his lips, indignant anger smoldering in his eyes. “I would never force a woman to,” he shifted, “well, I would never do it.”

“I know, Leon.” Jack sympathized with his friend’s indignation. “We both know that ain’t right.”

“Yeah.” Leon sighed and relaxed. “So, you think I should let her leave?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

“I’ll think on it. Maybe she’ll take Haley with her.”

Haley was just finishing up the evening dishes when Jack put a hand around her waist and turned her away from the chore.

“C’mon, Haley, let’s you and me go for an evenin’ ride.”

“What?” Haley frowned. She glanced at Gabriella sitting at the kitchen table, then allowed her gaze to drift to Leon who sat on the sofa, reading. “I don’t think—”

“Naw, c’mon.” Jack maneuvered her to the front door. “Tuffy and Jet could use the exercise.”

Haley put the brakes on. “No, Jack. I won’t leave Gabriella alone here with . . . him.”

Leon looked up from his book and sent her a narrow-eyed glare.

Jack laughed and took her into a hug. “But that’s the whole idea, Darlin’. Them two need ta have a conversation.”

Haley pushed away from him. “I don’t mind—”

“But I do.” Leon stood up and walked over to open the front door. “Give us a couple of hours, okay Jack?”

“Sure.”

“But . . .”

“It’s all right,” Gabriella said. “He won’t hurt me.” She sent a sharp look to Leon, setting her statement up as a challenge.

Haley frowned. "Well. Are you sure?"

"Yes. You go and have a ride. It's the perfect evening for it."

"Well. All right."

Haley sent a warning glance to Leon, then allowed Jack to escort her out the front door, which was then closed behind them.

Gabriella stood up, feeling apprehensive despite her reassurances to Haley. "Another go round, Monsieur Nash? Are you going to beat it out of me now?"

Leon stood by the door, his hand still on the knob. "No. You've probably figured it out by now, that I couldn't do that to you."

"Yes, I suppose." She crossed her arms and leaned against the counter. "I don't understand why not, though. You are quite capable of violence. Those men out there would not respect you if you were not."

"Jack keeps them in line."

"Oh, balderdash. That's Gus's excuse. Truth is, he knows darn well that you'd beat him senseless if he really challenged you. He blusters and fumes, and says that if it weren't for Jack Kiefer and his gun, etc., etc. It's the only way he has of saving face. I expect he tried to take you on, and you put the fear of the devil into him, and that settled it. Oh no, Monsieur. You are quite capable of violence in order to maintain control. Will you not go that far with me because I'm a woman?"

"Partly," Leon said as he walked across the room toward her. "But that, in itself, wouldn't stop me."

"Then what? I don't understand."

"Don't you?"

Their eyes met, and Gabriella felt a shiver of fear mixed with desire course through her. It was in his eyes so clearly, how much he wanted her, and how hard he fought against it.

She swallowed and looked away, ashamed of her own emotions.

"So," she heard the quiver in her own voice, "you wanted privacy so you could seduce me."

"No." Leon grasped the back of the kitchen chair, anchoring himself to the spot. "I've decided to give you what you truly desire. I'm going to let you go. Rex will escort you down to Bear Creek in the morning. From there you can carry on to Carbon or Medicine Bow, or wherever you want."

Gabriella gaped at him. "You're letting me go? Just like that? You could have told me this in front of Haley. Why the secrecy, if that's all you had to say?"

"Because, though it's not compulsory to my allowing you to leave, I would appreciate it if you told me why the money is so important to you."

Why were you willing to do what you did to get it, and then risk so much to keep it?"

She met his eyes again, and the pain he saw there almost made him regret asking. Then compassion took over, and he stepped forward, reaching out a hand to her.

"What? What is it? What could be so important?"

Gabriella hugged herself, the knot in her throat cutting off her gasp.

Leon wanted to take her into his arms, but he knew this would only cause her to lock up. His hand hung in mid-reach for her, but he stayed where he was and waited for her to come to him.

Finally, Gabriella took in a deep breath, then let it out with an audible sigh. She looked at him, her eyes misty but refusing to tear.

"All right. I'll tell you."

Leon nodded and indicated a chair.

Gabriella shook her head. "No, I better stay standing." She took another deep breath then resolved herself to continue. "You knew I was married."

"Yes."

"I was seventeen when I married Teddy, and we had a most unusual relationship. He worked undercover for the Montreal Police, and he was very good at it. He would have brought you down, Mr. Nash, and you wouldn't have even known what hit you."

"I believe you."

"Yes. I helped him, too. I have a knack, you see. I understand human nature, and I have studied forensics, with the intentions of being helpful to Teddy. I'm also very good at disguises which later came in handy as a thespian. But then I became . . . in the family way. Oh, we were so thrilled. Of course, I knew I would have to change my priorities. A new baby would keep me at home, leaving Teddy to work the nitty-gritty side of his job on his own."

Gabriella hesitated. She took another deep breath, and then a second. Leon gave her time to compose herself.

She blinked and, despite her efforts, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

"When little Theo was four months old, the bad guys won. They murdered Teddy. They took my husband, and my baby's father, away from us. I was lost. I . . . I couldn't cope."

"So, you want the money to help you find his killers?"

Gabriella looked at him, her eyes wide and shining. "No. His killers were found, and they paid for their crime."

"Then?" Leon's eyes asked the question.

"My in-laws never approved of me, you see. A woman wasn't supposed to be educated, and certainly not mix with the criminal element.

It was all right for their son, but . . . Then Teddy died, and I had to resort to other things they didn't approve of, simply to survive and to give my son a home. I swallowed my pride and asked them to help us so I wouldn't have to do those things, but they refused. It turned out they already had a plan. They waited until they could 'prove' that I was an unfit mother, and they took my son away from me. They did it legally, of course. Showing that I had stooped to working upon the stage and selling my body in order to survive. The irony is that if they had been willing to take us in, to help us, I would not have had to do those things. But no. They didn't want me. They only wanted my son. Theo is three years old, and I don't even know what he looks like!"

Then the sobs did come. Her hands shot to her mouth, but she couldn't hold them back. She wailed out her anger, as her hand clutched the counter and she doubled over in physical pain.

Leon stepped forward and took her into his arms.

Her hands grabbed his shirt sleeves, and she allowed herself to be comforted by him. She laid her head upon his breast, as she sobbed, hearing his heart beating, and feeling his hand stroking her hair. He didn't say anything. He didn't try to soothe her or offer useless platitudes, he simply held her.

He felt his own throat constrict, and tears threaten behind burning eyes. He knew what loss was; the anger you feel when the fates take away the people you love. Though the loss of a child was beyond him, he understood the anger that comes with such a brutal betrayal. They had both suffered injustices during their young lives, and Leon held her now in compassion and understanding.

Finally, her sobs softened, and her body relaxed, though she made no move to push away from him.

He continued to stroke her hair.

"So, you want the money to get established and win your son back?"

"Yes, partly," Gabriella sniffed. "But I also have to find them. Once they had legal custody, they moved. I have no idea where they are. But I'll find them. I will. And I will fight to get my son back."

Leon sighed. He knew enough about legal custody from his own childhood. If Gabriella's in-laws legally adopted Theo, Gabriella would never get him back. At best, she might be allowed to visit him, but only if the legal guardians approved. And this did not seem likely. But Leon wasn't going to tell her this. He already knew how determined and tenacious she was, and it wasn't up to him to discourage her.

"I wish you had told me sooner," he said. "Yes, you stole the money, but, as Mukua would say, it was an honorable theft. I cannot begrudge it."

Gabriella pushed herself away from him, wiping her eyes dry. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Yeah, okay. Would you like some tea?”

“No.”

“How about a shot of whiskey?”

Gabriella smiled through reddened eyes. “Okay.”

He reached up to the top shelf and took down a half-empty bottle and a couple of glasses. He poured them both a healthy dose.

They sat down together at the table and tapped glasses.

“To finding lost souls,” Leon said.

Gabriella nodded. “To finding lost souls.”

Once the whiskey had been baptized, Leon scrutinized his companion.

“I’m glad I asked Jack to keep Haley away for a couple of hours. If she sees you looking like this, she’ll be on me like a cat on fish.”

“Hmm. She doesn’t like you much, does she?”

Leon shrugged. “I really don’t know. One minute she’s considerate and friendly, and the next she’s stripping the hide off me. I never know what to expect.”

“She’s had a rough start,” Gabriella said. “She doesn’t trust men much.”

“She trusts Jack.”

“Jack is easy to trust.”

“Ha! And I’m not?”

“No, Mr. Nash, you’re not.”

“I’ve never done anything to cause her to mistrust me.”

“Perhaps not. But you have a hardness to you, an edge. You don’t let people in, then you wonder why they keep their distance.”

Silence settled over the table.

Leon twirled the amber liquid around in his glass. “So, the only reason you came to me that night was to steal the money?”

Another stretch of silence as Gabriella studied him.

“No. That wasn’t the only reason.”

Leon perked up and smiled. “No?”

“Of course, I was attracted to you,” Gabriella said. “But I couldn’t be, don’t you see? You’re the same kind of person who killed my husband. How could I be attracted to you?”

“I’m not that kind of person, Gabriella. I think you know that. If you really thought I was, then no reason would have been good enough to bring you to my bed.”

Gabriella sighed and took another sip of whiskey. “I suppose there is some truth to that. But you are still a criminal, and I couldn’t allow myself to love you.”

Leon smiled. "Love?"

Gabriella pursed her lips. "Desire."

"Oh."

"I suppose needing the money was as good a reason as any. I would sell my body to get what I needed, just like I'd always done. But truth be known . . ." she hesitated.

"What?"

"I think I was just looking for an excuse."

Leon smiled again. He looked at her and his thoughts returned to the first time he saw her in the Mercantile Store in Denver. She had taken his breath away then; she was so beautiful. Now, he was caught up in her again. Her fiery spirit only attracted him more, and he had to fight the urge to seduce her into his bedroom and take her, whether she wanted it or not.

He bit his lip and forced his eyes away from hers. As much as he wanted her, he would never do that.

Gabriella watched him, her feelings all a swirl. She wanted him, her body ached for him, but how could she live with herself if she seduced him? She had been willing to stay here in order to collect information about him and his gang, in order to bring them down. How could she bed him now without being anything more than a whore?

"There is no point to this going any further. I'm leaving in the morning."

"You don't have to."

She looked away from him and took a sip of whiskey. "Yes, I do."

"Then tell me where you live, and I'll come see you."

Her eyes snapped back to him. "No."

"Why not, Gabriella? California is far enough away from my hunting grounds. No one knows me there."

"I can't take that chance," she said with an adamant shake of her head. "I'll never get my son back if word got out that I was consorting with a known outlaw."

Leon swirled his drink, his eyes soaking her up. He wanted to tell her that getting her son back was a pipe dream. She needed to let that go and start life anew. But he didn't; he knew there would be no point and it would only push her further away from him.

"Okay." He downed the last of his whiskey. "One more night in my room, then you can leave in the morning."

"Thank you."

Gabriella felt the sun being blocked an instant before the voice stopped her.

“Morning, ma’am.”

She glanced up, then shaded her eyes as the bulk of a man shifted and the bright rays of the sun hit her fully in the face. She frowned, not being able to distinguish the man’s features, but something told her she had seen him before.

“Yes?”

“Detective Hezekiah Hoag, ma’am. Detective Carlyle would like a word with you.”

“Already? How did he even know I was in town?”

“We have our ways, ma’am.”

Gabriella sighed. “I thought I was being followed when I left Bear Creek. Your man could have simply stepped forward and escorted me here.”

“No, ma’am. That might not have been good for his health.”

Gabriella conceded the point. Not knowing where her alliance stood, or if she were being watched by gang members, discretion was wise.

“All right then, lead the way.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Even though it was well into September, the coolness of the sheriff’s office was a relief from the warm day. Gabriella stepped inside and was immediately drawn to the only other person in the room.

Frank Carlyle poured himself a cup of coffee which, considering the stove wasn’t even on, could not be particularly hot. He turned as the two people entered and sent Gabriella a smile that sent a chill down her spine.

“Morning, ma’am. Coffee?”

“No, thank you. Where is the Sheriff?”

“Out doing his rounds.”

Gabriella cocked a brow. Like hell he was. Carlyle had pulled rank on him and sent him packing for the duration of this meeting. Her jaw tightened. She knew, without looking, that Hoag stood behind her, blocking the front door, and Carlyle was nicely positioned between her and the back door. But since that door was likely locked, she wouldn’t make it out through there, anyway. She didn’t like being this close to Carlyle, but she saw no way out of the situation.

“Can we make this quick? I have plans for today.”

“What’s your rush?” Carlyle went to sit down behind the desk. “Your train doesn’t leave until this evening.”

“Must you keep tabs on everything I do? If you recall, I never did agree to do your spying for you.”

“And yet, how convenient that you ended up in Elk Mountain anyway.”

“It was hardly convenient for me.”

Carlyle smiled again. “Please, Mrs. Tanguay, have a seat.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“I insist. It’s not polite for a gentleman to sit while a lady stands, and since I prefer to sit, I suggest you do the same.”

Gabriella was about to protest further, but then felt the presence of Mr. Hoag. He hadn’t moved from his position at the front door, but she still picked up on the pressure.

“Fine.” She settled into the chair in front of the desk and waited for Carlyle’s next move.

“Why did Mr. Nash chase you?” Carlyle asked. “The passengers from that train all agreed that he appeared angry and was intent on running you down.”

“Well, as you noted yourself, Monsieur Carlyle, Mr. Nash seems to have an interest in me. He saw me amongst the passengers and decided to do something about it.”

“Uh huh. And you spent two months with him in his hideout. I would like to have been a fly on the wall for that.”

“You would have been disappointed, Monsieur Carlyle, because nothing happened.”

“Nothing? You spent two months in the company of a man who wants you, and nothing happened?”

“That’s correct. Despite your opinion of Monsieur Nash, he is not an animal.”

She heard Hoag snort behind her.

Carlyle simply smiled; his black beady eyes boring into her.

Then he shrugged. “Fine. If that’s the story you wish to maintain.”

Gabriella pursed her lips.

Carlyle took a gulp of cold coffee then set the cup aside. “Well, let’s get down to business, shall we? I don’t really care what you did to get the information, as long as you got it. I hope you’re not going to be stubborn about this, Mrs. Tanguay. I noted that your train ticket is for San Francisco, not Cheyenne. Just when were you planning on delivering your message?”

“Today,” Gabriella told him. “When Mr. Hoag detained me, I had just sent a telegram to my sister, letting her know I was on my way. Then I planned on stopping in here, even without the escort, and have the sheriff send you a private letter. I didn’t think you would appreciate information like this over the telegraph wire.”

She could tell by the look in Carlyle’s eye that he didn’t believe her.

He was willing to play the game. “Fine, fine. So, you have some information.”

“Yes.” Gabriella’s throat tightened on her words. She felt anger rise at herself. *I don’t owe Napoleon Nash anything. Bringing down criminals is what I used to do. Personal feelings don’t come into this; that gang needs to be stopped.* She took a deep breath and forced herself to look Carlyle in the eye. “They have a go-to man in Medicine Bow. He has connections and finds buyers for the jewelry and bonds the gang steals.”

Carlyle picked up the pen and dipped it in the ink jar.

“Okay, good. What’s his name?” He scratched ‘Medicine Bow’ onto a piece of paper, then glanced up when he met with silence. “Mrs. Tanguay, you’re in this now. What is their man’s name?”

“Levi Hendricks.”

“Good. I’ll get someone on to him right away. Now, I know they’ll be pulling at least one more job before the season ends. What can you tell me about that?”

Gabriella hesitated again, but she knew Carlyle was right; she was in it now. Carlyle was no fool and he wouldn’t let up until she gave him something more.

“They are planning something for next week,” she said. “I don’t know where.”

Carlyle leaned back; his beady eyes boring into hers. “Come now, Mrs. Tanguay. You expect me to believe that you spent all that time with the gang, and you can’t even tell me where their next hit is going to be? I think you can do better than that.”

“They hardly took me into their confidence.” Gabriella pursed her lips and puffed to her full height. “They did speak of one more hit this season, but—”

Carlyle slammed the desk top, causing even Mr. Hoag to jump.

Gabriella glared back in full defiance. “You will not intimidate me, Mr. Carlyle. I can only tell you what I know.”

“But you know more than what you’re telling. Come, Mrs. Tanguay. A payroll, a money transfer? A bank, a train? Tell me!”

“I don’t—”

She stopped her protests, then frowned as Carlyle’s expression turned inward, and his thin lips tightened in a slow smile.

“The Denver payroll,” he mumbled. “That’s what they’re after.”

Gabriella quivered, but she didn’t show it. “A payroll?”

Carlyle shifted his eyes back to her. “Yes. And you know it, too. You might as well give me the details. They’re going to figure you sold them out anyway, so you might as well get paid for it.”

Gabriella sighed, even though her heart raced with the truth of Carlyle's words.

"Like I told you before, they kept all that from me. I don't know where they're going to hit again, and they know I don't know. I'm afraid your threats won't work with me."

Carlyle looked at her and frowned. "You were with them for two months, and you expect me to believe you didn't get anything from Nash?"

"I got plenty from Mr. Nash, but this is all I got that would be of interest to you."

Carlyle's narrow eyes narrowed further. "Try me."

"That's all I have for you, Mr. Carlyle. If you're any good at your job, it's more than enough. Now, may I please go? I have errands to run before my train, this evening."

Carlyle smiled in admiration of the woman's pluck.

"Fine. Just leave me your address in San Francisco."

"No." Gabriella stood up. "I'm done with this. I hope to never see you or Monsieur Nash again."

She turned and walked with purpose to the front door.

Hoag didn't move.

Gabriella stopped and sent an expectant look over her shoulder to Carlyle.

Carlyle stood up and nodded.

"Good day, Mrs. Tanguay. Have a pleasant journey."

Hoag stepped aside, and with a huff, Gabriella left the office.

Carlyle sighed and sat down again. "What an ornery young woman."

Hoag smiled. "You want to have her followed?"

"The train ticket has already been bought."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SET UP

Malachi swung the axe, sending another chunk of wood spiraling into the air.

“How come we gotta chop down trees fer this, when I got me a sack full a dynamite?”

“Cause the little boy genius said so, that’s why.” Gus sat his horse, watching the four gang members as they chopped down small trees. “Sometimes there ain’t no rhyme or reason ta his plans. We just gotta follow ‘em, that’s all.”

“Yeah?” Lobo spit tobacco. “Then how come you ain’t down here helpin’ us?”

“Cause I’m the overseer, that’s how come. Hurry it up, we only got a couple a more hours.”

Luke and Rex showed up and brought their blowing horses to a dust-raising halt.

“How many more we gotta move?” Rex looked at the growing pile of felled trees. “And why? I thought Malachi was just gonna blow the tracks.”

Malachi perked up. “Yeah.”

“How the hell should I know?” Gus shook his head at the stupidity of this plan. “Somethin’ about givin’ the conductor warnin’. He’ll blow the engine right through this blockade, but it’ll slow ‘im down so’s he can see the blowed tracks in time ta stop.”

Lobo took his frustration out on the tree stump. “But it’s the blowed tracks that’ll stop ‘im. Why the hell we gotta chop and haul these trees all the way to the tracks, is beyond me.”

“Stop gripin’ and just do it.”

Lobo sent Gus a hard look but set back to work.

Luke and Rex each lassoed a felled tree and turned their horses back toward the tracks that lay one mile away.

As they were heading out, Mukua and Hank passed them as they came in. Slowly, all the felled trees made their way to their destination, where Luke, Charlie and Ed were busy stacking them up across the tracks to make the barrier.

Gus eyed the pile of trees and considered how much time they had left.

“Okay, that’s enough.”

Malachi and Lobo stopped in mid-chop and leaned against their axes.

Gus wiped his brow with his bandana. "By the time the rest of the fellas get this pile moved and stacked, we'll be needin' ta get inta position. Lobo, you help them other fellas with the barricade."

Lobo spit again. "Crap. Why don't you help 'em? You been sittin' there all mornin' like ya own the place."

"Cause me and Malachi is gonna go set that dynamite now, that's why."

Malachi grinned. "Yeah. About time, too." Hoisting his axe upon his shoulder, he strode with purpose to his bald-faced bay that stood, patiently, tied to a sapling that was still erect. Malachi secured the axe to the back of his saddle and mounted up. "It's about time we got ta the fun stuff. Let's go."

Leon glanced up at the overcast sky, estimating the sun's position from the lighter hue to the cloud cover.

"Train's due in about fifteen minutes. Those fellas better hurry it up."

Jack looked at his fob watch and shook his head.

"How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Know what time it is without lookin' at a watch."

Leon shrugged. "I dunno. Just always could."

"Hmm. Must be that Injun blood ya got runnin' through them veins."

"Maybe."

An explosion drew their attention to the tracks about a quarter of a mile further along from where the other fellas were just finishing up the barricade.

Jack smiled. "Malachi's done his part."

"Yup."

"Oh, and here comes the rest a them boys. Looks like we're all set."

"Yup. I wish they wouldn't gallop though. We don't want to give the conductor too much of a head's up."

"That dust'll be settled by the time the train comes around that bend."

"Hmm. I suppose."

Gus and Malachi joined the group, and they all piled into the hiding space amongst a swirl of dust and sweaty horses.

Fanny and Tuffy awoke from their snooze and danced around against their tethers, as they nickered in greeting to their herd-mates.

"Come on, fellas, settle down," Leon said, as the group dismounted. "We want things looking quiet and natural until the engine hits that barrier."

“Why did we need ta build that barrier in the first place?” Lobo stretched his shoulder muscles in protest. “I’m gonna be achin’ like a virgin whore come mornin’.”

“We’ve been over that, Lobo,” Leon pinned him down with a look. “If the conductor doesn’t have warning, he’ll hit those blowed tracks at full speed. They’ll de-rail and likely cause injuries we don’t need. We just want to stop the train; we don’t need to hurt crew and passengers while we do it.”

Lobo snorted dust out of his nose. “Yeah, fine. It better be worth it, that’s all I’m sayin’.”

Jack gave Leon a nudge. “If anyone’s interested, train’s comin’.”

All arguing ceased, as every head in the group swiveled to the distant locomotive.

“Okay, fellas,” Jack pushed himself off the rock he’d been leaning against. “Get mounted again. We want to be on the move as soon as that train hits the barrier. Let’s go.”

Every member of the gang knew their job. The now stationary iron and wood serpentine giant rumbled and spit steam, as the marauders split up, timing their arrival so each group would hit their assigned positions at the same time.

Rex had the shortest distance to go, aiming for the caboose and the conductor. Leon and Mukua headed for the freight car, while the majority of the gang closed in on the passenger car. Jack and Lobo galloped up to the engine to keep watch over the crew.

Jack pulled a dancing Tuffy to a halt right under the open window of the cab. Both men had their revolvers out and pointing at the figures of the engineer and fireman.

“Stand down,” Jack called up to him. “Let me see your hands!”

A sudden movement drew their attention to a third man stepping onto the landing.

“I’ll show you my hands, all right.”

The rifle spat fire, and just as they heard the report, Tuffy reared, causing the bullet aimed at Jack’s chest to hit him in the leg instead.

Jack gasped. He dropped his revolver and clutched at the saddle horn as Tuffy plunged forward. The horse took three stumbling strides, then collapsed as blood gushed from his nostrils and air escaped his punctured lungs.

Lobo reacted on instinct. The report from his revolver blended with the bark from the rifle as both weapons fired a split second apart.

The lawman on the landing collapsed without a sound. He fell forward and tumbled down the steps to land in the dirt beside the tracks. His rifle clattered down beside him and lay there, still loaded but useless for the time being.

Lobo sent off another shot toward the train crew, but both men jumped back from the window, and the bullet ricocheted around inside the cab. Someone yelled, but Lobo didn't stick around to see who had been hit. Firing two more shots at the cab, he swung his horse over to where Jack had managed to stand away from his downed animal.

Both men reached for the other and, grabbing hold, Jack managed to haul himself up behind Lobo, and they took off for cover. They heard the rifle barking behind them, so whoever had not been hit inside the cab, had found the courage to jump out and grab the weapon. But the shots went wide, and he did no further damage.

Rex positioned his horse up alongside the steps of the caboose. He grabbed the hand railing and nimbly stepped onto the landing. Pulling his gun, he kicked the door open and saw what he expected to see: the conductor backed up against the far wall, his arms raised and his eyes wide with fear.

Rex smiled. "It's all right, Old Timer. You just stay right there and be quiet, and ain't nobody gonna hurt ya."

"Too bad the same can't be said for you."

Rex jerked his eyes to the right, just in time to see a tin star and the butt end of a rifle.

Wes and Luke climbed the steps of the passenger car. Knowing it was best to be quick so that the passengers didn't have time to consider their situation, both men opened the door to the car and rushed into the aisle.

Luke brandished his revolver and did his best to sound threatening.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen . . . well, gentlemen—"

Instead of being submissive, the five passengers on the car, who just all happened to be male, cocked rifles and took aim.

Luke's eyes widened to saucers, as he spun around to make a getaway.

"Run Wes!" He shouted his warning just as the rifles barked.

Only one bullet found its mark, but it did double the duty. The shot went clean through Luke's shoulder then straight into Wes's chest, dropping both outlaws to the ground.

Luke panicked and clawed at Wes's clothing with his one good arm, trying to scramble over his buddy and get to the exit. He made no progress at all when he felt hands grabbing his ankles and pulling him back.

"No! Let me go—"

He twisted onto his back and grabbed his revolver, but a rifle butt knocked it out of his hand and sent it scuttling across the aisle and out of reach. He heard glass breaking and then rifle shots as four of the lawmen turned their attention to the outlaws outside.

"What the hell—?"

Gus grabbed the hand railing and pulled himself onto the landing. The first thing he saw was Wes's torso laying over the threshold of the passenger car door. Gus came forward, hoping to drag his friend to safety, but more bullets got sent his way. He felt one slice through his upper arm, and a volley of others thunk into the wood behind him. He ducked away and made a wild leap off the landing and dashed for his horse.

Malachi and Charlie did their best to hold the frantic animals, and though, usually, gunfire didn't spook them, when one of their fellows was hit and collapsed in their midst, panic ensued.

Hank and Ed returned fire, as they ran to their horses.

Ed took a hit in the back and went down.

Gus cursed and jumped over him to reach for a horse. Any horse. He grabbed the reins of one animal then turned and sent a chorus of bullets back at the train. None hit a mark, but the combined fire of the desperate outlaws did succeed in forcing the lawmen away from the windows.

"C'mon, Gus, hurry up!" Malachi yelled at him. He was mounted already and doing his best to hold his own horse steady to wait for his partner. "Where's Luke and Wes?"

"Forget about 'em!" Gus grabbed the horn and jumped aboard. "They're done. Get outta here."

Charlie held up in time for Hank to grab a horse and then the four remaining gang members booted into a gallop along the track line.

Mukua stayed aboard Buckwheat, as he didn't expect them to be loitering.

Leon dismounted and handed Fanny's reins to him.

"I won't be long."

"Hmm."

Leon unlatched the fright car door and with a heave, slid it open upon its rails.

Mukua reacted instantly at the sight of three rifles pointed right at him. A touch of his heel to the buckskin's flank caused the horse to sidestep, taking himself and his rider out of the line of fire.

One volley let fly, missing everything, and then Leon had the sliding door slammed back into place. Even as he made a run for Fanny, he heard the door opening again, but he didn't stop to see who came out.

Mukua sent a couple of shots toward the opening door, just to give Leon time to mount up and turn the horses for a hasty exit.

The lawmen were out of the car and firing again as the horses galloped away.

"That's Nash, the one with the fancy black hat! Get 'im. Bring 'im down—"

More shots fired even though the lawmen were unsure which fancy black hat they should aim for.

Leon felt heat slice through his upper thigh and heard the whizzing of more bullets as they zinged by his ears. He kept his eyes on the spotted rump of Mukua's horse as they pushed for more speed and prayed to find cover before the lawmen's aim improved.

Then Fanny stumbled and went down.

Leon ploughed into the dirt with her, then rolled to get away from her thrashing legs. He was relieved to see her get back to her feet. But though she stood her ground, waiting for him, her gait was off, and she dragged her near-fore. As much as Leon hated to do it, he knew he would never outrun the posse on a lame horse, and he'd have to leave her behind.

Mukua turned Buckwheat around and came up to Leon, just as Leon scrambled to his feet. Mukua's hand came down to him, and Leon grabbed it, hauling himself up behind the old Indian.

More shots came after them and, just as Mukua turned them away from the train, he quivered and then slumped forward over his horse's neck.

Leon wrapped his arms around his friend, preventing him from falling from the saddle. He grabbed the saddle horn and hung on, as Buckwheat pivoted on his hind legs and powered into a gallop, heading for where he knew was home.

All Leon could do was hold on and hope that no more bullets found them. Then Gus galloped up beside him and grabbed Buckwheat's flailing reins. He got the horse under control and turned them toward their hiding place.

Malachi, Hank and Charlie closed ranks on their leader, using themselves as shields, and the five members of the Elk Mountain Gang made a run for home.

Five miles into the high country, the gang allowed their sweating horses to halt and catch their breath. They turned as a group and gazed down the valley toward the flats and the distant train. Dust could be seen rising into the air as moving objects came steadily closer.

Gus snatched out his spy glass and focused in on the base of the dust cloud.

“Is it them?” Malachi shaded his eyes and peered down to the moving shapes.

“Sure as hell is.” Gus snapped his eyeglass shut and stuffed it back into his saddle bag. “They must a had horses inside that second freight car. This is a fine mess you got us into.”

“We’ll talk about fault once we get safe.” Leon snarked. “And where is Jack?”

Silence met this query.

Leon felt a trickle of fear. “Nobody’s seen him? What about Lobo?”

More shrugs and anxious glances to one another.

“Luke and Wes were taken out,” Gus said. “I don’t know ifn they’re alive or dead. I got a bad feelin’ we won’t be seein’ Wes again. I ain’t seen Rex.”

“Might I remind you,” Charlie spoke up, “that we got us a posse on our trail, and if we don’t get movin’, we’re gonna be sittin’ ducks.”

Leon nodded. “He’s right, you have to get going.” He swung a leg over the spotted rump of Mukua’s horse and dropped to the ground.

“What are ya doin’?” Gus yelled at him. “We gotta keep movin’.”

“You gotta keep moving. If I don’t stop the bleeding, Mukua is going to die.”

“We don’t have time for this.” Gus swung off his horse and grabbed Leon by the shoulders.

Leon spun on him in a rage, the pain from the nick in his thigh fueling his anger.

“Get off me!” he yelled and hit Gus hard on the nose. “You get going. Draw that posse away from here then split up and head back to the Elk. But don’t you tell me what to do.”

Gus staggered back, blood starting to flow. He wiped a sleeve across his nose, his brown eyes glaring at their leader. “You’re crazy. That posse is gonna be here any minute, and you’re stoppin’ ta help that Injun—”

Leon’s face contorted and he lunged at the gang member.

Charlie and Malachi were on the ground in an instant and got between the two men.

“C’mon, Gus,” Malachi grabbed his partner’s shoulders. “Leave ‘im be.”

Charlie pulled Leon off Gus and pushed him back toward Buckwheat. “Yeah, c’mon, Boss. Gus didn’t mean nothin’. He’s just scared. We’re all partial ta Preacher. Maybe we should just leave ‘im here, let the law take care of ‘im.”

Leon turned his angry glare to Charlie. “Leave him here?” He pointed to the limp figure still slumped over the buckskin’s neck. “In case you’ve forgotten, he’s wanted for murder. Add the fact that he is an Indian, and he won’t even see a trial.”

Charlie looked around, desperate for an answer. “Well, get yourselves hidden then. We’ll do like ya say and draw the posse offa ya. Get the bleedin’ stopped and head for Bear Creek. I mean, maybe that’s where the Kid and Lobo is headin’, too. But for now, we gotta move.”

Leon calmed down as he saw the reason behind Charlie’s words. He glared at Gus though, still angry at the attack.

Gus stood, pressing his bandana against the blood flowing from his nose, but just like anyone confronting Napoleon Nash, he backed down from the gang leader and spit a stream of red saliva into the dirt. “Yeah, fine. We’ll draw ‘em away. You just make sure the gesture ain’t wasted.”

“Hurry up!” Hank insisted from aback his own horse. “Either we go now, or we’re all spendin’ the night in jail.”

Without further argument, the three gang members re-mounted and turned their horses back toward the valley.

“You better find yourself a place ta hide,” Gus threw back at his boss. “Just in case we can’t draw ‘em off.”

And with that the four men were gone.

Leon ran to Buckwheat, grabbed the dangling reins and led the horse down into a gully. Once out of sight, he pulled Mukua from the saddle and gently eased him down to the ground.

Leon knelt beside him and pulled the bloodied shirt away from the wound. Blood still oozed from the opening in Mukua’s side, but Leon breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t a gut shot. If he could get the blood stopped long enough to get them to Bear Creek, his friend just might have a chance.

He stepped back to the horse and rummaged through the saddlebags. He knew Mukua always carried basic medicinals on these jobs just in case. Nobody ever thought that the old spiritual man might need them for himself.

Sure enough, Leon found padding, gauze, and a bottle of disinfectant, along with a bottle of whiskey. There was also a leather binder and inside that Leon found a needle and suturing thread. He gritted his teeth at the

idea of sewing the wound together, but he'd done it before and he could do it again. Anything to stop the bleeding. Another pouch held herbs for teas, but since Leon didn't know if that tea would help or hinder, he didn't pay them any mind.

He took the supplies he could use and returned to his patient. He doused the area with disinfectant and got the needle ready for use. Placing a hand on Mukua's shoulder, he gazed down at the closed eyes and gave him a gentle shake.

"Ata-i?" There was no response, and Leon felt a little easier. Hopefully he would remain unconscious until the sewing was done.

Leon took a deep breath then held it as he listened for any possible intrusion. He glanced at Buckwheat, and that horse had lowered his head to graze on the scrub grass, a pretty good sign that no other horses were near.

He let his breath go and started to work.

The gloaming crept across the landscape, chasing away the day.

Leon knew he wouldn't have time to get Mukua to safety in the light he had left so he opted to stay put. They were in a good hiding place, with grazing enough to keep the horse happy. Leon even took the chance and lit a small fire to help ward off the early autumn chill. Unlike the horse, they had nothing to eat, not even coffee, so Leon knew he was in for an uncomfortable night but there was nothing for it. He wrapped Mukua's saddle blanket around him, and he himself settled for hunkering up as close as he could to the fire and warming himself with the whiskey.

Leon felt the hairs on his neck rise at the same time that Buckwheat snatched his head up. Someone was coming. Leon pulled his gun and, rolling onto his stomach, he inched his way up to the lip of the gully. All he saw was darkness. Buckwheat nickered, and Leon cringed. But then a horse close to them nickered back and Buckwheat began to paw the ground. He recognized the greeting.

"Nash?"

Leon tensed, but he also recognized a familiar voice. "Gus?"

"Yeah. I'm comin' in. Don't shoot."

"Okay."

For a moment, all Leon saw was darkness, then slowly, two shapes emerged from the surroundings and came closer to the hiding place. Leon relaxed and holstered his gun when Gus led his horse into the gully.

"What are you doing back here?" Leon asked as he returned to the fire.

“Lookin’ for you,” Gus sat down beside him. He pulled a sandwich out of its wrapping and handed it over. “Here, I figured you’d be hungry.”

“Oh yeah. Thanks.”

Gus jerked his chin toward Mukua. “How is he?”

“Holding his own,” Leon said as he munched on the meal. “I knew I wouldn’t make it to Bear Creek before nightfall, so decided to wait it out here.”

“Yeah, I figured. I got more blankets and some coffee and such. We’ll get through the night all right, and then I’ll help ya get ‘im ta Bear Creek. Or do ya think he’ll make it back to the Elk?”

“No,” Leon shook his head. “I stitched it up and stopped the bleeding, but the bullet’s still in there. He needs a real doctor.”

Gus nodded. “Yeah. I figure Doc Kurtis will fix ‘em up all right.”

Leon nodded. “Any sign of Jack or Lobo?”

“Naw, not yet. I figure they’re doin’ like you and got holed up somewheres.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. What about Fanny?”

“Who?”

“My horse.”

Gus spit out to the side. “Goddammit, I got more ta worry about than your damned horse. I didn’t see her back at the Elk, but then I weren’t lookin’ for her neither.”

“Yeah, okay. How about everyone else? Did you lose that posse all right?”

“Yeah. I never did meet a posse that could track worth a damn. We had them boys runnin’ in circles. We almost had ta point ‘em in the right direction ta get ‘em home.”

Leon chuckled, then flinched and adjusted his leg.

Gus frowned. “You get hit?”

“Yeah, but no worse than you. I tended to it once Preacher-man was settled.”

“Hmm.”

Silence drifted between them as they both watched the fire flicker into the night.

Leon finished off his sandwich and swallowed the last bite. “You came back.”

Gus coughed to cover his embarrassment. “Ah, yeah. I figured you’d be wantin’ some coffee.”

Leon smiled. “Yeah. I have some whiskey to go with it.”

“Sounds good.”

Neither man slept much during the night. They took turns dozing then tending the fire and keeping an eye on the patient, and by the time the chilly dawn crept over the lip of the gulley, they all looked the worse for wear.

“How’s he doin’ this mornin’?” Gus asked.

Leon sat down by the small fire and accepted the cup of coffee. “He woke up a few times and seemed lucid enough. Still, it feels like a fever’s starting. We need to get him to Bear Creek, fast.”

“Yeah, well, there’s no point buildin’ a travois; the area’s too rough for that. You’ll have ta hold em’ in the saddle.”

“I know.” Leon finished his coffee and dumped the grounds into the fire. “You break camp and I’ll get him ready for travel.”

Gus grunted, but stood up to get on with things.

Bear Creek

“Let me go in first.”

The small group paused on the outskirts of the tent-and-wooden-structured town. Leon could feel the heat from Mukua’s fever soaking through their shirts as he supported his friend against him.

“We can’t wait. Preacher needs help now.”

Gus spit as he eyed the town. “And what good would we be doin’ Preacher if we was ta ride right into a trap? The law’s done it before.”

“Yeah, but Hurley always sends out someone to warn us. Do you see anyone?”

“No, but that don’t mean nothin’. Just let me go in first. It won’t take long. I’ll let ya know if the coast is clear.”

Leon hesitated. He knew Gus was right, but he begrudged the time.

Gus spat again. “Dammit, the longer ya set there thinkin’ about it, the weaker Preacher is gettin’. If I ain’t back in fifteen minutes then make for the Elk.”

Before Leon could respond, Gus booted his horse into a lope and headed for the town.

Buckwheat jumped and tried to follow, but Leon held him back.

Gus slowed to a trot as he approached the gritty mining town. There was only one street, but that street held everything any man could want

when scratching a living up this far. The saloon, bawdy house, general store and livery were all in close proximity, and Gus was familiar with every one of them.

Most of the individual living structures were wooden floors and bases covered by heavy canvas tents so winters could get chilly. There'd been more than one fire ravaging the residential areas when people got careless with their wood stoves. But it was a tough town, occupied by tough people. The law had no place here: no sheriff's office, no jail, no judge, and the Elk Mountain Gang was always welcome to come spend their money.

But just because the law wasn't welcome, it didn't mean they wouldn't show up on occasion. Nobody could prove that the outlaws spent time here, but everyone knew they did, townsfolk and lawmen, both. A time like this, with the gang scattered and some injured, would be perfect for the law to set up a trap here for whoever showed up.

Gus wasn't taking any chances.

"Hey, Gus," an over-the-hill painted lady called out to the rider. "You here for a little poke?"

"Not just at the moment, Lucy. We got us a problem."

"I ain't surprised. Heard you fellas ran into a little resistance down there."

Gus pulled rein and looked around. "How did you know that? Somebody here, tellin' tales?"

Lucy stepped off the boardwalk and came up to give Gus's horse a pat. She smiled, the paint on her face cracking with the deepening of her wrinkles.

"Yeah, I'll say. Lobo and the Kansas Kid come limp'in' in here last night."

"Anybody else?"

"Naw."

Gus nodded, satisfied. "Okay. Doc Kurtis around?"

"Sure, he's over in the brothel."

"Well tell 'em ta get his pants on. We're in need of his services, such as they are."

"Now don't go gettin' all snitty. That's the only place we had a bed ta put the Kid. Doc's been tendin' 'im."

"Well, make room for one more."

Big Jake, the smallest man in town, stepped out from the saloon, wiping his hands on his apron as he prepared for the afternoon rush.

"You fellas did run into some trouble, didn't ya?"

"Oh dear," Lucy wrung her pudgy hands. "It twern't Nash, were it? I'd hate ta see that handsome man all shot up."

Gus scowled. "No, it weren't Nash. It was Preacher."

"Preacher? Well, I heard a him, but I can't say as I've ever met 'im."

"Well, you're about to." Gus wheeled his horse back the way they'd come. "You go tell that doc; we've got a bad one comin' in."

"Put him on the bed in there." Doc Kurtis nodded a wobbly chin toward a downstairs room in the only two story, completely wooden structure, in the town: the brothel.

Gus and Leon carried Mukua across the small lobby and into the room, then laid him on the bed.

Kurtis looked like a slob, but, when sober, he knew his job well enough. One quick look at the wound and he knew what had to be done.

"All right. Lucy and Claire, you stay and assist me. The rest of ya, get out."

Leon snapped his eyes to the doctor. "I want to stay. I'll help."

"No. You'll only get in the way."

"But—"

"No! Lobo is at the saloon, why don't you join him for a drink or three?"

"Yeah," Gus said, as he inched his way toward the door. "That sounds like a good idea. C'mon, Nash."

A frown flicked across Leon's face. He didn't like other people telling him what to do.

"Lucy said the Kid is here, too."

"That's right," the doctor set out his tool, preparing for surgery. "He's upstairs, resting. Ask Joan to show you where."

Leon nodded, then, with one quick look at Mukua, he left the room.

Gus was on his heels. "Why don't we go get a drink first? The Kid ain't goin' nowhere's."

"You go get a drink. Maybe I'll see you over there later."

Gus sighed. "Fine."

"Come in."

Leon opened the door of the indicated room and entered.

Jack lay on the bed, sitting up against the layer of pillows and reading a book. His right pant leg had been cut off, and his right thigh was wrapped in gauze, resting upon its own pillow placed under the knee.

The partners grinned at each other.

“You look nice and comfy.” Leon pulled a chair over and sat down beside the bed. “Are you actually reading a book?”

“Yeah. Ain’t nothin’ else ta do.”

“Aw, it’s good for you.” This statement was met with a snort. Leon’s smile broadened. “How are you feeling?”

“Doc Kurtis gave me some pain killers so things could be worse. Bullet went right through.” Sadness settled on Jack’s features, as he recalled the incident. “Unfortunately, the same bullet killed Tuffy.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. He was a good horse.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna miss that old broomtail.”

“Fanny was injured. I don’t know where she is.”

“I’m sure she’ll make her way back to the Elk.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

A moment of silence passed, with both men thinking the same thing. A predator, spotting an injured horse, would be happy to make a meal of it. But neither man voiced it.

“What happened?” Leon was the first to come back.

“Aw, there was a deputy inside the engine cab. He got this shot off before we could react. Lobo shot ‘im. I sure hope he ain’t dead, but it did give us time ta get away. How about you?”

“Yeah. There were a bunch of them inside the freight car. Their first volley missed everything, and I was able to close the door on them before they got off a second one. But they opened her up fast enough and started shooting. I got nicked in the leg and Fanny went down. She got back up again, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to gallop anywhere.”

“You got nicked in the leg?”

“Yeah.”

Jack took note then of the dried blood and tear on Leon’s pant leg.

“You did a good job ‘a hidin’ that when ya walked in. You best have the doc look at it. You know how them things can turn.”

“He’s busy with Mukua right now.”

Jack frowned. “Preacher-man get hit?”

Leon nodded.

“Bad?”

Leon nodded again. “We were lucky just to get him here.”

“Aww, damn. Who else is with ya?”

“Gus. He made sure what was left of the gang got back to the Elk. Then he came back for us.”

“What’s left of the gang? What the hell happened?”

Leon shrugged. “I don’t really know the details yet. Ed is dead. Don’t know about Wes, but Gus is pretty sure he’s gone, too. Luke was injured and captured. No idea what happened to Rex.”

Jack groaned. “Damn.”

“Yeah. Seems like the law is getting smarter. They probably figured we would make one more hit before winter set in. They took the chance, and they were right.”

Jack was doubtful. “I dunno, Leon. I don’t think the law woulda gone ta that much trouble, unless they knew for sure. I’m thinkin’ somebody told ‘em.”

“Like who?”

Their eyes met. Both men thought the same thing, but Leon didn’t want to admit it.

Jack knew he had to. “She was right there in the cabin the whole time you were workin’ this plan out.”

“I kept my notes in the safe. She couldn’t have seen them.”

“C’mon, Leon. You know what she and her husband used ta do for a livin’. You said yourself that even I could open that safe.”

Leon looked down at his hands. Could he have been so gullible? She never hid the fact that she despised outlaws and even took pleasure in bringing criminals to their knees, especially after losing her husband. The timing was right, too. It all made sense.

“It ain’t your fault, Leon. You was blindsided.”

“You’re wrong. It is my fault.” Leon raised pain-filled eyes. “My ego convinced me that we had something special, that she would—”

“Make you an exception to her rule?”

Leon nodded. “Yeah. And now my gang has paid for it.”

Jack leaned back into his pillows. “Yeah, well, they know the risks a this life.”

“I suppose.” Leon looked more closely at Jack and noted puffiness around his eyes. “You look tired. I’ll let you get some rest.”

“Yeah. I guess them painkillers is kickin’ in.”

“Okay. I should get something to eat, anyway.” He stood up and returned the chair to its original place. “I’ll come back later.”

“Yeah. Leon?”

Leon turned from the door. “Yeah?”

“Mukua will be all right. He’s a tough old bird.”

Leon hinted a smile. “Yeah. Get some sleep.”

Leon sat by the light of the lamp, reading a book. His focus wasn’t really on it, but it was something to do while he watched over the old Indian. Eventually, he gave up the pretense, set the book aside and closed his eyes to rest.

But rest didn't come. His thoughts returned to what Jack said, and what he had already been thinking.

Did Gabriella turn on us? On me? He felt anger and hurt struggle over concern for his gang. This isn't over. If she betrayed us to Carlyle, I'm going to— A soft voice broke into his revelry.

"Napai'aishe."

Leon smiled and leaned forward. "Ata-i, how are you?"

"I have felt better."

Leon touched his arm. "I'm glad you're awake. You had me worried."

"Hmm." Mukua looked around at his surroundings. "This is not the Elk. Where are we?"

"We're in Bear Creek. I needed to get you to a doctor."

"Hmm. The job did not go well."

Leon chuckled. "No, Ata-i, it did not go well."

"Hmm." Mukua gazed at his companion. "You are tired. You should rest."

"I know. But Jack got hurt, and Fanny is missing, and it's been hit and miss with you. I've been worried."

"Oh. Jack is first on your list, then your horse. You worry about me last."

"You know that is not how I meant it."

"But a trustworthy partner is a good thing, and a solid horse is valuable. An old man just drags you down."

"Will you stop? You do not drag us down."

"Ah, but you do not deny that I am an old man."

Leon chuckled, knowing he was being teased. "I can tell already that you are going to be fine."

"Hmm. Perhaps this is not a good thing."

Leon frowned, teasing aside. "What do you mean? Of course, it's a good thing."

"No. We both agree, I am an old man. Winters are getting harder every year. I would rather die a warrior than as an old, crippled man in bed."

"But you're not going to die, Ata-i. And you're a valuable member of the gang. We need you."

"Yes, for now. But remember. I prefer to die a warrior."

Leon smiled and squeezed his arm. "I'll remember. But for now, I will take your advice, as always, and get some sleep."

"This is a good thing."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BACK HOME

Haley stood inside the barn, stroking Fanny's face.

"What a pretty girl you are. And don't you worry, we'll get you fixed up and you'll be out, running around with all your friends again."

Fanny ignored her, being more interested in her evening serving of grain.

"The least you could do is acknowledge me." Haley chuckled. "Don't you like me?"

Fanny's ears and head came up, and she softly nickered.

"You're awfully fond of my mare, aren't you?"

Haley jumped then turned and slapped Leon on the shoulder.

"Oh you!" she giggled. "You did that on purpose."

Leon grinned, pleased with catching someone else off guard rather than being the one caught.

"I don't know what you mean."

"No, of course you don't." Haley returned her attention to the mare and gave her soft neck a pat. "It's nice to have her home safe."

"It sure is." Leon stepped forward and scratched the mare's forehead. "You can't imagine my relief when I got back and found her here. It's times like this I miss Mukua. I don't know anyone who can nurse man or beast back to health faster than he can."

"She's coming along. I've learned a lot watching him brew his teas and prepare his poultices. We'll have her right as rain soon, just you wait and see."

"I hope so." Leon chewed his lip. "In the meantime, though, I need another horse." He frowned and glanced out the barn door. "I should speak to Gus. Maybe I'll go with them part of the way. I know I'm not healed up enough to help on the rescue mission, but I could do some horse-hunting. Hmm. I'll see."

"Do you really think you need another horse? I understand there are two extra ones already here. Besides, I'm sure Fanny will be fine in another week or two."

Leon sighed, but chose to ignore her snipe. "Maybe. Maybe not. I need to get out there and check out a few things for our next job anyway. We need to make up for this last dismal effort."

Haley frowned at him. "Why? Jack said the gang is fine. You didn't even need this last job. Why don't you leave well enough alone?"

Leon felt his jaw tighten. *Oh, here we go again.* "It's what we do, Sweetheart. And I won't close off this season with another bad job. If you don't like it, you don't have to hang around."

“Oh, Napoleon. You’re always so abrupt, trying to chase me off. I worry about you. Both of you. Especially after what’s happened. Bess is beside herself with grief. She’s talking about leaving and going back to Colorado. But she has no way to make a living other than what she used to do, but she’s getting too old for it now. I’m worried about what’s going to happen to her if she leaves.”

“You spend a lot of time worrying about people who are capable of making their own decisions. Bess will get Wesley’s share, and if she does decide to leave, we’ll make sure she has enough to get established. We don’t turn our back on our own.”

“Except working for you can get a person killed.”

“They know the risks.” Leon’s gaze hardened. “We all accept them.”

“Which is exactly why I want Jack to leave before he gets killed. I would think you’d want your nephew to have a chance at a better life.”

“My nephew is old enough to make his own choices. He doesn’t need some woman nagging at him. And for that matter, neither do I.”

Fanny’s eyes widened at the raised voices. She blew a snort and stepped back, her anxiety rising.

“Oh no, Fanny.” Haley reached for the door latch, preparing to enter the stall and comfort the mare.

Leon grabbed the door and slammed it shut just as she started to open it.

“Leave her alone. I would appreciate you keeping your hands off things that belong to me.”

Haley turned flashing eyes toward him. “Things that belong to you? Like Jack?”

“Yes! Like Jack. If you want to leave, all the better. But don’t think for a minute that you’re going to drag my partner along with you. Jack has told you, plain as can be, that he doesn’t want to leave, so you need to stop pressuring him.”

Haley huffed, hands on hips. “You’re just jealous.”

Leon snorted. “I just know my nephew, and I’m telling you to back off. You push him into a corner and you’ll regret it.”

“Oh really? Now you’re threatening me?”

“Not me, Sweetheart. You push Jack too hard, and you’ll see a side to him that you won’t like. Do yourself a favor and let him make up his own mind.”

“Oh really, Napoleon. Your petty jealousy is pathetic. Now, it’s time for me to start supper. Are you going to join us, or are you going to stay here and sulk in the barn?”

“What are you making?”

“I thought we’d finish up the elk stew, and we still have some vegetables left from the garden. And the bread I made yesterday.”

Leon nodded. “Okay.”

“All right. Come up in about an hour.” She headed to the barn door, then stopped and turned. “Oh, be a dear and apply some of Mukua’s salve to Fanny’s leg. I meant to do it but we got busy talking and now I don’t have time.”

“Oh sure.”

“When will Mukua be coming home?”

“Next week, I hope. He still won’t be able to move around much, but we need him here.”

“Yes. It’ll be good to have him home where he belongs.”

“Hmm.”

“See you in an hour. Don’t forget to wash up first.”

“Hmm.”

Leon snatched up his work sheet and, with an elaborate, deep-throated growl, scrunched the paper into a ball and threw it against the windowpane.

Haley glanced up from her darning and cocked a brow at the frustrated gang leader.

“Having problems?”

Leon snapped dark eyes in her direction. He had forgotten she was there.

“I don’t know why I even bother. There’s not enough in that safe to buy a steak supper.”

Haley allowed a ghost of a smile as she returned to her chore.

“No trains coming?”

“Sure, there’s trains.” Leon started pacing. “But none of them are carrying anything we want.”

“Did it occur to you that you might be pushing your luck? Perhaps this is fate telling you to leave well enough alone.”

“I don’t count on luck, or fate. Planning, strategy, making sure all the contingencies are covered. That’s why I’m successful.”

Haley allowed another small smile.

“Whatever you say.”

Leon turned on her, mouth open for a retort, when a single gunshot from the lookout warned of riders approaching.

Both people forgot their discussion and headed for the door.

Coming down the steps, the chill of this damp autumn day reminded Leon that he should have grabbed his coat, but he wasn't going to return for it now. He strode across the yard and met up with Jack and Mukua as they emerged from the barn. Other members of the gang soon joined them, and they all waited in anticipation for the rescue party to arrive.

It only took a few minutes and then Gus, Malachi and Hank trotted into sight. Rex rode in with them, but Hank led another horse that remained riderless.

"Oh no," Mary's soft moan said it for everyone.

Haley slid past Leon and went over to console her gang-sister.

Leon noted that Haley had remembered to snatch her shawl on the way out and he again kicked himself for letting his brain get ahead of his common sense.

He stepped forward as the rescuers pulled rein and dismounted.

"What happened?"

"Aw crap." Gus spit then snarled with his own disappointment. "Gettin' Rex was easy enough. They still ain't changed that lock on the backdoor of the jailhouse. But," He sent a quick glance to Mary then back to his boss. "I guess Luke was shot up worse than we thought. They'd already moved him ta Cheyenne. There ain't no way we're gonna get to 'im now."

Mary came forward and grabbed Gus's arm.

"But is he still alive?" Her eyes pleaded for the right answer.

"As far as we know," was all Gus could give her.

Haley moved up and again put her arms around her friend's shoulders.

"He'll be all right. He's young and strong. He'll be fine."

Mary didn't answer. She was both angry and fearful over her lover's fate.

Rex came to her, the remnants of a black eye shining through his strands of yellow hair.

"He was awake and aware of everything the last time I saw him." He put a hand on Mary's shoulder and squeezed it. "Like Haley says, he'll be all right. They'll take good care of 'im in Cheyenne."

Mary's eyes snapped up, tears brimming. "And then what? Prison?"

Leon and Jack exchanged a glance through the group gathered between them.

Leon sighed. "He won't get long. A couple of years at most, maybe out in eighteen months. Did he even have a reward posted on him?"

"Yeah," Malachi piped in, as he and Hank gathered up the horses to take them into the barn. "'Bout two hun' red, last I heard."

"See, Mary?" Leon smiled at her, hoping to lighten the blow. "That's penny-ante stuff. He'll be out before you know it."

“But what am I going to do? What if he doesn’t make it? I don’t want to go back to the life I had.”

Leon frowned. “What do you mean? You can stay right here.”

“But what if he doesn’t come back?” Tears rolled down her cheeks as fear of the unknown griped her.

“That doesn’t matter.” Leon was insulted that the ladies all seemed to think that he was a cold-hearted monster. “This is your home, and you can stay here for as long as you like. That goes for Bess, too.”

“Come on,” Haley steered Mary toward the cabin. “Let’s put on a pot of tea. Rex, be a dear and tell Bess that she’s welcome to join us, if she would like.”

Rex nodded as the two women left the group.

“It’s good to have you back, Rex,” Leon said. “How’s your eye?”

“It’s fine. Thanks for gettin’ me outta there. You too, Gus. Thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Gus fidgeted then diverted his attention to Lobo. “Hey, Lobo, speakin’ a tea, we got any a that whiskey left?”

Lobo grinned. “Yeah. Enough for a couple a rounds.”

Gus cocked a brow at Leon.

“Yeah,” Leon answered the hidden question. “You fellas go celebrate. Just don’t get too rowdy.”

With that, the gang dispersed faster than they’d gathered.

Leon strode over to Jack and Mukua.

“Damn.”

“Yeah.” Jack leaned on his cane; his injured leg not yet able to take his weight. “Two dead and one outta reach. Ain’t the best way ta close out the season.”

“I was hoping to get one more job in before the snows come.”

Jack smirked. “I ain’t up for that. I figure we oughta just call it. The law ain’t gonna be too happy that their main fish got away. They just might be settin’ another trap.”

“I’m thinking that that’s what they think we’ll be thinking and not bother. Which makes it the ideal time to strike again.”

“Like I said, I ain’t up to it. And neither is Mukua.”

Leon glanced at the old Indian.

Mukua smiled at him, but truth be accepted, he didn’t look well.

Leon sighed. “Yeah, okay. I know when I’m beat.”

The three men noticed Bess leaving the bunk house and they watched her as she hurried toward the leader’s cabin.

“Dammit. I’m sure not going back in there for a while. And I went and forgot my coat.”

“My little room is warm,” Mukua told him. “I also have a bottle of whiskey.”

Jack and Leon smiled.

“I still haven’t decided what I want to do,” Bess said as she dabbed at her damp eyes. “It’s so soon, I haven’t gotten over the shock of it yet. Isn’t that silly? We all know the dangers of this profession, but we convince ourselves that it will never happen to us. And now Wes is gone.” Her voice cracked as more tears welled and over-flowed. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

The other ladies both reached out a hand to comfort her.

“You have time.” Haley squeezed her arm. “Napoleon said you can stay on here if you want.”

“Yes, he did. And goodness knows, I’m too old now to return to my previous profession.” She shuttered. “I remember looking to the end of the street from my second-floor window and seeing the poor women there, barely scraping a living out of their filthy cribs. I swore that would never be me. I would save my money and leave the life before it came to that.” She shrugged and smiled through her sadness. “I guess we all say that, don’t we? Oh, Wes was a godsend. I even liked ‘im. He treated me fine and never once hit me. We made a good life for ourselves here. But now, it’s gone . . .”

“Have you no family you can go home to?” Haley asked.

“Oh, Sweetie, any family I had is a distant memory. Wes was my only family. I can’t think of any other place where a black man and a white woman could live together in peace, but I don’t want to stay here, tendin’ after those yahoos in the bunkhouse, not now. But I suppose I might have to; it’s all I got.”

Haley nodded, understanding her plight. Then she turned to Mary.

“What about you? Are you doing to stay here, too?”

Mary sighed, staring at her teacup. “Yes, I think so. For a while, anyway. Until I know what happens to Luke. If he’s only going to be gone for a couple of years, well, I’ll wait for him. Just like Bess, I don’t have anywhere else to go except back to where I come from. I have a few years left of making decent money, but I know where that road eventually leads.” She glanced at Bess. “I don’t wanna wind up in one of those cribs, either. It’s the end of the trail, that is.”

Haley sighed and poured the last of the tea into the cups.

“Let me put on another pot of tea.” She stood up, poured hot water into the pot and added more tea leaves. “I have something I want to talk to you ladies about.”

She brought the tea pot with her and set it in the center of the table to steep. She sat down and took a deep breath, then locked eyes with each woman in turn.

They waited in expectation.

“I have an advantage over you ladies in that I do have family, such as it is. Oh, my father is a boozing, brutal man, but he’s also wealthy.” Eyebrows shot up, and she knew she had their interest. “I had an older brother, but that fool got himself killed over a dispute concerning a young lady’s virtue. Now, I am the only heir.”

Mary gasped, a hand coming to her mouth. “Are you sure? If you have any uncles or other male relatives, the estate will go to them. Unless you marry that is.”

“No.” Haley smiled. “There is already a will. Papa has left me his sole beneficiary. He owns a ranch in Golden, Colorado. I grew up there, and though there aren’t many fond memories of the place, it is my home, and I will own it as soon as Papa dies.”

Bess looked skeptical. “Is the will notarized? Are there witnesses? Do you have a copy of it? Your father could change it, you know. It can be contested if you’re not married.”

“Yes, I know. I was hoping that Jack . . .” Her whimsical gaze drifted to the door of the cabin. “Oh well. Being married to an outlaw probably wouldn’t hold much credence with the law anyway. Still, Papa hates his brother, and I have no other male relatives. The ranch is mine once he dies.”

“Well, that’s certainly good for you, but how does that help us?”

Haley patted Bess’s hand.

“I have plans for the place. It’s a cattle ranch now, but I want to raise horses. Fine, quality horses that people will come from miles around to buy. I can sell the cattle to help finance it, and, as I said, my father is a wealthy man. If we’re careful, we can do it.”

Mary and Bess exchanged a look.

“We?” Mary asked. “I don’t know anything about raising horses.”

“I know. But that’s not all we’re going to be doing. I want to open a home for women like us. Women who fell onto hard times, and who had to turn to, well, your previous professions in order to survive. I want to offer them a safe place to come, where they can get on their feet and turn things around for themselves. Prostitutes, unwed mothers, and well, like me, who are simply running away from an abusive life. I want to help. I want to give them another choice. I might even call it that: The Other Choice Ranch. What do you think?”

Haley was met with silence.

“I don’t know,” Mary chewed her lip. “That sounds awfully grandiose. Besides, I want to wait for Luke. I’m not going to walk out on him now.”

“No, of course you’re not.” Haley said. “And we still have to wait for that old drunken sod of a father of mine to drop dead. I doubt he’ll live much longer, but even after that, there will be legalities to take care of. This isn’t going to happen overnight. Besides, once you know where Luke is, you can write him letters. It could be a good job for him, once he gets out. A real, legitimate job, working the ranch. You could build something together and not have to worry about him getting shot from the saddle every time he leaves the hideout.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true. What do you think, Bess?”

“Well, if it comes together the way you think, it could be a good thing. What the hell, I don’t have any other options.” She nodded. “I’m in.”

Mary sighed. “I don’t know. Do I have to decide right now?”

“No, of course not. I’ll be staying here through the winter, and I get the feeling you will be as well.”

“Yes, I suppose. Napoleon said I can stay if I want.”

“I know I’m not going anywhere,” Bess stated. “We’ll be here through the winter.”

“Good.” Haley poured more tea. “Come spring, life could be looking a whole lot better for all of us.”

San Francisco

“Gabriella! Over here.”

Gabriella looked around the busy platform, seeking out the owner of that familiar voice. She frowned with the irritation of attempting to find a tree in the forest. People surrounded her in the hustle of either departing the huffing iron beast behind her or attempting to get aboard. She shaded her eyes from the afternoon sun and peered over head tops until she spotted the waving arm.

“Helena! Hello!”

The two women fought against the conflicting tides as they strove to reach one another.

Finally, they managed it and embraced in a welcoming greeting.

“Thank goodness.” Helena pulled away from her young sister and scrutinized her features. “Are you all right? I must admit to feeling some trepidation when you failed to respond to my enquiries. Then, to discover that you were being held against your will—”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry to have put you through that. But really, Helena, it wasn’t as terrible as some suggest.”

Helena cocked a brow. “Really, Gabriella? Do tell. Was that scoundrel actually a dashing and handsome rogue of the west?”

Gabriella laughed through her weariness. “I’ll tell you all about it once we get settled. Right now, all I can think about is a relaxing bath, a glass of sherry and some supper.”

“Come along then. I think I can manage all that. I have a surrey waiting. I’m sure Ogden has your bags loaded by now.”

“Ohh, thank you. But tell me, did the money arrive safe and sound?”

“It certainly did.” Helena directed Gabriella toward the waiting surrey. “But tell me, how did you come into such a fortune? I know for a fact you wouldn’t make that much as a thespian.”

Gabriella sighed as Ogden offered a hand to help her into the surrey.

The ladies settled in and they got underway.

“All I can tell you is that I earned it doing a bit of undercover work on the side.”

Helena chuckled. “Undercover work, hum? Don’t you think it’s time you gave that up?”

“Yes, it is. No more of that life for me.”

“Good.”

Evening settled in upon the household by the time supper was done and the two ladies retired to the sitting room.

“Barkley, two brandies, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t forget to warm them.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Gabriella smiled at her sister. Though much older than Gabriella, Helena was the closest thing to a true companion than any of their mutual family members. Attractive in her day, Helena was still a handsome woman, though she made no effort to maintain this. She dressed plainly but comfortably and had no interest in attracting the attention of the opposite sex. She had worked hard to get her doctorate, and even harder to get accepted in the field of medicine. But she had done it, through persistence and an ability her male counterparts could not deny, she became a highly sought-after physician. This drive had cost her a husband and children, but she felt the trade-off was more than worth it.

Now that Gabriella was on her own again: her husband murdered, her child absconded with, and most of her family and friends shunning her for

her wanton ways, Helena was the only one who had stayed true. And now, Gabriella needed her support more than ever.

Barkley returned with the brandies, then discreetly disappeared.

“So, tell me, Gabriella, how did you wind up in the clutches of those outlaws?”

“Oh well, it was nothing, really.” Gabriella took a sip of brandy and collected her thoughts. “They stopped the train I was on. I had run into their leader, Napoleon Nash, before, and I recognized him. We had met in Denver during our last show there, and he showed too much interest in me. I tried to put him off and thought I had done so, but then he stopped the train and saw me again. He did not want to take no for an answer. I panicked. I grabbed one of their horses and made a run for it.”

Helena cocked a brow. “You panicked? Really, Gabriella, I know you better than that.”

Gabriella sighed. “Well, yes. There is a little more to it than that.”

“Umm hm.”

“Fine. To be honest, I also found him to be quite attractive.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And, truth be known, it scared me. He’s an outlaw, Helena. The very same breed of man whom Teddy and I sought to bring to justice. The very same breed of man who—” Her throat tightened and she choked on the words.

“Yes, I know, dear. I can understand your trepidation.”

Gabriella nodded and took another sip of brandy.

“I thought I had gotten away from him, and I was safe. Then, there he was, big as life, robbing the very train I was on in the hopes of putting distance between us. So yes, I panicked. Unfortunately, he came after me, and that silly horse I took stumbled and threw me. The next thing I remember was waking up in their hideout.”

“Oh. Well, that’s more than inconvenient. Just you and a bunch of uncouth men?”

“No, thankfully. Two of the gang members had wives with them. There was also a young woman living in the leader’s cabin. She had some connection to Jack Kiefer, Napoleon’s partner, though I never could quite make out what it was.”

“Really? So, not the obvious?”

“No. They slept in separate beds.”

“Oh. How odd. Honor among thieves?”

“All I know is that Napoleon never made any advances upon me. He’d only brought me to their hideout because I was unconscious, and he didn’t want to simply leave me in the middle of nowhere. He truly was a gentleman in all ways.”

“You were fortunate there.”

“Yes, I know. Once I was well enough, they let me go. That is when I sent you the telegram, letting you know that I was all right. I am sorry for the worry I caused you.”

“It couldn’t be helped. All’s well that ends well. At least for you. Things didn’t go so well for that gang though.”

Gabriella took another sip of brandy as a guilty knot clutched her stomach.

“Oh? What’s happened?”

“It was in all the newspapers. Didn’t you read any of them during your journey.”

“No. I was exhausted. I just wanted quiet.”

“Oh well. It seems the law got wind of a train the gang was going to rob. They set a trap and did some real damage. Two outlaws were killed, and two others taken into custody. Needless to say, the train did not get robbed.”

Gabriella felt her skin go cold.

“Two were killed?”

“Yes.”

“Did they say which two?”

Helena shrugged it off. “Oh, nobody of any note. I can’t even remember their names. But I tell you, the man in charge of the trap was not happy. Carlyle, I believe his name was.” She chuckled. “His two main fish had gotten away, and I’m sure heads rolled on that one.” Helena stopped talking as she noted her sister’s pale complexion. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Helena smiled with that annoying way of older sisters.

“Are you sure you’re quite over Mr. Nash?”

“What? Yes, of course. Why would you think otherwise?”

“Mr. Barkley, more brandy please.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“My sister and I have a lot of catching up to do.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

June 1875

Leon stood on the front porch, leaning against the support rail, his legs crossed at the ankles, while he nursed his fifth cup of coffee. The afternoon sun still held some chill on this late June day, but summer would soon be drying up the creek beds, and the heat of the day would keep them indoors until the evening coolness.

Leon didn't mind. He liked this time of year. He spent the winter months indoors, planning many of their jobs for the coming season, so by June he was antsy to get out and put them to the test. Especially since Haley was still in residence. She and Leon had gradually relaxed into a working relationship, but she was still sharing space in his cabin, and he looked forward to her imminent departure.

The only bug in the grease was that Jack didn't want her to go. Though things still remained on the level of "just friends", Jack enjoyed her company, and Leon had to admit, she did make a mean apple pie. But Leon worried Jack might just give in to her nudging and leave with her. That would not be good. Leon needed him. He didn't want to run the gang without Jack by his side.

A single pistol shot brought him back to the present. He smiled. That would be Jack returning from town. He and Haley had gone into Bear Creek to spend the afternoon doing whatever it was that young women liked to do in town. It had been nice to have the cabin all to himself, even just for those few short hours. But this time of year, getting back home before nightfall was important. High in the mountains, like this, the weather can change on a silver dollar, and even on a trail one was familiar with, things could get treacherous in the dark.

The buckboard rattled into the yard and stopped by the barn. The smiles on the faces of the two passengers told Leon all he had to know. They'd had a good day.

Jack set the brake and stepped down, then came around and assisted Haley to disembark. He spotted Leon on the porch and sent him a wave before returning his attention to the team.

Haley gathered her parcels and hurried to the cabin.

"I'm sorry we're so late getting back, Napoleon. You must be famished." She came up the steps and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll get supper going."

“No need. Bess figured you’d be late getting back, and most likely tired as well. She brought supper up. It just needs to be heated.”

“Oh.” Haley smiled. “That was kind of her. I’ll change into my leisures, then see about getting supper on the table.” She glanced at Leon’s cup. “Is there any coffee left?”

“Yes. And it’s still hot, too.”

“Oh good.” She gave him a pat on the arm. “I’ll bring out a cup for Jack. Would you like some more?” And before Leon could answer, she took his cup and disappeared into the cabin.

Leon sighed. No wonder Jack didn’t want her to go.

“Hey, Leon. Did ya enjoy your nice quiet day all on your lonesome?”

Leon glanced at the bunkhouse, noting the men sitting around, playing cards and drinking coffee. Hardly what he would call being alone. Still, it had been nice and quiet in the cabin.

“Didn’t take you long to tend to the team.”

“Yeah.” Jack came onto the porch. “Preacher was in the barn, so he took ‘em over.”

Leon nodded. “You have a good day?”

“Sure.” Jack sat in one of the rockers and stretched out his long legs. “It were pleasant enough. Got a bit a bad news, though.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

“Levi Hendricks got arrested. He’s gonna be doin’ time.”

Leon frowned, not at all pleased with this announcement. “Dammit. When?”

Jack shrugged. “I dunno. He’s already gone ta trial, so it musta been a while now.” Leon sighed. “Now we have to find ourselves a new fence. And one we know we can trust. That’s not going to be easy.”

“Hmm. Maybe the fellas in the Cripple Creek Gang can recommend someone.”

“Yeah. Couldn’t hurt to ask.”

“Yeah. Oh—” Jack dug into his breast pocket and brought out a small envelope. “There was a telegram there for ya. It’s likely pretty old, since someone woulda had ta bring it up to Bear Creek from Carbon. Still,” he shrugged. “Here it is.”

Leon frowned. “A telegram?”

Jack held it out to him just as Haley returned with the coffee. She set the cups down on the railing, then saw the paper in Leon’s hands.

“Oh yes. The telegram. I clean forgot about that. We think it’s from Gabriella.”

Leon sat down, staring at the envelope. “Gabriella? I highly doubt that.”

Haley shrugged. "Oh well. Supper will be about half an hour." And she disappeared into the cabin again.

"Ain't ya gonna open it?" Jack asked.

Leon sighed. "I suppose that would be the prudent thing to do."

"Sure would, ifn ya wanna know who sent it."

Leon tore open the envelope and slipped the piece of paper out. He unfolded it, then frowned when he read the name of the sender.

"Yeah, it is from Gabriella."

"Oh yeah? That takes a lotta nerve after what she done." Jack watched his partner's face go from mildly curious to surprise and then finally to concern. "What's it say?"

Leon looked up with an expression of fear mixed with caution.

Jack frowned. "What?"

"She's," Leon coughed. "Umm . . . she's had a baby."

Jack's brows shot up. "Really? Who's the pa?"

"Ah," Leon gulped. He turned the page over, hoping to find an escape there. "According to her, I am."

Jack's jaw dropped, then his eyes widened, and he broke out in a loud guffaw.

"Well ain't that somethin'! This kinda changes things, don't it? What is it, a girl or a boy?"

"Um . . . a girl"

"Ha, ha, Leon." Jack gave him a slap on the arm. "Congratulations, you're a papa!"

Leon looked at him with eyes filled with dread.

Jack's laughter dropped and he frowned. "What's the matter?"

"I don't want to be a papa."

"Why not? It ain't nothin'. She's still livin' with her sister, ain't she?"

"Yeah."

"Does she say she wants ya ta drop everything and come marry her?"

Leon turned the paper over again, in case he missed anything.

"No."

"Well then, what's the problem? Considerin' our life style, she's probably just as happy not havin' ya around."

"Then why tell me at all?"

Jack shrugged, then reached for his coffee.

"I dunno. Maybe she just wanted ya ta know."

Seeing Jack with his coffee helped Leon to focus and, he too, picked up his cup and took a gulp of the pacifying liquid.

"Maybe she needs money. I could send her—"

"Ya mean on top of the \$75,000 she already took?"

Leon looked at him in a daze. "Oh yeah. I forgot about that."

“You forgot about that?” Jack sat back in the rocker and chuckled. “You really are in shock. Ya want some whiskey in that coffee?”

Then both men noticed Mukua leave the barn and head down to the bunkhouse.

“You gonna tell Preacher-man about this?”

“I suppose I should. He never did think that Gabriella turned on us.” Leon sighed and chewed his lip, “but I really don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I already know what he’s going to say.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Hmmm.”

Jack grimaced. “Oh yeah. I don’t envy ya that.”

The partners looked at each other, then sat back in their rockers and sipped coffee.

Mukua continued to the bunkhouse for his own supper.

“I think it’s time I went home,” Haley announced as she passed the potatoes.

Both men glanced at her, then at each other.

Leon took the bowl and scooped a healthy helping onto his plate. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

Jack took the bowl and a helping of potatoes. “I thought you said ya didn’t have a place ta go to.”

“Well, no place I wanted to go to. But you knew I was planning on leaving come the thaw. That is why you’ve been paying me, isn’t it? So I could earn enough to help me get situated.”

“Well, yeah.” Jack picked at his meat. “I guess I figured you’d stay on a little longer. At least until summer.”

Haley shook her head. “No. There are things I need to check on at home.” She smiled, noting Jack’s sulk. “I might very well be back. We’ll see.”

Leon cocked a brow. “Back?”

Haley sent him a smirk. “Yes, I know, Napoleon. You want me gone, period.”

“Oh, well no, I wouldn’t go so far as to—”

“Of course, you would. And you have been, all winter.”

“She’s got ya there.”

“Okay, all right. I like my space.” Leon took a spoonful of stew. “And it’s been awfully crowded in this cabin. It wasn’t built for three.”

Jack sulked.

Haley reached over to take his hand. "You can always come with me."

"Oh, here we go." Leon slapped his fork onto the table and pushed his shoulders back. "You just won't give up, will you? You can't accept the fact that he'd rather stay here than go traipsing after you to who knows where."

"I'm not asking him to traipse after me. I'm simply suggesting that he can come with me, so he'll know I'm fine. Once I get home, he can come back here if he chooses."

"Right. You figure once he gets to your place, wherever that is, he'll simply decide to stay with you."

"That's absolute nonsense—"

"Will you two cut it out? Damn. It's like havin' Gabriella here still. I can make up my own mind, ya know."

The bickering pair came down a notch.

Leon crossed his arms. "Fine. Make up your mind then. You going with her or staying here?"

"I dunno yet. I might go, just ta make sure she gets where she's goin'. But I ain't gonna stay gone. Elk Mountain is my home. I ain't made out ta be no farmer."

"Rancher," Haley corrected him.

"Whatever. It's still back-breakin' work. It ain't for me."

Now Haley was in a huff.

"Fine. But now that I have the money to pay my way, I'm going. I need to see if . . ."

Both men waited for her to finish her thought. Nothing came forth.

"If what?"

She glanced up at the unified question.

"Well, if my father is still alive. If he is, I won't be staying. If he's not, then there are affairs I need to attend to. I told you I have plans."

"Yeah, I know." Jack frowned. "We just didn't know ya actually had . . . plans. So, you still have a pa and a place ta call home?"

"If I still have a pa, then it's not my home. If he's dead, then, yes, I have a home. That's why I need to go and find out. My whole future could depend upon it."

Leon sighed. "So, where is this home you don't have?"

Haley sneered at him. "It's in Colorado. Golden to be precise."

"That's ranch country."

Haley nodded at Leon. "Yes, it is."

Jack frowned. "So, you already own a ranch?"

"Once my father dies, yes."

Leon and Jack exchanged another look.

Haley looked from one to the other.

“What?”

Jack jabbed the table with his forefinger.

“You told us you had nobody. That’s why we took ya in.”

“And I don’t. My pa is no family to me. I thought you could figure this out by the jist of the conversation.”

“Yeah, well,” Jack looked at Leon for support.

Leon shrugged. “I guess, considering she hopes he’s dead, he’s probably not much of a father.”

Haley snorted a laugh. “You certainly got that right.”

“Okay.” Leon shifted, taking control of the conversation. “So, you want to go to Golden to check on the state of your affairs. If your father is still alive, you think you’re coming back here. If he’s dead, then you will stay there and follow your dream.”

“Yes.”

“What if we don’t want you back?”

“Leon!” Jack scowled at his partner. “Course she can come back. She won’t have no place else ta go.”

“That’s what she said last time.”

“And she was right. She couldn’t go back to her pa, not if he was the one who had been—” He hesitated and sent Haley a sheepish look. “Well, who was . . .”

“That’s all right, Jack. You can say it. If he was the one who was abusing me.”

“Yeah.”

Haley sent a pointed look to Leon.

Leon sighed and threw up his hands in defeat.

“Fine. You can come back here if he’s still alive. But Jack’s not going with you.”

“Leon!”

“I have someplace I need to go,” Leon stated, “and I want you with me.”

San Francisco, California

Leon tugged at his suit jacket. “Do I look okay?”

“Yeah, ya look fine. I don’t know what you’re so nervous about.”

“Just wait until it’s your turn.”

“My turn? I ain’t in no hurry.”

“Well neither was I, and yet, here we are.”

“Hmm. True.”

Leon drew in a deep, fortifying breath then pulled the door chime.

Within a few moments, the door opened to reveal a stodgy individual who cocked a disapproving brow at the riffraff on the step.

“My mistress donates to her own charities. Good day.”

The door started to close upon them.

Leon put his hands out to stop the door, while Jack stuck his foot in the way.

“We ain’t here ta collect for charities.”

Mr. Barkley sneered down his nose at the blond-haired man in the ratty suit.

“Indeed. What are you here for then?”

Leon tried his best smile but it came up as a nervous twitch.

“Ah, we’re here to see Mrs. Gabriella Tanguay.”

Mr. Barkley looked from one to the other.

“Is she expecting you?”

“Well, no, I don’t think so.”

“Good day.”

The door started to close again, and this time, both Jack and Leon made a concerted rush at the obstacle. Ramming into it, they forced the door open, knocking Mr. Barkley back a few steps and permitting them access to the front hall.

“This is absurd,” Barkley huffed to his full height. “I shall call the authorities.”

Jack’s gun was in his hand. “No ya won’t.”

Mr. Barkley gapped, not sure to be angry or amused at this raggedy pair.

“Well, isn’t this unexpected,” came a feminine voice from behind the doorman. “Just decided to come barging into our home without by your leave? Don’t you think it would have been prudent to telegraph first?”

Leon found himself speechless as he gazed upon Gabriella’s countenance again. He’d forgotten how beautiful she was.

Jack stepped up to the plate. “We didn’t want ya disappearin’ on us.”

“And why would I do that?”

Leon recovered. “Considering we had to dig for the address, I figured you didn’t want me knowing where you were. All I knew was that you were staying with your sister in San Francisco, but—”

“If you knew I didn’t want you here, then why did you come?”

“No, Gabriella, please.” Leon stepped forward. “Can’t I see her?”

Mr. Barkley moved between this uncouth man and his employer’s sister.

“I think the lady has indicated—”

“No, no, it’s all right, Mr. Barkley.” Gabriella stepped around the large man. “I do know these gentlemen, and we’re fine. Perhaps you will inform my sister that we have guests in the parlor.”

“Are you sure, ma’am?”

“Yes.”

“As you wish.”

Barkley gave a slight bow, but the scowl he sent the two visitors did not need translating. He then discreetly melted away and went in search of his mistress.

“Well, come in,” Gabriella ushered them forward. “And Jack, please put your gun away.”

“Oh. Ah, yeah. Sorry.”

Afternoon tea arrived as the three people struggled with conversation.

“Are you doing well?” Leon accepted his teacup, wishing he had something stronger.

“I’m fine.”

Another awkward pause.

“Your telegram was a surprise.”

“I’m sure.”

Leon and Jack exchanged looks.

Leon sighed. “Can I see her?”

“She’s asleep.”

Jack reached for a pastry to give his mouth something to do. This conversation didn’t involve him.

Leon sighed again. “Does your sister know that I’m her father?”

“Of course. Well,” Gabriella rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t be able to hide it from her even if I tried.”

“Is she angry?” Leon looked over his shoulder, half expecting to be attacked from behind.

“No. My sister has done and seen many things. She is not easily offended. There are others though, who would judge, so my daughter’s parentage is not discussed.”

Leon frowned. “People must be curious. You show up here on your own and in the family way. They must ask.”

Gabriella poured her own tea. “There is no need to ask. Before I arrived, my sister informed her neighbors that I had fallen upon unfortunate circumstances. That my husband died in an accident before we even knew of our blessing, therefore I was coming to live with her until I

found my footing. It's perfectly legitimate, and instead of being scorned I have been met with sympathy and support. It works."

"Is that what you're going to tell her?"

"Who?"

"My daughter." Leon surprised himself with the edge in his voice.

"Of course."

"That's not fair."

"Fair?" Gabriella and Jack locked eyes for an instant. Leon's attack was unexpected to all three. Gabriella's green eyes snapped back to the protester. "Are you prepared to give up your lifestyle? Are you prepared to marry me and be a full-time father to our child?"

Leon shifted and coughed. "Well . . ."

Finally, Jack spoke up. "That sounds like what Haley wants me ta do. I seem ta recall, ya ain't too keen on that."

"Yeah, but—"

"But what? This is different?"

"It is. You and Haley don't have a young'un."

"And I see that as all the more reason why ya need ta just walk away from this. Gabriella ain't askin' ya for nothin'. You wanted ta make sure she was all right, and ya have. You told me yourself you don't wanna be a pa."

Leon shot a look of defiance at Jack.

"So, you're telling me I should deny my responsibilities? I have a daughter, and I should just abandon them?"

"Ya ain't abandonin' 'em. You just ain't involved."

Leon's eyes flashed. He shot to his feet and began to pace.

"Thanks a lot, Jack. Is that the kind of person you think I am? Like I'm just going to pretend that she doesn't exist?"

"No. You can stay in touch. Maybe even visit once in a while, I dunno. Send money ifn ya feel the need. But come on, Leon. Even if ya gave up outlawn', it's too late. We ain't just wanted, we got Wells Fargo and Pinkertons interested in us now. You think a man like Carlyle is just gonna let ya walk away? If you came here ta be a pa, you'd only bring trouble with ya."

Leon stopped pacing and glanced at Gabriella.

Her expression bordered on smug. "Thank you, Jack."

Jack shrugged. "Yeah, well . . ."

Leon hung his head. Jack was right, and he knew it.

"Is this what you want, Gabriella? For me to just go away?"

"I think that would be best."

"Then why did you send me the telegram in the first place?"

“I felt that you should at least know. Who can tell what the future will bring? Perhaps having a daughter will affect the decisions you make. Children have a way of changing your life, even if they’re not a large part of it. It’s already affecting you, and you haven’t even met her yet.”

Leon brightened. “Yet? Does that mean you’ll let me see her?”

Gabriella frowned. She hadn’t meant to let that slip. But now it was out, and the look of hope in Leon’s eyes made it hard to refuse him.

“She’s usually awake in another hour or so. If you’re willing to wait—”

“Yes, we’ll wait. Won’t we Jack?”

Jack grinned. “Sure.”

Gabriella rang the small bell that sat on the side table, and the hired help appeared from a discreet door.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Inform the cook that we will be having two guests for supper.”

Ogden cocked a brow at the gentlemen.

“Yes ma’am.”

Leon paced around the parlor, looking at paintings on the wall and picking up vases to scrutinize the signatures on the bottom. Not that the markings meant anything to him, but it gave him something to focus on rather than the knot of anxiety in his gut.

Jack stretched out in the armchair, his arms and long legs crossed into relaxation.

Leon looked at him and again resented his nephew’s ability to shut down.

“What’s keeping her so long?”

Jack shrugged but kept his eyes closed. “How should I know? I know less about babies than you do.”

“What do I know about babies?”

“Ya made one, didn’t ya? That makes ya more experienced than me.”

“How do you know you don’t have any young’uns out there, somewhere? I only know because Gabriella told me.”

“What ya don’t know, don’t hurt ya.”

Leon was about to retort, when the side door opened, and Gabriella rejoined them. In her arms was a blanket-wrapped bundle that squirmed and made quiet cooing noises.

She instantly had the attention of both men. Jack stood up as Leon simply stood rooted to the floor, not sure what his next move should be.

Gabriella smiled, maternal pride and love beaming from her face.

“Here she is.” Coming to Leon, she set the bundle into his arms.

Leon gaped. For one of those rare moments in his life, he found himself speechless. He gazed down at the infant, who gazed up at him, and he felt a confusion of emotions. Fear was one. Over-whelming joy was another, but mostly, he felt confusion. A memory tugged at his consciousness. A memory that brought both pride and great sadness yet refused to come forth into the light. Is this what all new fathers feel?

He felt Jack standing at his shoulder, also peering down at the rosy face.

Jack grinned and stroked a chubby cheek with his thumb.

“Hey there, Darlin’. Is this your papa?”

The child’s brown eyes shifted from the voice back to the man holding her. She gurgled and smiled at him.

Leon was struck dumb when he saw his own dimples coming back at him.

Jack laughed. “Ha! Yup. She’s yours, all right.”

Gabriella sent him a look of mock indignation. “Of course, she is. Do you really think I am so scandalous that I wouldn’t know who the father of my child was?”

“Oh no, that ain’t . . .” Then Jack grinned at her, when he realized she was teasing him.

Leon finally came out of his trance and let the baby’s fingers take hold of his.

“Hi there, Sweetheart. What’s your name?”

Gabriella gazed at Leon, waiting to see his reaction.

“Her name is Hannah.”

Leon’s eyes snapped up to meet hers. “Hannah?”

“Yes.”

“How did you . . .?”

“Oh come, Monsieur Nash, I used to make my living as a detective. It really wasn’t that hard to track down your family lineage.”

“Oh.” Leon looked back at his daughter, as she sucked on his finger. “You named her after my mother.”

“Yes. I felt it was important that she have something of yours. Other than your dimples, that is.”

Leon grinned, said dimples coming out to play.

“Thank you.”

Leon eyed the fine silverware that indicated the four settings at the finely dressed dining table. He picked up the fork, feeling the smoothness

of the form along with the weight and balance of the utensil. His agile mind calculated it's worth as a single piece, then as part of a collective.

He sighed and set the fork back in its place, then glanced up to find a pair of dark eyes twinkling at him though wrinkling creases.

The matron of the house had entered the room and now stood, smiling at him.

"Does my fine silver meet with your approval, Mister . . . Harden?"

Leon felt the color rise and he coughed to cover his embarrassment.

"Ah, sorry, Mrs., ah, Miss . . ."

Gabriella stepped forward. "Yes, I must introduce you. Helena, this is my brother-in-law, Josh Harden, and his friend, Rick Roundtree. Gentlemen, this is my sister, Helena Dion."

The two men came forward, offering their hands to the lady of the house.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," Jack gave a slight bow over her hand.

"Indeed," Leon took his turn. "I noticed the placard on the front door. Your husband is a doctor?" He heard Gabriella groan and wondered where he had stepped wrong.

"I'm not married, Mr. Hardin," Helena informed him. "I'm far too busy for that nonsense."

"Oh. Ah, I meant no offence."

Helena laughed. "Of course, you didn't." She glanced at the servant standing respectfully out of the way. "Come, Ogden, can't you see that Mr. Harden and Mr. Roundtree need their drinks replenished?"

Ogden cocked a brow at the two gentlemen. "Yes, ma'am."

He stepped forward with the sherry decanter and filled the offered glasses.

Both gentlemen nodded their thanks.

"Your brother, then?" Leon continued the conversation.

"My brother?"

"Who is a doctor. Does he live here with you?"

Gabriella groaned again.

Leon frowned.

"My, but you are persistent," Helena laughed at his confused look. "I am the doctor, Mr. Hardin. There are no men living here, other than the servants."

"Oh. Oh dear. I do seem to be putting my foot in it, don't I?"

"You're just nervous," Helena assured him. "Afraid that I'm going to disapprove of you."

"Well, I suppose."

"Not to worry." Helena placed a hand on Leon's arm. "You're scoundrels, the pair of you. But charming scoundrels."

“Oh.” Jack glanced at Leon. “Ah, thank you, ma’am.”

Leon raised his brows at Jack.

Jack shrugged. “What?”

“You’re welcome,” Helena twinkled at Jack.

“You have a lovely home,” Leon changed the subject. “It reminds me of a friend of ours who lives in the Bay area—”

“I don’t think my sister is interested in the kind of people you call friends, Monsieur Na—Harden.” Gabriella bit her lip and glanced at Ogden.

That gentleman chose to ignore her.

Helena laughed. “On the contrary, I’d be very interested in your friend. Perhaps I know him.”

“Perhaps.” Leon glanced at Gabriella and smiled at the daggers she sent him. “His name is Jonathan Redikopp.”

“Oh, Red! Yes, of course, I know Red. He is a fine gentleman. Though I always suspected there was more to him than the distinguished businessman he likes to portray. If he is a friend of yours, then I think I need no longer simply suspect.”

“Oh.”

Leon looked at Jack.

Jack shrugged.

“Come, gentlemen, I’m teasing you. Ask Gabriella, I do like to have my fun.”

Gabriella rolled her eyes. “Too much fun, I’d say. Are you never going to grow up?”

“Why should I?” Helena challenged her sister. “Life is too short and filled with pitfalls.” She twinkled again at the two outlaws. “Don’t you agree?”

“Oh yes.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Come, let’s be seated. From the aromas coming from the kitchen, I expect supper is almost ready.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN THAT YEAR FLEW BY

Elk Mountain Feb 1876

“Hannah is going to be a year old next month.” Napoleon Nash flipped the pancakes as he made this isolated observation.

“Yup, I suppose she is.” Jack stabbed a fork into the frying pan and snatched a piece of ham from the hot grease. “Time sure do fly.”

“Hmm. We’ve been busy.”

“Uh huh. Dammit, Leon! You’re burnin’ the pancakes.”

“What? Oh yeah. Dammit.” Grabbing the towel, he snatched the pan off the stove and set it aside. “Ahh, they’re fine. I caught it in time.”

“Ya mean I caught it in time. You don’t usually do stuff like that unless you’re workin’ out a plan. Ya got somethin’?”

“No,” Leon admitted as he stacked the cakes onto a plate and transferred them to the table. “I’ll get one of the fellas to do some snoopin’ around. Maybe we can find one of those payroll trains.”

Jack cocked a brow, as he stuffed another slice of ham into his mouth. “Ya mean better than the last one?”

“Stop eatin’ all the ham before it even gets to the table.” Leon grabbed the ham-filled plate and set it beside the pancakes. “And yes, better than the last one.”

“Okay.” Jack refilled the coffee cups and brought them to the table as well. “So ifn ya ain’t got a job on your mind, then what’s on your mind?”

The partners sat down to eat.

“I already told you. Hannah is going to be a year old next month.”

Jack poured honey on his cakes and tucked into breakfast. “Yeah. So wha’?”

“Well,” Leon shrugged. “I should send her a birthday present.”

Jack stopped chewing. “A birthday present?”

“Well,” Leon shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Okay. What?”

“How should I know?”

“She’s your daughter. Don’t ya know what ya wanna send her?”

“How should I know what to send a baby? I’ve never had one before.”

“Maybe ask Betty or Mary. They might know.”

Leon brightened. “Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“Glad ta help. Pass the ham, will ya?”

Leon stomped down the steps. He buttoned his coat against the winter chill as he headed for the bunkhouse. He shivered. The snow in the yard was trampled down by all the boots and hooves that walked around it, but there were still icy patches that needed to be skirted around. That is if you saw them under any new layers of snow. It wasn't an unusual sight to witness one gang member or other walking casually to and fro to suddenly have their legs fly out from under them and come down in a hard, bruise-forming thump upon the cold ground.

Leon's eyes scanned the suspicious track as his feet trod with care through the thin layer of snow. He was doubting his decision to traverse to the bunkhouse when he was stopped short by a body in front of him.

His eyes snapped up in surprise.

"You should watch where you are going."

Leon slumped. "I was watching where I'm going, Ata-i. It's slippery along here."

"Your feet will tell you where the path is safe. Your eyes should be up and watching your surroundings."

Leon sighed. "I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I?"

A hint of a smile twitched at the leathery old face.

"You have always been good enough, Napai'aishe, but I would like to see you live to be an old man. Not that I will live long enough to see that anyway, but I like to think that it will happen. Here, I have made this for our *Paite*."

"You?" Leon held out his hand, surprised at the offering. "How did you know?"

"Her birthday is next month. You should send her this."

"Oh."

Mukua handed him a wood hoop, with fine sinew webbing across the three-inch diameter, which was then ornately decorated with beads and feathers.

Leon allowed the offered gift to settle into his open hand.

"A Dream Catcher." He smiled as he looked the older man in the eye.

"This is perfect. Thank you."

"Yes, it is a good gift. She needs to know who she is."

"I'm trying. Why don't you come up to the cabin for some coffee?"

Mukua glanced at the cabin and considered the offer.

"Hmm," he nodded. "Yes. That is a good idea."

Leon grinned and clapped him on the back, as both men turned to retrace their steps.

Leon's feet slipped out from under him, and he went down, cursing.

Mukua stepped around him, shaking his head and muttering, as he carried on to the cabin.

March 1876

Five men on horseback trotted down the main street of Ogden, Utah. It was the middle of the day and nobody strolling through the bustling center of town gave any noticed to the group as they headed out of town.

“Damn, that was too easy,” Gus grumbled. “Somethin’ must be wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong, Gus,” Leon rolled his eyes at the repetition of this assurance. “It’s all in the planning.”

“It’s plain luck,” Gus snarked. “How could you a known that back room was gonna be unguarded?”

“Like I said: it’s all in the planning.”

Gus snorted.

Jack turned icy eyes upon the old gang member. “Stop your gripin’. Would ya be happier if there was a posse chasin’ us?”

“Well, no. But this was too easy.”

“I dunno,” Malachi piped in. “I kinda liked it. It’s fun creatin’ diversions at the saloon. And now we’re \$20,000 richer just from this job alone. Yee ha!”

The other four members of the group turned on Malachi with fingers to lips.

“Shhh.”

“Oh yeah.” Malachi sent a quick glance at the passersby. “Sorry.”

The group trotted on until they reached the outskirts, then they stepped it up to a hand gallop and headed into the hills.

Evening found the group settled in for the night in a snug gulley, far from searching eyes. They even felt relaxed enough to build a small fire and prepare a decent enough meal for their evening respite.

“Are we gonna be doing more of these kinds a jobs?” Rex asked as he forked in a mouthful of corned beef hash. “I mean long distance kinda jobs?”

“Yup,” Leon answered. “We’re getting too well known around Elk Mountain. The towns and trains around there can no longer support us.

They're still good for the occasional hit, but we have to start expanding our business if we want to survive. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Hell, no," Rex said. "I kinda like gettin' away from the Elk once in a while." He smiled. "Get ta see more of the country this way."

"Dang," Gus poured himself more coffee. "You ain't kiddin' there. I'm almost gettin' too old for traipsin' all over the countryside."

"Nobody says ya gotta come," Jack pointed out. "You can always stay at the Elk and keep Mukua company."

"I said, almost," Gus growled. "I ain't that old."

"That's good, Gus," Leon said. "Because when we spread our net a bit further and hit three or four towns during one trip, we make good money. And the law has no idea where we're going to hit next."

"Yup," Jack nodded, "as long as we don't forget where we've been and hit the same town on our way home."

Everyone laughed at that suggestion.

"Yeah," Gus wiped a sleeve across his mouth. "That wouldn't be too bright now would it?"

"Speaking of heading back," Leon said, "we better make plans. I think we should split up. If the law has put the last four jobs together, they'll be looking for six men. So, we'll do what we usually do, split the money three ways and take different routes back home."

"Fine by me," Gus said. "Me and Malachi can make good time. Hell, we might even hit a couple a small towns along the way."

"If you do, hide your loot before you go in," Leon said. "If you get caught, there's no point in you losing the money from these jobs, as well."

"What do ya take me for, an amateur?" Gus was insulted. "And I ain't gonna let no woman get her hands on it, neither."

"Are you never going to let up on that?" Leon glared at him. "That was ages ago, and it went for a good cause."

Gus snorted.

Jack glared at him. "Back off, Gus."

Gus slipped a sidelong glance at Jack, his resentment showing, but he did back off.

Hank spooned himself another helping of corned beef hash. "I'm fine with splittin' up. I don't know about Rex, but I'm ready ta head back. We made a good haul on this trip, and I don't see no reason ta risk it by pulling some penny ante jobs along the way."

"Fine by me," Rex agreed. "I'm happy with my cut."

"I might make a side trip," Jack said. "I thought I'd check up on Haley and see how she's doin' with that ranch. Besides, I'm thinkin' it might be a good idea ta hole up somewhere just in case the law is lookin' for us."

Leon nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. I'm thinking I might catch the train in Ogden and head down to California."

"Ogden?" Hank asked. "Is that a good idea? We just rode outta there with \$20,000."

Leon smiled. "All the more reason why they won't expect it. Besides, they'll be looking for six men, not one. I'll be fine."

"You want me ta come with ya?" Jack asked.

"No, no. You go see Haley. I'll see ya back at the Elk."

"Okay."

San Francisco, California

Leon rapped the brass horsehead knocker against the door then waited for the summons to be answered. He sighed and glanced around, checking his surroundings, since Jack wasn't there to do it for him. He smiled and tipped his hat at two ladies who had stopped at the base of the steps to gawp at him. They averted their eyes and whispered to one another, curiosity swirling through their thoughts.

The door opened and Barkley's pasted on smile melted. The fine suit that adorned the gentleman caller did nothing to disguise his identity.

"Oh. It's you. Again."

Leon produced a charming smile. "Hello there, Barkley." He slapped the doorman on the shoulder. "Good to see you."

Barkley seethed, but stepped aside to allow the guest to enter. Everyone claimed that this man was Mrs. Tanguay's brother-in-law, a sibling of her late husband's, but Barkley had his doubts. If the two men were brothers, why did they have different last names? And the child. Well, the older she got, the more she . . . *well, I don't suppose I should go there. It's not the business of the servants to question . . .* he cocked a brow at the man walking by him and into the hallway. *I suppose a family resemblance is not surprising between a man and his niece, and yet . . . oh well.*

Barkley caught the eyes of the two ladies on the street, and they snickered between themselves. He cocked a brow and sent them a nose snub as he closed the door, but that didn't prevent him from hearing them giggling. Oh, the indignities of being a servant in a woman's household.

Stepping around Leon, Barkley escorted him to the sitting room and ushered him in.

"Mr. Hardin is here, ma'am. I suspect to visit with Mrs. Tanguay."

“Oh, of course.” Helena stood up from her cup of tea. “Come in, Mr. Hardin. Would you like some tea?”

“No thank you, ma’am. But Mr. Barkley is correct. Is Gabriella available?”

“Not at the moment. She and Hannah are visiting with friends.”

“Oh.” Leon’s disappointment was obvious.

“No need to look like that,” Helena told him. “I have a lecture at the university in a couple of hours, but I was just about to have some lunch. You don’t want tea, but will you join me for dinner and a glass of wine? Gabriella should be home by the time we’re done.”

Leon’s grin surfaced. “Thank you. Yes, I will.”

“Good. We have much to talk about.”

Leon’s grin disappeared.

Helena glanced at the servant. “Ogden, another place for dinner.”

A commotion in the front alcove interrupted the discussion at the table.

“There’s Gabriella, now.” Helena rose from the table. “Mr. Barkley is carrying the baby carriage up the steps.”

Leon nodded, more interested in the appearance of Gabriella than he was in a baby carriage.

“Thank you, Mr. Barkley,” came Gabriella’s voice from the hallway. “You can leave it right there for now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The door to the dining room opened, and Gabriella stepped through, carrying the child on her hip. She stopped when she spied Leon, then pursed her lips.

“Monsieur Hardin. You are persistent, aren’t you? Every time you come to visit, I tell you not to come back, and yet, here you are.”

Leon stepped forward and gave Gabriella a kiss on her cheek. He dipped and did the same thing for Hannah.

The child’s acceptance of the greeting was met with more approval than from the woman.

“I was in the vicinity,” Leon told her, “and decided it was a perfect time to drop in.”

“You did, did you?” Gabriella sent an exasperated glance to her sister. “I don’t think it’s wise for you to keep coming here. What if you’re followed?”

“I wasn’t followed.”

“The neighbors will get suspicious.”

“I’m your brother-in-law, coming to visit his niece.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Yes, I know.”

Gabriella sighed and turned to her sister. “Helena, will you take her for a moment, so I can remove my coat?”

“I’ll hold her.” Leon stepped up and, before any protests got in his way, he took the child into his arms.

Hannah smiled up at him, recognition in her dark eyes.

Leon grinned and the child laughed out loud at his dimples.

“You have them too, you know,” Leon told her, as he bounced her in his arms. “You’re getting big. Every time I see you, you’re inches longer and pounds heavier. Not going to be able to carry you at all pretty soon.”

Gabriella slouched out of her coat and hat, then handed them to Mr. Barkley.

That gentleman took them and disappeared.

“Come, let me have her.” Gabriella tried to take the child from Leon’s arms.

“I’m not done holding her yet.”

“It’s time for her afternoon nap.”

“Then I’ll take her.”

“Monsieur . . .”

“Come on, Gabriella. I came all this way. How often do I get to see her?”

Gabriella cocked a brow and stood with hands on hips. “I thought you said you were in the area.”

“I was, relatively speaking.”

“Oh, let him visit with her, Gabriella. He only gets to see her on very rare occasions.”

“I need to feed her and put her down. She gets cranky when she’s hungry.”

Helena glanced at the entranced father cooing at his daughter. Happy gurgling came from the bundle in his arms.

“She doesn’t appear cranky now. Give them a few minutes.”

Gabriella sighed. “Fine.”

“Would you like some tea?”

“Yes. All right.”

Leon followed Gabriella upstairs with Hannah still in his arms.

“The nursery is just down here.” Gabriella opened one of the doors along the hall and they entered.

Leon looked around the room and smiled. There was nothing frilly about it. Dark curtains, once drawn across the windows would hide the daylight sun, but upon entering, there was plenty of light to see the interior.

There was a crib along the far wall, and he noticed, with a sense of satisfaction, that the Dream Catcher dangled from the headboard, just as he had instructed. A well-cushioned rocking chair by the window, and a table with neatly folded blankets and nappy cloths set upon it. There were some toys scattered about the floor, but most were set aside in a large wooden box for playtime later.

“You can put her in her crib for now,” Gabriella nodded to it.

Leon set the child into the crib, and Hannah whimpered and fussed, not wanting to be put down. He couldn’t stand the disappointment in her eyes and picked her up again.

“Really, Monsieur. Not much of a disciplinarian, are you?”

“With a gang of unruly outlaws, yes. With my daughter? No.”

“Quiet. You don’t know who could be listening.”

Leon sighed. “How long are we going to play that game?”

“You know the reason for it. How can I admit that she was not only conceived out of wedlock, but that her father is a notorious outlaw? It would be scandalous.”

“A little bit of scandal never hurt anybody.”

“Of course, it can,” Gabriella couldn’t help her raised voice. “It would hurt Hannah. She would be a bastard and shunned by everyone. It will not do.”

“You could always move to Wyoming. I can understand you not wanting to raise her at Elk Mountain, but there are some nice towns in that area. I could see her more often, and—”

“Absolutely not. I thought we already discussed this.”

Hannah looked at her mother and chewed her lip at the raised voice.

“Only you and Jack agreed to it.”

“You did, too, Monsieur. I will not have my daughter caught up in that lifestyle. It could only end badly.”

Leon sighed, caressing his daughter’s back.

But even that gentle touch couldn’t wipe out the strong voices, and the whimpers of the worried child increased.

“Oh. Here, let me have her.” Gabriella reached out for her daughter and this time would not be dissuaded. “She’s tired and hungry. I need to feed her.”

Leon grinned. “Can I watch?”

“No! You can’t watch. Now go away.”

“All right. Will you come back down when you’re done?”

“Yes.”

Leon smiled then, giving his daughter a gentle stroke across her soft brown hair, he left the room.

“Will you stay for supper, Mr. Harden?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Do you have a room lined up?”

“Yes. I’m staying at the Occidental.”

Helena slipped him a sidelong glance. “The Occidental? Business must be good.”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you stay with your friend, Mr. Redikopp?”

“Ah, well, we don’t like to impose.”

“Impose? Would he not be pleased to see you?”

“Red thought I would make a better conman than a petty train and bank robber. I saw it differently.”

“Oh. Perhaps he’ll come around, eventually. You appear to be doing well in your chosen profession.”

“Not well enough.”

Gabriella entered the parlor and settled into the sofa.

Ogden approached with the tea caddy.

“Yes, Mr. Ogden. Thank you.”

The servant poured a small amount of milk into the cup then added the tea. He placed the cup and saucer on the small side table.

“A pastry, ma’am?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Ogden. Just tea is fine.”

Helena finished off her tea and stood up. “I must be off to that dratted lecture. Mr. Ogden, replenish Mr. Harden’s tea and then leave them. I believe they have things to talk about. In private.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Your sister tells me that you’ve hired a detective in Toronto to find your son.”

Gabriella snapped her eyes up to meet his. “That’s none of your concern. It’s my money. I can do with it as I please.”

“You already told me this is what you were going to do with it. It’s no secret. Why can’t you tell me about it?”

“What is there to tell?”

Leon shrugged. "Has there been any news, any leads?"

"No." Gabriella chewed her lip. "It's been six months and still, nothing."

"I'm sorry."

"I feel like I should be looking for him, not sending some private detective to do it. It's frustrating, just waiting here for news."

"I bet it is. I don't like waiting either. But you have a baby now to look after."

"I know. Believe me, that is the only reason keeping me here."

Leon heard the tremble in her voice. He rose from the armchair and sat down beside her. He took her hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze.

She did not withdraw it. "I hoped that having Hannah would ease the ache of losing Theo, but it's only made it worse. I don't know what I'll do if I can't get him back."

Gabriella fought the tightness in her chest. She swallowed and tried to breathe normally, but tears threatened, and her breath came in gasps.

"Shh," Leon soothed. He put his arm around her and pulled her close to him.

"No," Gabriella said and pushed away. "I can't."

Leon sighed and released her. "I'm not trying to take advantage, Gabriella. You're hurting, and seeing you hurting, hurts me."

Her green eyes, bright with pain, rose to meet his. "Truly?"

"Truly."

"Then all the more reason why we can't. Don't you see? Neither of us want to marry, and it's too dangerous to be lovers. We can't."

Leon dropped his gaze and sighed. Hurt and disappointment washed over him. He wanted her, just as he had always wanted her, but she was right about one thing. He was not ready for marriage. He wondered if he ever would be. When holding Hannah, he felt such love for her, a love he had never known before. But with that love came an overwhelming fear. What if something happened to her? He almost wanted to push the child away, to block that fear and protect his heart. But he didn't. He loved her.

He looked at Gabriella, sitting beside him but alone, her hands clasping together upon her lap. *No wonder she's so afraid. I fear losing Hannah, but Gabriella has already lost a child. How can I begrudge her fearing the loss of another?*

"All right. I won't push. Perhaps you and Jack are right after all. Perhaps I should just leave and not come back."

Gabriella looked at her hands but shook her head. "No. I know I told you not to come back, but I do miss you when you're gone." She looked at him then, boring into his eyes. "But you must come here only as Hannah's uncle and nothing more. Do you agree?"

Leon nodded, again taking her hand in his. “Yes.”

The following morning, Hannah sat on the carpet, playing with a soft toy. She still had a hard time keeping her balance and, more than once, toppled over amongst loud giggles and leg flapping. Being a resourceful child, it didn't usually take her long to get right side up again and continue playing.

Helena and Gabriella sat at the table, enjoying morning coffee with biscuits and preserves, when the knocker on the front door announced a visitor.

Fully expecting it to be Napoleon, Gabriella dabbed at her mouth to remove any crumbs, then stood up to receive their company.

But the conversation coming to them from the front hall sent a chill down her spine.

“The madams are at breakfast, sir. Can you return in an hour?”

“No,” came the familiar voice. “This is not a social call my good man. Show me to them.”

There followed an awkward silence, then, “Please wait here, sir.”

“Fine. But don't be long.”

The door opened, and Mr. Barkley appeared.

“There are two gentlemen from Wells Fargo here, ma'am. They insist on seeing you now.”

Gabriella and Helena exchanged a quick look, as Gabriella unconsciously strangled her napkin.

Helena smiled and, standing, she squeezed Gabriella's arm to settle her, then nodded to Mr. Barkley. “That's fine. Show them in.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Helena felt Gabriella take a deep breath and settle her nerves. By the time Mr. Carlyle and Mr. Hoag entered the parlor, the young mother was well in control.

“Ladies,” Carlyle tipped his hat. “Dr. Dion, I don't believe we've had the pleasure. I'm Frank Carlyle, and this is my associate, Hezekiah Hoag. We're detectives with Wells Fargo, and we need to ask your sister some questions.” At which point, his dark, beady eyes slinked over to settle upon Gabriella.

She sent him a haughty look. “What else could you possibly need to ask me, Monsieur Carlyle?”

“Well, ma'am, we have reason to believe that your friend, Napoleon Nash, has been seen recently in San Francisco. We thought, perhaps, you might have heard from him.”

“Why would I hear from him?” Gabriella asked. “He is not my friend.” She allowed a small shudder to cascade down her body. “I shall never forget those months being held in that horrid place. I hope I never see him again.”

Excited laughter from Hannah drew all attention away from the conversation.

Gabriella gasped.

Mr. Hoag, having noticed the child playing on the carpet, had come over to entertain her. Smiling up at him, she had lost balance and toppled over, causing Mr. Hoag to do the kindly thing and pick her up.

She laughed, sensing a kindred spirit, and flashed her dimples at the adults.

Gabriella, her heart in her throat, dashed over and removed the child from Mr. Hoag’s embrace.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Mr. Hoag said. “I meant no harm.”

“That’s fine,” Gabriella told him. “I just don’t want her to become upset. She’s shy of strangers.”

The happy light in the child’s dark eyes belied this statement.

Carlyle’s eyes narrowed.

“She’s your child, ma’am?”

“Yes. As if it’s any of your business.”

Carlyle scrutinized the child again. “Her coloring is darker than yours.”

“Well, what of it? Her father had a dark complexion. So what?”

“And where is her father now?”

“You know my husband is deceased, Mr. Carlyle. Why must you insist on stirring up sad memories.”

“My apologies, ma’am. I’m simply trying to work out the timeline.”

“It’s none of your concern. Now, I have told you that I hope to never see Napoleon Nash again. If he is in San Francisco, it is no mind to me.”

“Of course.” Carlyle tipped his hat at the two ladies. “I will bid you good day. If you happen to see Nash, well, you know where to contact me.”

Helena stepped forward. “Yes, of course, Mr. Carlyle. Thank you for your diligence.”

Gabriella waited until the detectives were gone from the front steps, then let her exasperation show.

“Well doesn’t that just beat all. He knows.”

“What does he know?”

“Helena, Mr. Carlyle is the detective who asked me to help him trap the Elk Mountain Gang. That was two years ago. He knew I was a widow then. He also knows I spent time with Monsieur Nash at Elk Mountain. Don’t you see? The timeline!”

“Ah, yes. It seems you do have a dilemma,” Helena said. “Mr. Carlyle does not strike me as a foolish man. Even if he only suspects Hannah’s parentage, he will begin to watch you much more closely.”

“Yes. I always loved her dimples, as they so strongly resemble his. But now, I wish she hadn’t inherited them. Anyone who knows Monsieur Nash will see. How can they not?” Gabriella stopped and sighed as she considered her options. She looked at her daughter, who gazed back at her with worry creasing her round face. Gabriella hugged her close. “Don’t worry, Sweetheart. Mama will think of something.”

Leon dipped the razor into the bowl of water and commenced to scrape at his stubble.

He had slept late. The poker game he’d treated himself to had not wrapped up until 1:00 am, and then he spent another hour in his room, reading, before he wound down enough to sleep. Now, he smiled in anticipation of his lunch date.

He thought of Gabriella and how her green eyes still set his heart to thumping.

I wonder if I can persuade her to come to Wyoming. I know it’s nothing like San Francisco, and her sister is here, but it would be nice to have them closer. He thought of his daughter and his brow crinkled into a frown. *There it is again; that knot of fear, that feeling of impending doom. Why do I feel that way?*

He stopped shaving and stared at himself in the mirror. *What are you thinking, Napoleon? You were only coming here to visit, not convince her to come back with you. Go for lunch, then use that train ticket for this evening and get out of town. It’s what Gabriella wants.*

He sighed, rinsed off the razor and started on his opposite cheek. *It’s time to head for home.*

He finished his shave and was wiping off the excess cream when someone knocked at his door. Tossing the towel aside, he slid his Remington from its holster and padded over to stand just to the side of the entrance, out of the line of gunfire.

“Who is it?”

“The bellboy, sir. A note was left for you at the front desk.”

“Oh, just a minute.”

Leon came around and opened the door, being sure to keep his pistol hidden from view, but ready just in case. He relaxed when he saw a young man standing on the threshold, holding a folded slip of paper.

The bellboy offered it to him.

“The message, sir.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Still keeping his pistol hidden, Leon accepted the note with his left hand. He glanced up to meet the lad’s gaze, and his heart skipped a beat.

Next thing he knew, a hand on his chest pushed him backward into the room.

The lad stepped in and closed the door behind him.

Leon stood, slack-jawed with astonishment and then amusement.

“Gabiella! What—?”

“Shh. Be quiet, you fool.”

“But what are you doing? I was just getting ready to come to you.”

“I know. That’s the problem.”

Leon frowned. It took him a moment, but once the surprise was over, he realized that Gabriella was serious. “What’s wrong?”

“Mr. Carlyle and Mr. Hoag came by for a visit. You remember them, don’t you?”

Leon’s jaw tightened, his eyes darkening. “I’m not likely to forget those two gentlemen.”

“And they haven’t forgotten you, either. They know it was you and your gang that pulled that recent string of robberies, and they followed you here.”

“What? But how could they have—?”

“How should I know? The point is, they did. And they’re watching the house now.”

Leon slumped, disappointment taking over anger. “Oh. I guess that’s it for lunch then, isn’t it? Of course, we could always have lunch at the restaurant here. Even Carlyle wouldn’t think of looking for me in this nice a place.” He frowned again as he eyed Gabriella up and down. “Of course, you’re not really dressed for lunch, are you?”

“Will you stop taking this so lightly. This is serious.”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle, Gabriella. I’ll just stay here until my train leaves this evening. Now that I know those two are in town, I can avoid them. Don’t worry about me.”

“Listen to me. There’s more to it than that.”

Leon slipped his Remington back into its holster. “What more can there be?”

“Carlyle and Hoag came to our house.”

“Yes.”

“They saw Hannah.”

Leon frowned, then shrugged. “Okay, so Carlyle can count, and he knows you had a child out of wedlock. I hardly think he was shocked.”

Gabriella puffed up to her full posture, her eyes flashing anger. “What?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it that way,” Leon backtracked. “I only meant that in his line of work, he would come across that more often than the average, church-going joe. That’s all. I didn’t mean to suggest that you were a . . . well . . .”

“A floozie? A tramp? A prostitute?”

Leon came forward to take Gabriella into his arms. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Gabriella pushed him away. “It doesn’t matter how you meant it, because it’s what he thinks. But it’s worse than that.”

“How could it be worse than that?”

“Monsieur Nash, even you cannot be so dense that you can’t see how much Hannah resembles you.”

Leon smiled. “She is a cutie, isn’t she?”

“Stop being so flippant. Carlyle saw it. He put it all together in an instant. And now he knows that you and I have a . . .”

“An intimate connection?”

“Can’t you take anything seriously?”

Leon moved in again to caress her arm. “Sure, I can. But what can he do with it? Just because you had my child, doesn’t mean we’re together. He may be assuming that I raped you. The kind of work he’s in, I expect that would be his first thought. He knows you were happy to get away from us, and that you were willing to give him information about our next hit.”

Gabriella gasped, and she again pulled away from him. “How did you know?”

Leon laughed. “It was obvious. The first job we pulled, right after you left, and it turned out to be a set-up? Someone had to have tipped Carlyle off. And that someone had to be you.”

Gabriella puffed up in defiance. “Well, you deserved it after what you did, holding me against my will. You knew I didn’t approve of your profession, and you also knew that I helped my husband on his cases. You shouldn’t have left your plans lying around. Besides, I had to give him something. You, of all people, know how persuasive he can be. I only told him you were planning something for the following week. Unfortunately, it was enough for him to put the rest together. What did you expect?”

“You’re right. Carlyle won’t relent until you give him something. But did you have to be so honest? I lost three good men because of it.”

Gabriella came down off her defense. “Three men were killed?”

“Two were killed. One is spending time at the prison in Laramie City.”

“I’m sorry. I only meant to teach you a lesson for treating me that way. I didn’t mean . . . I’m sorry.”

“Bess is the one you need to apologize too. But, probably best you don’t. I suppose I should be angry with you, but . . .”

Silence settled between them.

Gabriella removed her bellboy’s cap and unpinned her tresses, just to give her hands something to do. Once her ginger locks fell loose, she realized what a relief it was, and she scratched her scalp then gave her mane a vigorous shaking.

Leon’s heart thumped madly against his chest. He couldn’t help but notice how the trousers stretched across her ample buttocks and made him want to caress her where the sun didn’t shine.

“What are you looking at?”

“What?” Leon’s eyes snapped up to meet hers. “No. Nothing. I mean . . .”

Gabriella rolled her eyes. “You need to be taking this seriously, Monsieur Nash. This could be real trouble.”

“Gabriella, why do you keep calling me that? I’m the father of your child. Can’t you call me Leon?”

Gabriella stood back and considered his request.

“To call you Leon would suggest an intimacy that would be dangerous for us to allow. You’re an outlaw, and you have no desire to change this fact. I am a mother. I have two children to care for. I cannot be drawn into your world. As much as I love you—”

“You love me?”

Gabriella sighed. “It doesn’t matter. I must leave now.”

She gathered her hair into a knot to attach at the back of her scalp, when Leon stopped her.

He took her wrists in his hands and pulled them down, causing her long tresses to cascade upon her shoulders again.

“Don’t go, Gabriella. Not yet.”

His hands caressed her thighs as he moved in.

His soft breath tickled her neck as she responded to his closeness. All her reasoning went out the window as her body reacted to his proximity.

She felt his lips breeze across her neck. Her breath caught between arousal and resistance. Then he kissed her cheek, and she felt his tongue push into her ear as his hands pulled her buttocks in closer.

Her breathing quickened as he kissed her throat. *Oh, why not? Everything has gone to hell anyway. Why not?*

Leon maneuvered her to his bed and set her down upon it. He couldn’t believe his luck.

Is she really going to let me in?

The burning desire in her eyes told him *yes*.

A flashback to Haley walking in on them caused him to hesitate. With a frown, he went to the door of the room and locked it, then, considering that the front desk still had a key, he jammed the armchair under the knob for extra security.

When he turned back to his lady love, she had removed her shoes and jacket and was in the process of unlacing her bodice.

“Wait.” Leon came to her and stopped her hands. “Let me do it.”

“Still needing to be in control.”

Instead of responding, he took her face in his hands and leaned in to kiss that enticing set of lips. He felt her draw in a breath as her arms embraced him. That beautiful mouth that could often be hard set and cruel, now softened and responded to his kiss.

Coming up for air, Leon hugged her close.

“Ahh, Gabriella, I love you. I miss you.”

She didn’t answer him, but her arms around his shoulders tightened.

His hands found the loosened lacings of her corset, and he worked at them, pulling them from their eyelets until the garment itself came apart and fell to the floor. He planted small kisses upon her cheeks and neck as his fingers, trembling with anticipation, released the tie on the front of the bodice. He then moved on to the buttons, undoing them, as his eyes took in her breasts slowly revealing themselves.

The garment parted, and Leon breathed in her beauty. His hands squeezed those supple mounds and then his thumb and finger clasped each nipple and pinched them into a roll.

Gabriella closed her eyes and groaned. *Oh, I shouldn’t be doing this. We shouldn’t be doing this. But he feels so good.* Without her even realizing it, her hands moved to his belt and undid the buckle. With her eyes still closed, lost in what he was doing to her, she unbuttoned his fly and, knowing exactly where to go, her hand slipped into the depths and found his erection.

His mouth nestled in to her throat, as his hand cupped her enlarged breast. He groaned with the intense pleasure of her hand caressing him.

Then she pushed his trousers down around his knees and gazed upon his erectness. She smiled with appreciation. Though not the first time they’d make love, it was the first time they were doing it in the open daylight hours. Her hand caressed his shaft as the other continued to gently squeeze his sack.

He straightened up with a moan. Then, much to his surprise and gratification, she took his cock and encased it with her lips. He gasped with the intensity of it as he felt her tongue playing around the head. His fingers now entangled in her hair, he encouraged her to continue, and she

did. Taking him further into her mouth, she sucked on him as her one hand continued to gently roll his balls as the other encircled the base of his penis and squeezed.

Leon could barely breath. *Oh my god. I knew she was special.* His eyes closed, he groaned with every pump of her mouth, until he could stand it no longer.

“Stop.” It was more of a strangle than a command. “Stop, or I’ll be done.”

She released him and came up to embrace him in a kiss.

He tasted himself on her lips and pushed his tongue in deeper.

Not being able to stand it any longer, he pushed her bellboy trousers down to her knees, then set her onto the bed. He grabbed the cuffs and pulled them off her altogether. He spread her legs, bending them at the knees and, without any further ado, he came down onto her and pushed his erection into the warmth of her body. His whole shaft sank into her and, as her legs wrapped around him, he began to thrust, pounding her hard and fast, as both their passions escalated and overwhelmed them.

She felt the rising wave assault her. She gasped, moaning her ecstasy out to the world, as her tunnel tightened upon the thrusting assault.

She cried out as her walls sought to strangle him, but he only pushed harder, thrusting deeper, until they both reached their climax together.

Leon collapsed down upon her, and they lay together in a tangle of sweat and satisfaction.

No words were exchanged as they lay in each other’s arms. They simply held one another and nuzzled into their comfort zones.

Half an hour slipped by as they wallowed in the afterglow.

Finally, Leon stirred, and his hand caressed her belly, tracing along the stretch marks left behind from her pregnancy.

“You’re beautiful.”

Gabriella looked down at her tummy. “A lady doesn’t generally want to show those off. But I’ve had two perfect babies, so I can hardly begrudge them.”

Leon propped himself up on an elbow and kissed the marks. “They’re a badge of honor. You should be proud of them.”

Gabriella laughed. “Says a man who’s never had them.”

Leon continued to kiss her tummy, then gradually made his way up toward her breast.

Gabriella felt him coming closer. “What, again?”

“We’re already here and dressed for the occasion. Why not?”

“I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Leon looked up from his kisses and met her eyes. The smile he sent her was wicked and charming. "I have a lot left in me. One more time before I have to leave."

Then, without waiting for her response, he shifted his body on top of hers and felt his way back inside.

She did not protest.

Later that evening, after indulging in a dinner brought up to the room, the two lovers parted company.

Leon, with his stuffed saddle bags over his shoulder and a carpet bag in hand, distracted the hotel clerk with checking out procedures, while Gabriella wisped her way out the back door. Trusting in Gabriella's ability to return home undeterred, Leon headed for the train depot, keeping his eyes peeled for Carlyle.

Luck was with him that day, and he boarded the train and headed for his own home without incident.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GOLDEN

“Howdy, mister. What’ll ya have?”

“Just a beer.” Jack tossed a coin onto the bar.

“Ain’t no such a thing as just a beer.” A pudgy hand nipped out to scoop up the money. “Beer is the magical elixir of life.”

Jack grinned. “Oh yeah? I thought that was coffee.”

The barkeep shrugged as he poured a frothy beer from the spout. “They’re brothers. Coffee’s for the morning, beer is for the rest of the day.”

Jack considered this, then nodded. “Yeah. That do make sense.”

“Umm hm.”

Jack took a mouthful of the golden liquid then loosed a contented sigh.

“Oh yeah. I needed this.”

“So, where ya from?”

Jack cocked a brow at the nosey tender. His plan had been to engage the man in conversation, but he wasn’t sure he liked the conversation coming to him.

“Ahh, Wyoming.”

“Wyoming’s a big territory. Whereabouts?”

“Cheyenne.”

“Really? You never struck me as a big city boy.”

“Well, I live a ways outside a Cheyenne, but that’s the nearest I can get to it.”

“Hmm. I hear ya best stay close to civilization over that a way. Outlaws all over the place. You ever run into any outlaws?”

“Ain’t no reason for them folks ta take an interest in me. I ain’t nobody.”

“Still, ya can’t be too careful. Ever since Nash took over the Elk Mountain Gang, there ain’t nobody safe.”

“Well, like I said, I ain’t got nothin’ Nash would want. Besides, if ever a day comes when I can’t put an upstart like Napoleon Nash in his place, I’ll hang up my gun and become a preacher.”

The barkeep snorted. “Big talk. You handle a gun well, do ya?”

“Good enough that I ain’t worried about no outlaws. Why ya askin’?”

“If you’re lookin’ for work, I know someone who might be needin’ some help along them lines.”

“I ain’t hirin’ out as no gunman.”

“Na’, not so much as a gunman as maybe moral support.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I ain’t really lookin’ for work.”

“Hmm. Too bad. She’s real pretty.”

Jack swallowed his mouthful of beer, suddenly interested. "Oh yeah?"

"Mmm hmm. Pretty, single, and now, rich."

Jack frowned, thinking this might be what he was looking for after all. Still, he played his cards close.

"That's real interestin'. But you don't know me. How does this lady feel about you spreadin' around personal information like this? How do you know I won't go out there and do her damage?"

The barkeep grinned. "You don't do this job as long as I have without learnin' how ta read people. I'm thinkin' you're a pretty upright fella. I'm thinkin' you'd be just what the lady needs. It ain't a permanent job, and she'll pay ya decent. Ya might wanna consider it."

"Okay." He pushed his empty beer glass forward by way of ordering a second. "What are the details?"

The barkeep smiled and refilled the glass.

"Well, this particular young lady, Miss Sherman, recently inherited her father's cattle ranch. Prime property for sure, so she's set for life now. Except for one thing."

Jack knew a hook when he saw it but decided to play along.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"It seems the manager there, who's been runnin' things for the last twenty years, don't feel like leavin'."

"Why don't she just keep 'im on? If he's been runnin' the place and it's doin' well, it sounds like a good situation."

"Hmm, it would be except Miss Sherman has other plans for the place, and ole Matt Carley don't like them plans. He wants ta keep things the way they are. He also don't like the idea of workin' for a woman."

Jack sipped his beer. He knew now that the woman in question was Haley, but he kept his expression neutral. "It sounds ta me like he don't have much choice. She inherited it, so she's the boss. Why don't he just move on?"

"That's just it, he won't. He figures Miss Sherman oughta just marry him so he can be the boss. He's makin' it clear he won't take no for an answer, too."

"Ahh." Jack nodded. His protective instincts rose but he didn't let his expression show it. "So, I take it, she's wantin' some fellas ta come out there and chase this guy off."

"Yup. You got it."

"Sounds dangerous."

"Could be. But if you figure you could handle someone like Napoleon Nash, some old cattle wrangler shouldn't be a problem."

Jack smiled. He'd walked into that one.

“Well,” Jack pushed away his empty beer glass. “Maybe in the mornin’ I’ll go have a word with Miss Sherman. Just where is this ranch of hers?”

The barkeep puffed up, feeling he had done a good job.

“It’s the Five Star ranch. Oh no, wait, she changed the name. “Ah, Next Chance, Second Choice. Damn. Something like that. Anyway, changin’ the name don’t change how ya get there. Take the main road headin’ east for about ten miles. There’ll be a sign on the right. Ya can’t miss it.”

Jack felt mild irritation. He hated it when a local claimed *ya can’t miss it*. It usually meant that someone new to the area could miss it.

He straightened up and pushed himself away from the bar.

“Okay, thanks.” Jack tossed payment for the second beer onto the bar, then added a tip. “Have a good evenin’.”

“Same to you, young man. Same to you.”

Jack stepped outside and spied the café. He was now ready for supper.

The next morning, Jack decided to give his horse the day off after the long journey they had just completed. He rented a gelding from the livery and set out for the ranch.

The horse was a decent enough animal. Many rented horses show resistance in leaving their barn and going to work, but he settled into an easy lope and covered the distance in good time.

They passed several signs, each giving direction and distance to various ranches and towns in the vicinity. He stopped at a major junction that boasted a multi-tiered sign with one arrow stating: *Denver 15 miles* painted on it, another announcing *Evergreen 10 miles*, and *Golden 8 miles*.

Jack gave his sweaty horse a pat. “Looks like we’re almost there. Keep your eyes open.”

The horse snorted, gave a quick head toss, and then they were into the lope again.

Two miles later Jack stopped again at a t-intersection. The road did go off to the right, but there was no sign.

Jack grumbled. Typical. He rode around the section, looking along the side and behind bushes to see if any sign had been knocked over and lay hidden from view. He didn’t find one.

“Humph. Well, he did say ten miles and to the right, so I expect this is it. Let’s go see.”

He put the horse into an easy jog, not wanting to wear him out too much because they might end up having to turn around and come back.

Half an hour later, Jack began to have doubts. Another fifteen minutes and he decided they had made a wrong turn. He pulled the horse around

and tried to head back the way they'd come. Odd thing was, he got hit with resistance.

Normally, when a horse's nose is turned toward home, interest and gait pick up. But not this time. Getting the horse back into a jog felt like pushing a fully loaded wheelbarrow through mud. Jack gave the animal a solid kick.

The horse laid his ears back and tossed his head but did not increase his speed.

Jack looked back over his shoulder, wondering if he was giving up too soon.

The horse, feeling the shift in Jack's weight and looking for any excuse to turn around, pivoted on his hind quarters and took off at a hand gallop.

Jack decided to let the animal have his head. Sometimes, horses know things that humans do not, and it pays to listen to them.

Sure enough, half a mile later, they crested a hill and there was the ranch spread out below them.

Jack slowed the horse to a trot and came in under the sign announcing *Five Star Ranch*, showing confidence that he'd known exactly where he was going. He carried on past the barns and the bunkhouse and kept the horse's nose pointed toward the main house.

The ranch showed promise. The yard was clean and the livestock that was there appeared healthy. The house itself could use some minor repairs and maybe a new coat of paint, but it was far from derelict.

Jack took note of a couple of fellas watching him ride by, but he conveyed disinterest and rode on to the hitching rail in front of the porch and dismounted.

"What can we do ya for?" a voice asked from behind him.

Jack turned and faced the tanned and chiseled face of the man who had some authority behind his question.

Jack figured he already knew who this was. "Lookin' for the owner. That you?"

"Not yet. Who are ya?"

Jack smiled. *Yup, I was right.* "Name's Jack Adams."

"What do ya wanna talk ta the owner about?"

"I don't see where that's your business."

"I run this place, mister. What goes on here is my business."

"Uh huh. And maybe my business don't got nothin' ta do with your business. I just need ta talk to the owner."

"Is that right?" The foreman crossed his arms and puffed up to full height. "Well, you gotta go through me before ya—"

"Jack!"

Jack grinned at the woman standing on the porch, relieved that he had given his real name as part of the alias. "Haley!"

Jack took the steps two at a time and, taking Haley in his arms, he twirled her around then planted a kiss on her cheek as he set her down.

"Oh, Jack." Haley blushed and struggled to find her breath. "It's so good to see you. What are you doing here?"

"I was just passin' by and thought I would stop in and see how things were goin'." He paused and looked into the house. "Ah, is your pa still here?"

"No. I own the Five Star Ranch now. And I'm naming it **The New Choice Ranch** just as soon as the paper work is done."

"That's good, Haley. Things are workin' out like you planned."

"Yes. Well, almost."

Her eyes met those of the foreman, as he came up the steps and joined them. He gave Jack a narrow-eyed glare.

"You know this man, Miss Haley?"

"Of course, I do. Would I let him come up here and give me such a welcome if I didn't know him?" She sighed, noting the tightening jaw of her foreman and decided she better play nice. "This is my good friend, Jack. Jack this is my foreman, Matt Carley."

The two men begrudged a handshake.

"Uh huh," Matt noted the tied-down gun. "Well, he says he's got business with you. I figure anything he's got ta say to you, he can say ta me too."

"You figure wrong, Mr. Carley. Jack is a friend, and I don't require a chaperone. You may carry on with your other duties."

Matt turned hard eyes to Jack again, but the freeze that was returned to him, warned him to back off. He curled his lip and spit into the dirt.

"Yes, ma'am." He clomped down the steps and headed to the barn. He didn't like this, not one little bit, and he'd be keeping an eye on Mr. Jack Adams.

"Come into the house, Jack." Haley had Jack's hand in hers, and she tugged him toward the front door. "I'll make us some tea, or perhaps a glass of wine to celebrate the occasion. It's so good to see you. Come. Come into the house."

Jack grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

"Are you hungry? Would you like some lunch? Let's have some lunch. I'll have Jiang make us some sandwiches. You always did like sandwiches."

"Yes, ma'am."

Jack offered no resistance as Haley ushered him into her home. He glanced around at the interior and found it in the same condition as the

outside: well-maintained but in need of some repair. The carpets on the floor were of fine quality but ready to be replaced, and the same could be said for the curtains. The floors, where there was no carpet, were worn from many boots walking across them, but they were still clean and durable.

“You’re right,” he commented as he followed Haley into the small dining room. “This is a nice place. It’ll do real well for what you got in mind.”

Haley picked up the small bell from a side table and gave it a tinkle. “I think so, yes. There is a problem I hadn’t foreseen, however.” She stopped talking when a small, middle-aged, Asian woman appeared through a side door. “We’ll discuss it later.”

“You ring, ma’am?”

“Yes, Jiang. Will you prepare some sandwiches for lunch? As you can see, I have a guest.”

Jiang’s dark eyes flicked to the male visitor then returned to her mistress. “Yes, ma’am. I already preparing lunch, I will just prepare more.”

“And wine too, please.”

Jiang nodded. “I will bring wine for the gentleman.”

“I will have wine as well, Jiang, so bring two glasses and the decanter, please.”

Jiang’s eyes flickered disapproval. Not only was her deceased employer’s daughter entertaining a man without a chaperone, but she was actually going to drink alcohol with him. This new situation was going to take some getting used to.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Haley smiled at Jack and offered him one of the plush armchairs. “Jiang is old world in her view. I’m afraid she doesn’t approve of me.”

“Oh yeah? How do ya think she’s gonna feel about havin’ a bunch a soiled doves and single mothers comin’ ta live here?”

Haley laughed. “I have no idea. I haven’t discussed it with her. Oh dear. I may be looking for a new cook.”

It was Jack’s turn to laugh. “Ifn she wants ta keep her job, she’ll get over it.”

The side door opened again, and Jiang appeared carrying a tray with two glasses and a decanter of wine. She set them down on the side table between the two armchairs, bowed and left the room.

Jack laughed again as he picked up the decanter and poured them both a glass of wine. “She ain’t much on decorum, is she?”

“No. But she is an excellent cook.”

“Ahh.” Jack could relate to that. He handed Haley a glass and offered a toast. “Here’s to your new venture. I hope all the best to ya, Haley. This is a good thing you’re doin’.”

She drank to the toast, then sent Jack a sidelong glance. “I take that to mean that you don’t intend to stay.”

Jack grimaced, thinking he was in for an argument.

Haley smiled at him and patted his hand.

“That’s all right, Jack. You can relax. I did have my hopes, but I would rather we stay friends than push you away by forcing something onto you, you don’t want.”

“Yeah. Thank you.” Jack settled back and sipped his wine. “I ain’t ready for this. But you’ll do fine. What about Matt Carley?” Haley cocked a brow at him. “Oh, I don’t mean for a husband. I mean, he’s foreman here and by the look of the place, he knows what he’s doin’. Keep ‘im on in that capacity and you should do all right.”

Haley frowned as her thoughts drifted inward.

Jack waited. He’d rather Haley asked for his help, than letting on that he already knew.

Haley returned to the present and sighed.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Carley has other ideas about how this place should be run. And definitely other ideas about me.”

“Oh yeah? He don’t approve a turnin’ a cattle ranch into a home for down-on-their-luck women?”

“He doesn’t approve of a woman being his boss.”

“Oh. Well now, that could be a problem. Why don’t he just leave? Plenty a ranches could use a foreman like him.”

“Because Mr. Carley considers everything on this ranch to be his, including me.”

“Ohh. Well, you could just marry ‘im and live happily ever after.”

Haley snorted wine. “You cad!” She laughed and slapped his arm. “No. I’m afraid you have ruined me for all other men.”

“Ho, ho! Yeah, until the right man comes along.”

Jiang appeared again and placed a platter filled with meat sandwiches on the dining table. She left, but instantly returned with plates, napkins, a bowl of olives, pickled cucumber and beets, and sliced vegetables.

“Anything more, ma’am?”

“No thank you, Jiang. This looks lovely.”

Jiang bowed then, with another quick glance at Jack, departed the room.

“Come Jack, sit down and enjoy. I have something to discuss with you. Oh, and bring the wine with you.”

They settled at the table, and Jack loaded a plate up with sandwiches and pickles. He wasn't sure what to make of the olives.

Haley helped herself to half a sandwich and some vegetables. "I need you to get rid of Matt Carley for me."

Jack nearly choked on his beef. "What?"

"Oh, I don't mean kill him. Don't be silly. You might be an outlaw, but I'd never ask you to do something like that."

"Oh, good. Sometimes it's hard ta tell with you."

"Really, Jack. I think you know me better than that."

"Hmm," Jack mumbled over a mouthful. "Why don't ya just tell 'im you ain't interested. He can hardly force ya to marry 'im."

"I have told him no." Haley sighed with frustration. "I've even told him to leave, and he won't go. Says he's put in too much time on this ranch to let some woman snatch it out from under him."

"But your pa must a told 'im that he was leavin' the ranch to you."

"Yes, he did. But Mr. Carley always did have his eye on me. More because I was the boss's daughter than due to any real attraction. Pa joked around with him that once I inherited the ranch, all Mr. Carley had to do was take me to wife and the ranch would be as good as his. Mr. Carley took him at his word."

"Ahh. So, with your pa givin' 'im permission from the grave, so to speak, he figures you ain't in a position ta say no."

"That's about it. Yes."

"Well now, we're just gonna have ta do somethin' about that, ain't we?"

Haley grinned. "Yes, we are, *Mr. Adams*. More wine?"

"Hey, Adams!"

Jack stopped on his way to the stable. A smile tugged at his lips when he saw the irate man striding toward him from the corrals. "What can I do for ya, Mr. Carley?"

"You can saddle up your horse and head on out, is what you can do."

Carley stopped within two feet of Jack; the dust scuffled up from his aggressive approach swirled around two sets of booted feet.

Jack felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. "I ain't ready ta head out."

"Oh yeah?" Carley stepped closer and poked Jack in the shoulder with his finger. "I say ya are, and now."

Jack looked down at the offending finger then lifted a chilly stare to meet Carley's snarling face. "Since yer just the foreman here, and I'm visitin' with your boss, I don't think it's up ta you when I leave."

"There is a special arrangement between myself and Miss Sherman that I'm assumin' you don't know about. I say who visits her and who don't," the finger poked again, "and I'm tellin' ya ta leave."

Jack's left hand snatched the poking finger and bent it backward. The resounding crack was followed by Carley nearly dropping to his knees, as a yell of pain strangled his throat.

Jack released him. "And I'm tellin' you, I ain't ready ta leave yet."

"You bastard! You broke my finger—"

"Yup. And I thank ya for givin' me a reason ta do it. At least this way, I don't need ta worry about ya comin' back out with your gun."

"This is my place, and you got—"

"No, it ain't your place. Now Miss Haley woulda been glad ta keep you on as foreman, but you have plum wore out your welcome. I'm thinkin' you're the one who needs ta pack his things and get."

Carley straightened, clutching his injured hand as his chest heaved with pain and anger. "Who the hell do you think you are? Comin' on here and tryin' ta boss me around like you own the place. I'm tellin' you to get gone, and I mean it."

Carley put his left hand to his lips and blew a loud, sharp whistle.

Heads poked out of the barn while other fellas showed up from the bunkhouse. They all headed for the two men in the middle of the yard.

Carley grimaced a smile, thinking he had won the day.

"What's up, Boss?" one of the wranglers asked for them all.

"This fella's causin' trouble. I want 'im off the property. And if ya gotta bloody 'im ta do it, do it."

The five wranglers made a rush for Jack, then all stopped as one when they saw the Colt .45 appear from nowhere.

"Damn!"

"Where'd that come from?"

"That ain't natural."

Jack smiled, his Colt feeling comfortable and relaxed in his hand. "Now, I wanna assume that you boys like workin' here."

The five men exchanged quick glances. Nobody looked at Carley.

The handlebar mustache and bowed legs stepped forward. "Yup. I'd say we're doin' okay, workin' here."

"Good. Who's been workin' here the longest?" All eyes turned to Carley. "Aside from him."

"Oh," said the handlebar, "I guess that be me."

"Okay. What's your name?"

“John Newton.”

“John Newton, you’re the new foreman.”

This announcement was met with mumbling from the ranks, and the dust swirl advanced again.

“What do ya mean, I’m the new foreman?” Newton huffed. “Mr. Carley’s been foreman for years. You can’t just walk in here and—”

“I can, and I did.” Jack’s eyes narrowed and the muzzle of his Colt rose just enough to be noticed. “You got a problem with it, you can take it up with Miss Sherman.”

Everyone’s gaze was on the muzzle of the gun.

Carley was fit to be tied. “Who the hell are you? What gives you the right—?”

“I’m a friend a Miss Sherman’s,” Jack informed them. “I’ve known her for a while now. We lived in the same . . . town. She asked me ta come by and help her get this matter sorted. And that’s what I’m doin’. Now, if one a you fellas would be kind enough ta tape up that broken finger, the rest of ya can get his things together. You got money comin’ to ya, Carley, and I’ll see you get it before ya leave. But leave, ya will.”

Carley puffed up and looked around at his friends. None of them met his eye.

“You bunch a lily-livered cowards. You’re gonna let this wet-behind-the-ears pup come on here and start—”

Three shots exploded from Jack’s Colt.

Carley’s hat flipped into the air, the triangle gong at the door of the bunkhouse resonated and pivoted on its hook, then finally, the rope holding up the hay loft door, split in two, causing the heavy door to slam shut, sending bits of hay and more dust into the air.

Jack twirled his Colt and slipped it back into its holster. “Any more questions?”

Five sets of astonished eyes came around to meet Jack’s. Carley simply snarled.

“Ah, no sir, Mr. . . .”

“Jack Adams.”

“No more questions, Mr. Adams. We’ll take care a things.”

“Good.”

“You bastard,” Carley spit at him. “You may a won this hand, but you ain’t seen the last a me. And neither has Miss Sherman.”

Jack stepped forward so he and Carley were up close and personal.

“I’m tellin’ ya once. Miss Haley knows how ta get in touch with me. If she sees you back here, or even as much as suspects you’re back here causin’ trouble, I’ll know about it. If somethin’ happens to her, like maybe

she disappears? I'll just assume it's your doin', and then there ain't no place you can hide. You got that?"

Carley snarled and spit into the dirt. "Yeah, we'll see about that."

"C'mon, Carley," Newton put his hand on Carley's shoulder, "don't do somethin' ya might not live ta regret."

Carley swiped Newton's hand away, but he still turned on his heel and stomped off to the bunkhouse. The other men turned and followed to carry out their orders.

The following morning, Jack came down to the dining area to find coffee already on the go. A carafe along with cups, fresh cream and even some sugar sat on the sideboard for anyone wishing to partake.

Jack felt better already. He treated himself to some cream and poured coffee into his cup. The first sip of the morning is always the best. He was just about to sit down at the bay window to watch the world go by when Haley entered the room.

"Oh. You're up. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Yeah, sure," Jack agreed. "When you're ready."

Haley picked up the bell and jangled it.

Jack looked to the side door, already knowing that Jiang was going to appear through it at any moment.

Sure enough, Jiang poked her head through the door. She sent a quick accusation to Jack concerning his spending a second night under the roof of an unmarried lady, then bowed to said lady.

"Breakfast, ma'am?"

"Yes, please. Steak and eggs, Jack? And some potatoes."

Jack grinned. "Sounds good."

"Fine. I'll just have scrambled eggs and a piece of fried bread. Oh, and some fruit."

"Yes, ma'am."

Jiang bowed again and retreated.

"Sit down, Jack. Enjoy your coffee."

Jack was already making his way to the table and didn't need the invitation to sit.

Haley poured herself a cup of coffee and joined him.

"I can't thank you enough, Jack. I already feel so much better with Matt Carley off the property."

"It weren't no problem at all. Like most bullies, he crumbled when faced with someone bigger than him."

Haley smiled and sipped her coffee. “Still, I appreciate it. I was willing to pay \$50 to anyone who could get him to leave. The money’s yours if you want it.”

Jack thought back to the money the gang had recently earned on their extended road trip. “Naw, that’s okay, Haley. You keep it. The gang is doin’ good.”

Haley nodded, looking at her cup. This wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “So, you’ll be leaving soon.”

“Yeah. Like I said, I ain’t ready ta settle down, not ta this. Me and Leon, we got it good. I’d only get restless and end up leavin’ ya anyway. You need a man who’s got the same goals as you do. Someone respectable.”

Haley nodded, disappointment showing in her tight lips. But it was no more than what she expected.

“Okay. Do you think Betty and Mary still want to come here?”

“Yeah. They’re just waitin’ for the word.”

Haley smiled. “Good. They can come anytime. I have rooms for them here, and I’ll even send money back with you to help them get here.”

“Naw, you don’t need to do that. We can cover that. They’re family.”

Haley nodded. “How is Napoleon? Is he staying out of trouble?”

Jack laughed. “I hope so. He’s in San Francisco visitin’ with Gabriella and Hannah.”

“Oh, how wonderful. Hannah must be such a button. I’d love to meet her one day.”

Jack shrugged. “I’m sure Gabriella would welcome you for a visit.”

“Yes. I must try and do that.”

Jiang came through the side door, pushing the trolley with plates of food and condiments.

Breakfast was at hand.

Jack was just putting away his last piece of steak when voices from the yard drew their attention away from the breakfast table.

Haley stood up and went to the large picture window to see what the commotion was all about.

“Oh, it’s Cole.”

“Yeah?” Jack joined her at the window. “Who’s Cole?”

“He owns the ranch next to ours.” Haley patted her mouth with the napkin and did a quick straightening of her morning hair. “He never did like my pa, so that already has him in my good books.”

Jack grinned, noting her quick tidying up. “Oh yeah? You like ‘im?”

“Well, I . . . he’s a good neighbor.”

“Uh huh.”

“Jack, really!” she gave him a playful slap on the arm. “Come on. You might as well meet him.”

Haley exited the dining room, pulled open the front door and clattered down the steps.

“Cole! Good morning. How nice to see you.”

“Miss Haley.” The tall drink of water stepped down from his horse and strode forward, tipping his hat to the new owner of the Other Choice Ranch. He glanced at Jack, his curiosity aroused. “I heard you had some trouble here yesterday. Is everything all right?”

“It is now.” Haley motioned Jack forward. “Cole, this is my good friend, Jack Adams. Jack, this is Cole Madison.”

“Howdy.”

“Howdy”

The two men shook hands.

“I know all of Haley’s friends from around here,” Cole scrutinized Jack. “You ain’t local.”

“Oh, Cole, don’t be so silly. You know I traveled for a time. Jack and I met in Wyoming. We lived in the same town for a while.”

“Uh huh.”

Jack couldn’t help a smile, realizing that Haley had herself a new suitor.

“Ah, I just come by for a visit and to help Haley out with a little problem she was havin’. I’ll be headin’ home tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Cole nodded. “Good.” He turned his attention to Haley. “Was that little problem Matt Carley?”

“Yes, it was,” Haley told him. “But Jack took care of it.”

“Fine. Part of the reason for coming over here this morning was to do just that. But if the problem has been taken care of, then all the better.”

“Yup,” Jack said. “But, I gotta tell ya, I sure feel a lot better about headin’ out tomorrow, knowin’ that Haley’s got someone right here, watchin’ her back. Carley threatened ta come back, but he might think twice about that if he knows yer watchin’ the place.”

Cole nodded. “He’ll know. I’ll be surprised if he comes back.”

“Well, now that you two have stopped being the protective males, would you like to come up for some coffee, Cole?”

“Sure, I could do with a cup.”

“Good.” Haley caught the eye of the stable boy. “Opus! Come tend to Mr. Madison’s horse. He’ll be staying for lunch.”

Cole laughed. “How did a cup of coffee turn into lunch?”

The three people spent the morning sitting on the front porch, enjoying coffee and conversation.

“I still think you should keep up the cattle ranch until your other projects find their footing. If they ever do.”

“Yes, Cole, I know.”

“It only makes sense,” Cole persisted.

Haley sighed. “I need the money from selling the cattle to buy some good quality mares. I figure if we can find five really nice mares, then find a stud—”

“I know. But even if you find the mares and can afford a decent stud, it’s going to be at least a year before you have any foals on the ground. Then, if you want to do this right, it will be another three to four years after that before they’ll be trained and ready to sell. What do you plan to live on in the meantime?”

“I do have an inheritance.”

“And you need to keep that safe for the unexpected. And believe me, Haley, running a ranch, whether it be cattle or horses, will always bring the unexpected.”

“Jack, tell him.”

Jack’s brows jumped up. “Tell him what?”

“That I am resourceful. That I have people coming to live here who will be helping me. I’m not doing this all on my own.”

Jack threw up his hands. “Hey, I ain’t gettin’ involved with this. I don’t know nothin’ about ranchin’, except that it’s hard, dirty work. Keep me outta this one.”

Haley frowned. “You’re a coward.”

“I ain’t no coward. I just know what I know, and I know what I don’t know. And I don’t know ranchin’. But,” Jack looked at Cole then back to Haley, “what he says do make sense. From what yer sayin’ this ranch already supports itself and then some. Ya don’t wanna be throwin’ away what’s earnin’ ya money. Not before ya got somethin’ to replace it with.”

Cole smiled. He had been cautious of this man showing up out of the blue, but now he seemed a reasonable enough sort.

“He’s right.” The two men locked eyes and nodded in mutual agreement. “Hang on to your inheritance, sell some of the cattle in order to buy your mares and maybe fix this place up a bit, then go from there.”

Haley huffed and crossed her arms. She glared from one man to the other then sat back in her chair with a sigh.

“Yes, all right. I suppose that does make sense.”

“Yup.”

“Uh huh.”

Cole looked across the yard to a couple of wranglers coming in for fresh horses. “Who’s your foreman now that Carley is gone?”

“Brook Newton.”

Cole nodded. "Good man. He shoulda been foreman ages ago."
Jiang stepped out to the porch. "Lunch is served."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE NEW BEGINNINGS

Elk Mountain May 1876

Leon leaned upon the top rail of the paddock as he watched Fanny trot around, tossing her head with the joy of movement. She flattened her ears and snaked at Buckwheat who deftly scooted out of her way. Leon smiled. She looked good.

“Hello Napoleon.”

Leon turned and nodded a greeting as Bess came up beside him.

“Morning.”

Bess gazed out at the agile mare. “She’s doing much better.”

“Hmm. I may take her out for a ride this afternoon. See how she handles the terrain.”

“Has Mukua given the okay for that?”

Leon frowned. It was one thing for him to accept that Mukua had say over him, but quite another for everyone else to realize it.

“I suppose it’s obvious who the boss is around here, isn’t it?”

Bess laughed. “Oh, Napoleon. You’re the boss. You value Mukua’s opinion, that’s all. Everyone does.”

“Yes. I suppose.” Leon slipped a sidelong glance to his companion. “Have you and Mary come to a decision?”

“Yes, we have. I always knew what I was going to do. With Wes gone, there’s no reason for me to stay. Mary wasn’t sure for a while. She felt an obligation to wait here until Luke got out.”

“We’ll let Luke know where she is.”

“Yes, I know that. But she’s concerned that you will convince Luke to join with the gang again, and she’s thinking that this offer from Haley could help him stay legal. He’ll have a clean slate when he gets out, but he won’t for long if he stays here.”

“That’ll be up to Luke.” Leon turned to Bess and put a hand on her arm, “but I will tell Luke where she is. I’d never trick a man into staying here if he has a chance at something better.”

“Haley offered Jack something better, but he stayed because of you.”

Leon chuckled. “Jack stayed because he wanted to. We have a good life here. He asked Haley to stay here with him. Mukua could marry them, and we were even going to build them their own private cabin. She chose not to stay.”

Bess smiled and nodded. “She has a dream.”

“Hmm.” Leon gazed out at his mare again. “But it’s one that Jack doesn’t want. He respects her for it, and we’ll sure help when we can, but he and Haley are on two different paths. It’s probably a good thing they both realize it.”

“You mean like you and Gabriella?”

Leon tensed. This wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

Bess smiled and, this time, she gave his arm a squeeze. “You and Gabriella are too much alike. You’re both headstrong and have your own ideas on how to live. And honestly, Napoleon, what woman, with other options, would choose to live here?”

“I didn’t ask her to. I just wished she’d—”

“Change her life to accommodate yours?”

Leon sighed; the muscles of his jaw twitched. “We do have a child together.”

“All the more reason for her to stay away.”

“I suppose.”

“And you can go visit.”

“Yes, I know.”

“So what’s the problem? It seems to me that you have the best of both worlds. You’re still footloose and fancy free, living the life of a notorious outlaw, but you can go visit your daughter any time you want. Not such a bad arrangement.”

“Okay, you’ve made your point.” Leon grinned, his tension easing. “At least she hasn’t disappeared altogether.”

“Exactly.”

“So,” Leon pushed away from the fence, “when are you and Mary planning to leave?”

“If someone can give us a ride to Carbon on Monday, we’ll spend the night and catch the morning train to Denver. I’m sure Haley can arrange to have us picked up from there.”

Leon nodded. “From what Jack says, she has a whole ranch full of men working for her, so I expect she can spare one to come get you.”

“Good. We’ll send her a telegram from Carbon.”

“And Sunday night, we’ll throw you and Mary the best going away party this gang can put together. A celebration of new beginnings!”

“That would be fun.”

Mukua ran his hands down the foreleg, then stood and gave the mare a pat on the neck.

Leon stood by Fanny’s head and waited for the word.

Mukua ran his hands along the mare's spine and down her haunches and hind legs.

Leon sighed. "Why are you checking back there? It's her foreleg that was injured."

Mukua sent him a sharp look. "How quickly you forget the teachings of *Nat-so-gant*. Has your mind become so crowded with white man's impatience? Soreness in the back could mean trouble in the front."

Leon sighed again and waited. He knew the Indian was right, but the mare had stayed sound during their morning rides. Sometimes the Preacher-man could be too cautious.

Mukua came to stand beside the mare's neck and gave her a scratch along her crest, under the mane.

Fanny stretched out her neck, and her lower lip quivered.

Leon chuckled. "She likes that."

"Hmm. How hard have you been riding her?"

"A little more each time. I haven't had her in a full out gallop yet."

"Hmm. Best not to wait until a posse is on your tail. Tomorrow let her open up for a couple of miles. Then we will see."

Leon grinned. This was the word he'd been waiting for.

"C'mon, Jack, I'll race you."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Even at her worst, Fanny could outrun this fella." He gave the bay gelding a rub on the neck. "Sorry, Ferdinand." He straightened with a sigh. "I need ta get me a new horse. The spring sales are next month, ain't they?"

"Yeah. But we've got the job in Medicine Bow before then. Do you think old Ferdi will see you through that one?"

"Sure. As long as we don't have ta outrun a posse."

"Hmm. Well, come on. Fanny's itching for a run, and so am I. We'll give them both a good stretch of the legs."

"Uh huh."

Leon grinned, then turning Fanny toward an open stretch, he gave her her head and a touch of his heel.

The mare jumped forward, her powerful hindquarters digging into the dirt as her forelegs reached forward to grab the ground and pull it toward her. Her ears back and mane flying, within two strides she had control of the space beneath her, and she flew across the landscape as Pegasus without wings.

Leon whooped in his excitement. There was nothing more exhilarating than riding a horse that was going full out over an open stretch of land. The

rush of the wind made his eyes water, and the ground beneath them blurred with the speed and the tears.

He knew Jack had been left behind after the first few strides, but he didn't slow. Jack would catch up with them at the end of the flats. It felt so good to finally be able to let his mare run unhindered. She loved it, and so did he. Everything was good.

Two miles at a full gallop and Leon sat back in the saddle and indicated to Fanny that she should slow down.

She felt a bit winded so was agreeable with this notion. She gradually eased up on her speed and, with a snort and a shake of her head, she slowed to an easy lope and then a trot.

Leon brought her around and they came to a stop. He looked back over their tracks and scanned the area for Jack. He saw the dust trail and, screening his eyes from the sun, he then made out the form of a man on horseback. Within moments Jack had caught up with them, and he pulled the exhausted but willing Ferdinand to a halt.

"Wow. She sure moved out. Is she still sound?"

Leon nudged Fanny into a walk, and they completed a circle around Jack.

"She feels sound to me. Do you see anything?"

Jack watched Fanny's legs as the mare walked her pattern.

"Nope. She looks good."

Leon grinned and patted his mare on her neck. "Ha, ha. Yeah. I knew Mukua would put her right. Just in time too, for the new season."

Jack slumped. "You had ta mention that, didn't ya. I still need myself a good outlaw horse."

"We'll get you one, Jack. We'll check at the sale next month in Buffalo. I'll help you pick one out, because, we all know, you don't have an eye for a good horse."

The partners joined up and turned the horses back toward Elk Mountain.

"I don't need yer help pickin' out a good horse," Jack protested. "I picked out Tuffy, didn't I? He was one a the best I ever had."

"Yeah, but we can do better."

"There's always gonna be a better horse in someone else's pasture. Maybe a combination of Tuffy and Fanny. You know, a good solid build but longer in the leg. And a gelding. I don't want no mares."

"Oh, I don't know, Jack. That's a pretty tall order."

"Uh huh. I'm thinkin' you just don't want me ta have a horse as good as Fanny. You like bein' in the lead too much."

"What? That's not fair. If we're running from a posse, do you really think I want you riding a horse that can't keep up? Tuffy was a good

horse, but he didn't have the speed you need. This time, we'll look for a horse with some giddy-up."

"What do ya mean? Tuffy was fast enough."

"Not fast enough to keep up with Fanny."

"He could keep up with her on the flats. Them hind quarters a hers give ya an advantage on the hills, that's all."

"Hey, any advantage helps with the business we're in."

"Sure, until ya get caught out on the plains, then yer outta luck. She's fast enough, but anything long and lanky would run ya down."

"Then I guess we're lucky that Elk Mountain is higher up."

"Uh huh. Well, I prefer somethin' that's got a bit more speed." Jack sighed, tired of this age-old argument. "Let's face it Leon, we ain't never gonna agree on horseflesh."

Leon grinned. "No, not likely." He reached over and gave Jack a playful slap on the back. "But don't worry. I'll help you pick out a real fine horse this time."

"Uh huh."

Medicine Bow, Wyoming

Leon stepped up to the teller and smiled a friendly greeting.

The teller returned it. "Good afternoon, sir. How may I help you today?"

"I have a fair amount of cash on me and I would like to leave it in your safe until tomorrow morning."

"Oh. Do you have an account with us?"

"An account? Oh dear, no. Is that necessary?"

"We do prefer it, sir. That way we know whose money we are holding and can check to be sure it was not attained through nefarious means."

Leon cocked a brow. "Nefarious means?"

"Yes. Criminals will rob one bank, then come into town and secure it in another bank. It's been known to happen."

"Really? Well, what will they think of next?"

"Indeed. So, may I have your name and place of residence?"

"I really wasn't intending to open an account." Leon frowned and scratched his chin in thought. "You see, I don't live around here. I'm traveling and usually secure my valuables in the safe of the town I'm staying at. I've never had any problems before."

"I'm sorry, sir. This is our policy. You can always close your account once you leave town."

“But then you would have all my personal information.”

“Well, yes. But . . .”

Leon sighed. “This is most unfortunate.” He cast his eyes to the back wall behind the teller. “Is that your safe there?”

The teller swiveled as though he’d never realized the large metal box was situated nearby.

“Yes, it is.” His smile beamed with pride. “A brand-new Navarre Special Edition.”

Leon’s brows rose. “Special Edition? Really. I didn’t realize they’d come out with a new one.”

“Oh, yes sir. Timed lock and everything. I assure you; your money will be safe with us.” The balding gentleman chuckled at his play on words. “It’s an extremely safe safe.”

“Yes, I’m sure it is.” Leon gave the safe one more casual glance then smiled. “When is the timer set for?”

“Oh now, sir, I can’t tell you that. Why, you could be a highwayman out to rob us. If I told you when the safe could be opened, why, that would almost be like handing the contents over to you here and now.”

“Ah yes.” Leon grinned. “I see your point.”

The teller pulled out a sheet of paper and dipped his pen in the ink jar. “Now, if I could just have your name, address and place of business.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Leon said. “Thank you anyway. I’ll take my chances at the hotel.”

“Oh.” The teller’s smile disappeared along with his bonus. “Well, if you change your mind, you know where we are.”

“Thank you. Good day, sir.”

Leon turned and walked out of the bank. He spied Gus and Lobo across the street keeping an eye on things, and he sent them a subtle nod. Continuing along the boardwalk, he turned in at the saloon and joined Jack at the bar.

Jack nodded to the barkeep and a second beer was deposited upon the wooden counter.

“How’d it go?”

“Pretty much what we figured.” Leon took a gulp from his beer. “We have all we need to do it. I say it’s a go.”

Jack nodded and both men turned to lean against the bar and watch their surroundings.

Then they froze as a familiar set of dark eyes glared at them.

“Whoa!” Leon nearly spilled his beer. “Taggard. What are you doing here?”

“What am I doin’ here? This is my town!”

Two sets of eyes dropped to the sheriff's badge pinned to Taggard's shirt.

The partners exchanged a look.

"Gee, Tag," Jack grinned and gave Taggard a punch on the arm. "We didn't know ya got promoted ta sheriff. We thought you were still deputy'in over in Rawlins."

"Well, I ain't. I'm here now, and I can't have you fellas hangin' around."

"Yeah, yeah," Leon nodded. "I understand that. But come on, how about a drink for old time's sake?"

"No. I want you fellas outta my town, and I want ya ta stay out. That's fair warnin'. I see ya again, and I'll arrest ya. Understand?"

Leon looked genuinely hurt. "Taggard, we're friends; we rode together. Of course, we won't come here to conduct business now that we know. But come on. I've missed you. One more drink, how about it? Then I'll be gone."

"Yeah well," Taggard hesitated too. He lowered his voice. "Fine. But not here. I'm off duty at 6:00. My house is just north a town. White one with the well in front. Come there for a drink. And dagnabbit, be discreet." He straightened and raised his voice. "Now, I want you fellas outta town by tomorrow mornin', and don't you be comin' back here."

"Ah, yessir, Sheriff," Jack tipped his hat. "We'll be on our way, first thing."

"Good!"

Taggard turned around and headed for the exit.

Just as he was about to push out, the doors swung inward and Gus and Lobo entered.

The three men stopped and gapped at one another for an instant, then, before either outlaw could recover, the sheriff pushed through the doors and disappeared.

"What the hell?" Gus grumbled as he came up to the bar. "What's the matter with him?"

"Yeah," Lobo growled as he nodded at the barkeep. "We don't see 'im fer who knows how long, and he acts like we're strangers. What's his problem?"

"He went and turned legal," Leon stated and shook his head. "It's a sad thing to see, but he doesn't want us around. Looks like our job this evening is a bust."

"What?" Gus snatched his beer off the bar and took a swallow to relieve his stress. "What do ya mean? It's the perfect set up."

"Yeah," Lobo spit and hit the spittoon. "Don't he know we gotta make a livin'?"

“Oh, he’s got nothin’ against us makin’ a livin’,” Jack said. “As long as we don’t do it in his town.”

Gus snorted. “His town. He’s gettin’ all high falootin’ now that he’s sportin’ a tin star.”

“Yup.” Leon set his beer glass onto the bar. “I’m afraid that’s what happens. So, you fellas take it easy tonight. Have some beers, play some poker, whatever, but stay outta trouble. We’ll leave in the morning and we won’t come back. We owe Taggard that much.”

“He walked out on us,” Lobo sneered. “What do we own him?”

“Think about it,” Leon said, as he picked up his second beer, “he ran with us for years, so he knows all the hidden tracks into Elk Mountain, but he hasn’t turned us in, has he?”

This revelation was met with stoic silence.

“And he coulda arrested me and Leon, right here and now,” Jack said. “But he didn’t. He’s even agreed ta meet with us tonight and talk over old times. So, I figure, he leaves us alone, we can do the same for him.”

“Yeah, well,” Gus leaned against the bar. “I suppose.” He smiled at one of the upstairs gals who gave him a wink. “Besides, I think I can find somethin’ ta entertain myself with for the evenin’.”

“Good.” Leon finished his beer and set the glass down. “I’m hungry. I’m heading to the café for supper. Anyone else?”

Gus still had his eye on the prostitute. “Ah, naw. I got other things ta do. Maybe later.”

“Yeah, I could eat,” Jack said. “I’ll come.”

“Okay. Lobo?”

“I like Gus’s idea better. See ya in the morning.”

Evening was settling in when Jack and Leon walked out of the café. Both men stretched and Leon rubbed his full tummy, as Jack let out a belch.

“Oh, ‘scuze.”

Leon smiled. “Good food. I could get used to this.”

“Yeah, I kinda miss eatin’ good now that Haley’s gone. Next will be Bess and Mary. We gotta get us some more women at the Elk.”

Leon smirked. “Just to keep your tummy happy?”

“I can think of a few other reasons but that one’s good for a start.”

“Ha. Yeah.”

“Listen, Leon,” Jack stopped and put a hand on Leon’s arm, “why don’t you go visit Taggard on your own. He’s more your friend than mine.”

“Oh.” Leon’s tone showed disappointment. “Well, yeah. But I thought you’d want to hear what he has to say, too.”

“Yeah, I do. But you can fill me in later. I think he’d feel more at ease with just you there.”

“He likes you too, Jack.”

“I know. But like I said, he’s more your friend than mine.” A twinkle showed through the gloaming. “Besides, what if it’s a trap? You know you can’t count on Gus and Lobo ta get ya out.”

“A trap, ha. Taggard wouldn’t turn on me like that.”

“Oh, you never know, Leon. New sheriff in a new town. What better way ta prove himself than ta capture the two most wanted outlaws in the territory?”

Leon frowned. “You don’t really think he’d—?”

“Ha, ha!” Jack slapped his partner on the back. “No, a course not. I’m just funnin’ with ya.”

“Yeah. Good. That would almost be like you turning on me. He wouldn’t do that. Would he?”

Jack sobered. “No, Leon. Like I said, I was just funnin’ with ya. I’ll wait for ya at the saloon, and you can fill me in there.”

“Okay. See you in a bit.”

“Yup.”

Jack watched as his partner strode off along the boardwalk, heading toward the residential side of town. His smile dropped, and slipping his Colt from the holster, he cracked the barrel and checked his rounds. Everything was as he left it. He snapped the weapon shut, gave the chamber a spin and twirled the gun back to its rightful place.

He sent one more look after the disappearing figure of his friend, then followed him, keeping to the shadows.

Though darkness was nearly complete, Leon didn’t have any trouble finding Taggard’s home. The fact that the sheriff had lit the porch lamp and left the door partly ajar also helped to lead him to the right address.

Leon came onto the porch and knocked on the screen door.

“Taggard?”

“Yeah. Come on in.”

Leon stepped into the living room of a cozy, well-kept family home.

“Wow, Taggard. When you settle down, you do it up right. When do I meet the missus?”

Taggard waved the comment away. “Naw, it ain’t like that. This is the house the county provides for the sheriff. Have a seat.”

Taggard indicated a comfy-looking armchair.

Leon surprised himself with his uneasiness. The living room was lit well enough, but there were dark corners and doorways leading to hidden rooms. His eyes followed the staircase up to the second floor, where more dark shadows hid the landing.

Taggard cocked a brow at him as he poured out two brandies.

“You expectin’ an ambush?”

Leon jumped, feeling foolish.

“No, of course not.” He smiled. “Just habit, you know.”

“Uh huh. Here, have a drink. And sit down, I ain’t gonna bite. Besides, I expect the Kid is out there keeping an eye on things.”

Leon took the glass and sat down. “Naw, I’m going to meet him at the saloon later.”

Taggard nodded, letting it go. He’d spent enough time with Jack Kiefer to know he wasn’t just sitting at the saloon and waiting for Leon to return. He was out there, watching his friend’s back. Like always.

“So, I ain’t heard much from you fellas lately,” Taggard said, as he sat in the armchair opposite. “That ambush make ya cautious?”

Leon frowned, not wanting to be reminded of that fiasco.

“You know the routine. We lay low through the winter. We had enough to get through, even without that train. So why bother?”

“Uh huh. What about now? You got your eye on the bank here, don’t ya?”

“Well sure.” Leon shrugged. “I mean, we did. But we’ll leave you alone, Taggard. We’ll respect your town.”

“I prefer you respect the whole county.”

Leon stopped with his lips just tasting the brandy, then he lowered the glass and frowned at the sheriff.

“The whole county, Taggard? That would put us right out of business. You know that.”

“And with Carlyle on your case now, just how long do you expect to stay in business?”

“We’re doing okay.”

“I told ya this was gonna happen. The more successful you are, the more the law is gonna be lookin’ for ya. Carlyle’s already making things hot for you, isn’t he?”

“Hey, just because he caught us by surprise last fall, doesn’t mean he’s going to stop us. We’ve already had a good spring, and no Carlyle in sight.” He didn’t think it prudent to mention that he’d almost had an encounter with the Wells Fargo man in San Francisco.

“That don’t mean he ain’t still watchin’ you.” Taggard took a healthy sip of brandy and waited while the liquid slid down his throat before he

continued. "Look, I ain't tellin' ya to stay outta the county just ta be ornery. You been usin' this area as your huntin' ground for too long. It ain't sparse laid out anymore. There's towns all along the rail route now, families and business, and with them are comin' churches and schools."

Leon snorted. "Yeah. I suppose nothin' good can last forever."

"Dammit, will you take me seriously?"

Leon looked up and met the dark eyes of his friend.

"I am. I know more people are coming here, and that makes for bigger payrolls and fatter banks. Pickings are getting good, and you want us to quit?"

Taggard sighed. He wondered why he even bothered to talk sense to his friend.

"You're just gonna keep on doin' it until ya get captured or killed, ain't ya? Hell, maybe I should arrest ya right here and now. I might just end up savin' your life."

Leon's jaw tightened. "You try that, and you and I will not be friends anymore."

"Leon, we ain't friends anymore already. We can't be, don't ya see that? I'm givin' ya fair warnin'. Stay outta my town and stay outta this county. If I see ya again, it won't be as a friend, it'll be as a lawman."

Leon swigged the brandy to try and burn the hurt out of his chest.

"All right, Taggard. I guess you've made that clear. But Carbon County is our home too, and we were here before these towns and these families showed up, bringing their churches with them. We're already going further afield to conduct business, but I can't agree to staying out of the county entirely. It's not going to happen, Taggard."

Taggard sighed. He stood up and poured himself another drink. He raised the bottle at Leon, asking the question.

Leon finished what was left in his glass, then held it up. "Yeah, sure. One more for the road."

Glasses re-filled, Taggard sat down again.

"This is a fine mess," he grumbled. "I like ya, Leon, I always have. That's why I invited ya here this evenin'. I was hopin' I could get ya to change your mind."

"No. Things are going too good. We miss you though. We had some really good times up at the Elk."

Taggard chuckled. "Yeah, we sure did. How's Preacher? That old injun still hangin' around?"

"Oh yeah. This winter was kind of hard on him though. He figures next fall he might head down to New Mexico then come back in the spring."

"That makes sense," Taggard agreed. "He's not a young sapling anymore. I was sorry to hear about Wes. How's Betty handling that?"

“About as well as can be expected. She and Mary are going to leave next month though. A lady friend of ours has inherited a ranch in Colorado, and she’s asked them to come help her run it.”

Taggard nodded. “Good. Livin’ up there at the Elk, that ain’t no life for a woman.”

Leon sighed, disappointment clouding his eyes. “No, I don’t suppose it is.” He swallowed the last of his brandy and stood up. “Well, I guess I better be off. Jack’s probably getting cold, hanging out in the woods.”

Taggard snorted and stood up as well. “Yup. You best take your time heading to the saloon. Give him a chance to get there ahead of ya.”

“Yeah.”

The two men headed to the front door, and there, Leon stopped.

He turned and offered his hand.

“Thanks for everything, Taggard. I’m gonna miss ya.”

Taggard took his hand, and they locked eyes.

“Yeah, me too. I won’t do anything to help Carlyle catch ya, but I can’t do nothin’ ta hinder ‘im neither. I hope you understand that.”

“Yeah, I do.” Leon’s smile morphed into a full dimpled grin, and he gave Taggard a slap on the shoulder. “It was good to see you. Nice to know you’re making good. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, Leon. Dammit. You too.”

Leon stepped into the saloon and took a quick look around. He spotted Gus at a poker game, but no sign of Lobo or Jack.

He frowned. *It doesn’t take much to know where Lobo is, but Jack? I gave him plenty of time to get here.*

He sighed and headed for the bar.

The beer showed up without him asking for it.

He nodded and placed a dime on the bar top. “Thanks.”

“Beer’s a nickel.”

“Yeah, I know. I have a friend showing up here presently. The second beer’s for him.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll watch for ‘im.”

Leon nodded, then turning around to get in position, he took a swallow of the amber liquid then grimaced. Drinking the watered-down regular fare of a saloon was a disappointment after a couple of rounds of good brandy.

He brightened when Jack entered, and the two friends locked eyes. Leon nodded a welcome as Jack joined him.

The second beer showed up, and Jack dug into his pocket for a coin.

“Don’t bother,” Leon told him. “I already paid for it.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“What took you so long? I expected you to be here before me and already halfway through your first beer.”

“I wanted ta make sure nobody followed ya. It ain’t my fault ya took the long way back.”

Leon smiled at his partner’s caution. “Thanks. But there was no need. Taggard just wanted to talk, that’s all.”

“Yeah well, better safe than sorry,” Jack took a long swig of beer. “I know he’s your friend, but once a man puts on that tin star, somethin’ happens to thei brain. Suddenly, friendships don’t mean nothin’ no more.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right about that.”

Jack cocked a brow at him. “What’s that mean? What did he say?”

“Let’s wait until Lobo gets done, then we’ll have a meeting.”

Jack sighed. “He could take all night.”

“Naw, he doesn’t linger. I expect he’s down at the other end of town with a crib gal. He’ll be wanting a beer soon.” Leon grinned as Lobo walked into the establishment. “See?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll go get Gus. You get us a table.”

Leon nodded and ordered four more beers.

Jack approached the poker game and gave Gus a tap on the shoulder.

“Close it up. We gotta talk.”

“Dammit. I’m on a winnin’ streak.”

“In a penny-ante game? C’mon, close the hand. Leon’s got a round a beer and a table over there.”

Gus followed Jack’s indicator and spied the other two members of their party settling in at a corner table. “Yeah, fine. Just give me a minute ta finish this hand.”

The other players at the table listened to this conversation with interest. With the way their opponent was protesting, it didn’t take many brain cells to figure he had a winning hand.

Everyone folded.

Gus cursed. Not because he’d won the hand, but because if Jack hadn’t come over to interrupt, he likely would have won more.

“Nothing much new,” Leon informed them. “He still wants us out of town tomorrow. If he sees any of us again, he’ll be a lawman not a friend, and he’ll act accordingly. He can’t help us if we get into trouble, but he also said he wouldn’t help the law bring us down either. I guess we should consider ourselves lucky for that. He could do plenty to hurt us.”

Lobo spit. “Lucky. He thinks he’s somethin’ special now? I say we get rid of ‘im.”

All three men at the table stared at the snarky outlaw.

“Get rid of ‘im?” Gus repeated, his tone incredulous. “It’s Taggard. We leave him alone and he leaves us alone. That’s a fair enough deal.”

Lobo snorted. “Fair deal. Since when does some lawman tell us where we can hit? I tell ya this business is really goin’ downhill.”

“We’re not getting rid of Taggard,” Leon said, his eyes like dark daggers aimed at Lobo. “If I hear about anything happening to him,” he jabbed his finger in the craggy face, “you’ll be the one I come after.”

Lobo looked at his boss and saw the intention in those eyes. He backed down, even though he hated himself for doing it.

“Fine. But I’m tellin’ ya, next thing he’ll be tryin’ ta keep us outta Carbon County altogether.”

Leon and Jack exchanged a quick look.

Gus and Lobo glanced at each other, then at the two leaders.

“He already done that?” Gus asked.

“Well, he tried.” Leon kept his tone light. “But I told him no. We’d be out of business, if I agreed to that.”

“Yeah, you ain’t kiddin’,” Gus grumbled. “This county is our bread and butter.”

“Hmm,” Leon nodded. “Still, I think we should stay clear for a while, anyway. We’ll go back to the Elk and plan another extended excursion, like the one we just did. That one paid well.”

Gus and Lobo considered this, then both nodded.

“I figure we could head north, into Montana this time,” Leon said. “We might be staying out of Carbon County, but we can still choke the life out of it.”

Gus and Lobo snickered.

Leon and Jack walked back toward the hotel leaving Gus and Lobo to their poker game.

“You really plannin’ on doin’ damage ta this county?” Jack asked.

“No,” Leon told him. “But I had to get Lobo to stop thinking about retaliation. You know what he’s like once he feels slighted.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah.”

“And like Gus said, Carbon County is our bread and butter. It wouldn’t do to slaughter the cow that keeps us in cream. We get back to the Elk, and I’ll do some planning. We go up as far as Montana, hit a few towns

along the border, then circle back down. That oughta bring in enough to give Taggard time to forget about us.”

“Uh huh. And maybe time for you to take another ride to San Francisco?”

Leon grinned through the darkness. “Maybe.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO BACK AT IT

Rocky point, Wyoming
June 1876

“No, no. I’m not interested in opening an account,” Leon told the teller, much to that individual’s disappointment. “I intend to be in town for a few days and would prefer to store my funds here at the bank rather than in my hotel room.”

“Of course, sir. Quite understandable. And I can assure you that our Navarre safe is top of the line.” The teller puffed with pride as he showcased the large metal box which stood proud and solid against the far wall. “Purchased just three years ago, and no one has been able to break into it yet.”

Leon cast a critical eye to the item being discussed. “Really? Three years and no break-ins? That has to be a record. George Navarre must be pleased. I think that beats Linus Yale.”

“Oh, you know your safes, do you?” The teller smiled. It wasn’t often he met a customer who showed this much interest or knowledge.

“Oh yes. In my profession, you could say it is a necessity.”

“Indeed? May I ask what that is?”

Leon smiled. “Security.”

“Ah. Well, you won’t find better security than here.”

“And why is that? I assume that a model this new is a combination and timer combined, but I know of a few that have been blown.”

“Yes, that is true enough. But we also employ a night guard, so this bank is never empty. There’s always someone here, and the front lights are kept on.”

“Really?” Leon mocked surprise. “Why such extremes? Do you get large payrolls and such coming through here?”

“Yes, we do. Wells Fargo just dropped off one the other day. Even they know this is a secure bank. The most secure in all of Campbell County.”

“But what brought it about in the first place?”

“What do you mean?”

Leon smiled, as he covered his irritation. He often found himself in this dilemma: hoping to find a talkative teller with no sense, but then having to deal with dumb questions.

“Other, larger towns don’t generally have night guards or keep their oil burning all night. It’s too expensive. Why did this town choose to do it?”

“Oh.” The teller lowered his voice as though he was imparting great wisdom. “Well, you see, four years ago a gang of outlaws did rob this

bank. Right in the middle of the day, too. Most unfortunate incident. Our sheriff, a fine, upstanding family man, was mowed down and trampled to death when those scoundrels made their escape. They were never captured.” The teller shook his head with the sad memory. “He left behind a wife and young son. Tragic, simply tragic.”

“Yes. And so unnecessary. Ruffians like that give outlawin’ a bad name.”

The teller frowned. “Sir?”

“Never mind. Just thinking out loud.”

“Oh. Yes sir. Anyway, after that unfortunate loss, the townsfolk held a meeting, and it was decided that all the citizens would contribute a small amount every month to help pay for the added security.” Again, the employee puffed up with pride. “We are determined never to get robbed again.”

“How did it go?”

Jack sat at the small table by the window of their hotel room, the various inner workings of his Colt Peacemaker spread out upon the surface.

Leon frowned at him as he closed the door. “What are you doing, cleaning your gun when I’m not here to back you up? What if the sheriff recognized us and came knocking?”

Jack nodded to the Winchester laid out conveniently on the bed.

“I’m good. So?”

“What?”

Jack sighed. “How did it go?”

Leon’s smile took over his face. “They’re practically inviting me to rob their bank.”

“Oh yeah? Old safe, no locks on the doors?”

“Nope. New Navarre, lock and timer combination. Armed guard and oil burning all night.”

Jack slumped and sent his partner a pained look. “Don’t tell me: you can’t resist the challenge.”

“Yeah!” Leon came and sat at the table, his eyes sparkling. “They haven’t been robbed in four years. Smug about it, too. Just think about it, Kid. We get in there, right under the nose of that guard, and clean the safe out. That teller even made slip that they’ve just had a Wells Fargo payroll dropped off. Ha, ha! This is going to be fun.”

“Wells Fargo, huh? That oughta please Carlyle no end.”

“Agh,” Leon waved it away. “Who cares about Carlyle? We’ll be in and out. We’ve already got most of what we’ll need to blow it, and the rest, I’ll pick up at the mercs. You just carry on cleaning your gun. I got this.”

“Uh huh. Fine. I’ll let Gus and the boys know it’s a go.”

“There you are, sir. Good luck with your prospecting.”

Leon accepted his parcel and nodded his thanks. “I have every intention of succeeding.”

The shopkeeper laughed. “That’s what I like ta see: a positive attitude!”

“Oh, yes sir. Good day to you.”

“Good day.”

Leon turned and came smack up against a teenage boy whose feet had brought him into the store before his head.

“Oh, sorry mister. I didn’t mean ta run into you.”

Leon scrambled to prevent his supplies from scattering. Once he had his parcel under control, he smiled at the blond-headed teen and tried to show appreciation for the lad’s exuberance.

“You’re in an awful hurry. What’s the rush?”

“My ma gave me five cents ta spend on whatever I want.” Sparkling juvenile eyes darted beyond Leon’s shoulder to survey the sweets on the counter. “I ain’t had this much money for myself for, well, I don’t reckon I know how long.”

“Then you better get over there and see what you want. Be careful with your choices though. Don’t go wasting it.”

“No sir!”

The lad was just about to push past Leon when he was brought up short by a feminine command.

“Samuel Jefferies! Don’t think I didn’t see what you just did.”

Young Sam rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mama.”

A handsome, middle-aged woman entered the store. Seeing the young gentleman smiling at her, she absently brushed a stray strand of greying hair from her face and nodded a greeting.

“I do apologize. My son is all legs and no manners these days.”

“No need to apologize, ma’am,” Leon tipped his hat. “It hasn’t been so long that I don’t remember the excitement of a five-cent payday.”

“You’re very kind. Still,” she turned sharp eyes to meet level with her son’s, “you will apologize to this gentleman, Samuel.”

“Ma! I already did.”

“Well do it again.”

Sam sighed then slouched. He looked in the vicinity of Leon's belt buckle as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Like I said before, mister: I'm sorry I bumped into ya. I gotta learn to watch where I'm goin'."

Leon fought to keep a straight face. "That's the best apology any man can ask for. Keep up the good work."

Sam grinned. "Yes sir."

Leon nodded and again tipped his hat to the lady. "Ma'am. You and your son have a good day."

"Thank you. Same to you."

Leon had to hand it to his gang, they sure knew how to hide a fire when they wanted to. If he hadn't known their location, he and Jack would likely have ridden right past them. As it was, he still had to place fingers to lips and blow out a long, low whistle.

They waited, gazing into the darkness.

"You sure this is the spot?" Jack peered into the night, looking for a sign.

"You know it is."

"Maybe they run into trouble."

"Maybe. But, oh, there." Leon pointed though there was no need.

A lantern swayed among the trees, then disappeared.

The partners nudged their horses forward.

Neither animal was comfortable with this situation. The darkness closed in around them making it not only difficult to be sure of their footing, but also giving their predators an advantage. Blowing through quivering nostrils, they picked their way through the foliage until they rounded an outcropping of rocks and found themselves surrounded by a comforting circle of warmth and light.

"About time you two showed up," Gus grumbled from the seat beside the campfire. "We were beginnin' to think ya got lost."

"No, no," Leon assured him, although there had been some scary moments. "No trouble at all. Right Jack?"

"Yeah, sure."

The newcomers dismounted and Malachi came over to take the reins.

"I'll get 'em settled for the night. We saved some supper for ya."

"Well, that's good. Ah, just a minute."

Leon and Jack pulled their saddlebags from their horses, then let them be led away.

The partners settled in around the fire, pleased to be able to warm up. It might be June, but the nights still got chilly.

“Here ya are,” Charlie handed them each a plate of something hot, along with a chunk of flat bread. “Malachi had a couple a grouse ta add to the pot.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Jack added as he took the plate. “Anything’s better ‘n jerky and beans.”

Gus took the kettle off the rack and poured himself a cup of coffee then settled back and squinted at his bosses.

“You two are bein’ awful quiet. Ya did break into it, didn’t ya? We didn’t waste our time waylayin’ that night guard, did we?”

“Oh no,” Leon mumbled around a mouthful. “Everything went fine.” He grinned at Jack. “Even easier than the Denver job.”

Gus looked from one man to the other, the campfire highlighting the glint in his eyes.

“So, what was the take?” His tone suggested irritation.

“Um, near as we can figure, about \$10,000.”

Malachi rejoined the group. “Woeee. Add that ta what we already done got, that ain’t a bad start to the season.”

Charlie chuckled. “That’s for sure. Now all we gotta do is get it back to the Elk.”

Hank nodded as he poured himself a coffee. “Yeah. I admit ta feelin’ a bit anxious with all that money stashed in our saddlebags.”

“Yeah.” Leon sopped up gravy with his bread. “Does everyone remember where we buried the loot from each job?”

A series of nods made the rounds.

“Good,” Leon continued. “We’ll split up in the morning, as planned. Jack and I will pick up the closest one outside of Gillette. Gus, you and Malachi can get the one by Buffalo. Hank and Charlie can get the one in Evansville. Things should have cooled off by the time you get back to those towns. Just be careful. And no side jobs. No drawing attention to yourselves. Just get the cache and get home. Understood?”

“Sure.”

“Yup.”

“I’m ready for my own bunk.”

Leon lay in his bedroll, staring up at the stars. His tummy was full, and the hot food and coffee took the chill off his body. Considering he was

laying on the ground and not in his own bed at home, he was pretty comfortable.

“You were awfully quiet during supper.”

Jack grunted, startled out of the near sleep he had drifted into.

He sighed. “I saw no reason ta interrupt. You was doin’ just fine.”

“Yeah. But a little back-up would have been nice.”

Jack sighed again and rolled onto his back. He could just make out his uncle’s silhouette caused by the backlighting from the dying embers.

“Back-up for what? They all know the plan.”

“Yeah, I know.” Leon shrugged. He continued to gaze up into the dark expanse, and the wheels in his mind churned.

Jack stared up at the same stars, wishing he could simply roll over and go to sleep, but he knew Leon wasn’t going to let that happen.

Jack accepted the inevitable. “What’s on your mind?”

“Nothin’.”

Jack groaned. “C’mon, Leon. I’d like ta get some sleep tonight, and I ain’t gonna until you spit it out. So let’s hear it.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking.”

“Uh huh.”

“What if Taggard is right.”

“Right? Ya mean about quittin’ while we’re ahead? That we’re gonna come to a bad end, and such?”

“Yeah.”

“Sheesh. After the haul we just made? Things ain’t never been better.”

“Yeah, but Carlyle’s not giving up, either.”

Jack snorted. “Carlyle and Hoag are runnin’ themselves in circles. As long as we keep changin’ the counties we hit, they’ll never know where ta expect us next.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“You’re just tired. Get some sleep. Things are goin’ good.”

Leon sighed then smiled. “Yeah, you’re right. I am tired. Goodnight, Jack.”

“Yeah, goodnight.”

Five hours later, the camp bustled with early morning activity. Charlie coaxed the embers back into a small fire, good enough to boil coffee, while others got horses grained then saddled.

Jack approached the fire, his warm breath blowing on cold hands.

“How ya feelin’ this mornin’?”

Leon shrugged as he pulled his coat more snugly around himself.

“Better. I’ll be glad when all of us are home safe, though.”

“Ya always say that.”

Leon chuckled. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

The sun was just rising and adding a touch of rosy light to the camp when Malachi came by for coffee.

“Horses is all saddled.” He looked with disappointment at the kettle on the fire. “Ain’t it ready yet?”

“Give it a couple a more minutes,” Jack said.

“Here,” Charlie dug out a biscuit and some jerky. “Munch on that until the coffee’s ready.”

“How can I eat biscuits without coffee?”

“Put it in your mouth and chew.”

“No need ta get surly.”

“Well, I ain’t had my coffee yet neither, so stop complainin’.”

“Ah, fellas,” Jack nodded toward the coffee pot that was in the process of boiling over. “I think the coffee’s ready.”

Six cups appeared out of nowhere as every member of the group gathered around the fire. Charlie filled each cup, starting with Leon’s, then Jack’s and Gus’s, then everyone else according to whose cup got under the spout first. He poured his own last and emptied the pot.

“There,” Charlie grumbled. “Everybody’s got their coffee. Get your own food. Ya all know where it is.”

“Ain’t ya gonna get another pot a coffee goin’?” Hank asked the back of Charlie’s head.

Charlie spun around with a snarl on his lips when Leon interrupted.

“No time for a second cup. Grab what you can for breakfast and then we break camp and get going. I expect that night guard is going to get found within the next couple of hours, and I want to be out of here before that happens.”

This comment was met with some sighs, but nobody argued.

“Once you pick up your caches,” Leon continued, “you can take the train to get home, if you feel safe enough. Get off at Rawlins though, and ride in from there. I hope I don’t need to remind any of you to stay out of Medicine Bow.”

This time there was grumbling.

“Sheesh,” Gus curled his lip. “What is this gang comin’ to? Since when did we kowtow to any sheriff?”

Jack sent Gus a warning glare.

Leon simply sighed. “Are we going to have to go over this again, Gus? You don’t know when keeping Taggard as a friend just might come in handy. Keep your distance.”

“Yeah, fine.” Gus downed his last gulp of coffee, grabbed another stick of jerky and stomped off to pack his gear.

“Okay, fellas,” Jack said, “time ta break camp. Let’s get goin’.”

Rawlins, Wyoming

Three days later.

Jack and Leon strode with purpose along the station platform, bulging saddlebags bouncing upon their shoulders. Both men carried rifles, and though this wasn’t unusual, there was an air about them that let people know to not bother them.

Other passengers crossed in front and behind them, greeting family or hurrying to secure hotel rooms before other passengers beat them to it. The partners didn’t pay them much mind, other than to avoid collisions as they headed for the freight cars.

As the pair stepped down off the platform, they noted with some disappointment that their way was blocked by cattle being herded off two stock cars and pushed into pens to await their fate.

Leon tapped one of the herders on the shoulder.

“Hey, we need to get through here. We have horses in that third car.”

The cowhand turned a dusty, sweat-streaked face toward him then snorted through his moustache.

“Ain’t nothin’ I can do about that. You’re gonna have ta wait.”

“But—”

A feisty steer tried to make a break for it, but the cowhand turned on it and wacked it across the nose with his lariat.

The animal bellowed with indignation, but then, with a snort and a toss of its impressive horns, turned and joined its fellows inside the pen.

“Dammit.” Leon looked around, seeking an alternative. “We could cut between the cars and come around on the other side.”

“Yeah, we could. I don’t see the point though. They’ll have the way clear here soon.”

“I know, but I don’t like being delayed like this. We’re too close to home.”

“There,” Jack nodded toward the wranglers. “They’re done.”

To emphasize Jack’s words, the heavy gates of the pens slid down with a loud clatter and slammed into place. Then, with more disturbed dust and the grating of wood sliding against wood, the ramps were removed and allowed to fall to the ground.

The mustachioed cowhand sent them a broken smile and waved them through.

“There ya go, gents. All clear.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Thank ya kindly.”

The partners hurried passed the now empty freight cars and arrived at the third car just as the stockman and the conductor were setting the ramp up to the door level.

“Ah, there ya are,” the conductor nodded a greeting. “I was beginnin’ ta think the railroad had just inherited two horses.”

Leon grinned. “Ah no. We got delayed by the cattle.”

“Uh hmm. That happens sometimes.”

With everything in place, the stockman walked up the ramp, unlatched the freight car door, and slid the heavy barricade open.

The men outside were met by two eager whinnies as the horses inside stamped and snorted, showing their impatience.

The stockman disappeared inside the car, then emerged a moment later, leading Jack’s bay.

The whinny that followed them out indicated Fanny’s displeasure at being left behind. She didn’t have long to wait though. As soon as Jack took the reins of his horse, the stockman went back for the mare and within a few minutes, the partners were leading their horses away from the stockyards.

“Who’d you say the sheriff is now?” Jack cast a glance toward that office as they crossed the main street.

“Some fella named Boxtton. As far as I know, we’ve never met him.”

“Good. I’ll see ya at the saloon.”

“Sounds good.”

The partners split up, with Jack taking the horses to the livery, and Leon, loaded down with the saddlebags, aimed for the hotel.

Both men were tired. Train travel, though faster than horseback, was wearing on them. A beer at the saloon had been followed by a hasty supper at the café, then a retreat to their room and an early night.

Jack slept well, but he awoke just before dawn and couldn’t settle back into sleep again. Beside him, Leon snored just loudly enough to indicate deep slumber, so Jack knew he was on his own. He lay in bed for another ten minutes, then sighed and got up. He needed the water closet anyway.

Once that business was taken care of, he padded to the window and parted the curtains just enough to get a view of the quiet street down below. He settled one haunch on the windowsill and surveyed the slowly awakening town.

Still dark, the streetlights by the main entrance to the hotel were the only thing illuminating the boardwalk and that section of the road. All was still and quiet.

Then, as Jack watched, the sun peaked over the horizon, and the scene below lost its cover of darkness. The shape of a man, who had been hidden by the night shadows, now slowly took shape.

Jack frowned. It wasn't unusual for someone to be out during the early morning hours. There were people who had jobs to get to. But Jack felt a tickling on his spine as he watched this individual. The man leaned against the hitching rail with the air of someone who had been there for some time. He was smoking a cigarette, and, as Jack watched, he shifted and the light from the streetlamp glinted on the rim of a badge pinned to the man's chest.

Jack gasped and let the curtain float back into place just as the man looked up to stare directly at their window.

"Leon, wake up." Jack kept his voice low, even though the man outside wouldn't have heard him. "C'mon, Leon. Wake up."

Jack came around the foot of the bed and gave Leon's leg a shake.

Leon, startled out of sleep, jerked awake and made a grab for his Remington that was hanging from the bedpost. He stopped part way when he realized it was just Jack.

He peered at his partner through sleep-heavy eyes. "What? What are you doing?"

"We got us a visitor," Jack whispered. "There's a fella, sportin' a badge, hangin' around in front of the hotel, watchin' this room."

Leon groaned. "Dammit." He swung his legs off the bed and stood up. Yawning and rubbing itchy eyes, he made his way to the water closet. "I guess we're heading out the back way again."

"Yup."

Not daring to turn up the lamp, they dressed quickly, having laid out their clothes the night before in such a manner as to assist in a hasty departure.

They strapped gunbelts around hips, gathered up their saddlebags, coats and rifles and, carrying their boots, headed for the door.

"Wait a minute." Jack set down his boots and dug in his pocket for some coins. He set them on the table, then met Leon's questioning look. "For the room. Don't wanna leave without payin'."

Leon rolled his eyes. "Come on."

Stepping outside into the semi-dark back alley, Leon eased the door shut and checked their surroundings. All was quiet as they pulled on their boots and coats, then gathered their belongings again.

“Which way to the livery?”

Jack nodded to the left. “Down there. It’s even on the same side of the street.”

The two outlaws ghosted along the back way and arrived at the livery without meeting a soul. Their luck changed though as they followed the fence line to the front of the establishment and realized that the horses in the outside paddocks were already munching their breakfast hay. The lamp above the open door was still burning, but it was obvious from the interior sounds of contented snorts that the livery man was already on the job.

Glancing toward the hotel, Jack nipped back to the shelter of the barn.

“That deputy’s still there. He ain’t lookin’ this way though.”

Leon frowned. “If the law knows who we are, why didn’t they come at us during the night? Why just watch the room and wait for morning?”

Jack shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe the idea was ta follow us, hopin’ we’ll take ‘em to the money.”

“That could be.”

“Mornin’ gents. You’re up awful early.”

Both men jumped and pivoted to meet the friendly eyes of the liveryman.

Leon plastered on his enchanting smile.

“Yes sir. Sorry. We should have mentioned that we’d need to leave early. We were afraid you might not be here yet.”

“Oh, no sir. I’m here before the sun every mornin’. Your horses are grained. I’ll get ‘em saddled up for ya, if ya like.”

“No, that’s fine. We can do that ourselves.”

“Yeah,” Jack followed Leon into the barn. “We can see yerbusy.”

“Well, okay. Your gear is just over there.”

Within ten minutes the horses were saddled and the liveryman paid.

Grimy fingers counted the coins, and a grizzled smile showed appreciation for the tip.

“Safe journey, gents. Come back anytime.”

Leon slid his rifle into the boot. “Sure will. You have a good day.”

“Yeah, real nice town,” Jack said as he mounted. “We’ll be seein’ ya.”

He glanced back to the hotel again as they turned the horses’ noses the other direction.

“Dammit.”

“What?”

“That deputy’s gone.”

“Uh huh. So are we, and we better be quick about it, too.”

“I’m with ya there, partner.”

Pushing their horses into an easy lope to not draw attention to themselves, they headed out of town in the opposite direction of Elk Mountain.

By 11:00 that morning, the sun had taken over the day. Both men were back to shirtsleeves, and all of them were caked in sweat and dust.

The last four hours had been spent covering their tracks and riding along streams or creek beds whenever flowing water presented itself. All the while, they watched behind, looking for telltale dust clouds or metal glinting in the bright summer sun.

Sitting their horses on a slight rise in the landscape, they peered back in the direction of Rawlins.

Jack removed his hat and wiped his brow, hoping to prevent the salty sweat from seeping into his eyes.

“Ya see anything?”

Leon shook his head. “Nope. Doesn’t mean they aren’t out there.”

“True. How much food do we have?”

“Not much for us and nothing for the horses.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Jack looked around. “There ain’t any places in this area ta hole up neither. We gotta keep movin’.”

“Yup. Let’s skirt around Fort Steele, then come to Elk Mountain from that direction.”

Jack looked at his partner like he was nuts. “Fort Steele? Aside from Injuns that don’t know you, the last group I wanna run into is soldiers. It don’t make no sense goin’ that way. Why don’t we head for Encampment?”

“Because that’s what the law would expect us to do.” Leon stopped talking as Fanny lowered her head and gave her body an aggressive shaking. She then snorted and stamped a foot. Leon gave her mane a stroke. “I know. We’ll get going in a minute.”

Jack took another swipe across his brow then set his hat back on. “I still think Fort Steele is a bad idea.”

“It is,” Leon grinned. “That’s why it’s a good idea.”

Jack sighed but relented. “All right. We’ll head for Fort Steele. Maybe none a them soldier-boys will recognize us.”

“Ha! Fat chance of that. We just won’t go near the actual fort.”

“Or their patrols, or their scouts, or their look-outs . . .”

“Leon, stop!”

Leon pulled Fanny in from her hand gallop and sent Jack a question as he came up beside them.

“It don’t feel right.” Jack scanned the high ridges on either side of the passage. “We shouldn’t go through there.”

“But it’s an extra ten miles to go around.”

“Yeah, I know. But it don’t feel right.”

Leon cast a regretful glance along the intended route, then shrugged and turned Fanny away from it.

“Okay. We’ll go around.”

Then two sets of eyes snapped around to the upper ridge, as a minor rockslide clattered its way down toward the dirt. Neither man waited to see it make landfall.

“Go!” Jack yelled, his gun already in his hand.

Jack sent a wild shot skyward to encourage whoever to keep their heads down, but it didn’t have the desired effect.

Both men heard the rifle shot, then Jack’s horse shuddered and collapsed.

Next thing Jack knew, he hit the ground and began coughing from the assault of freshly raised dust. He scrambled to his feet and made a grab for the saddlebags, but more bullets rained down upon them, and he snatched his hand away.

Fanny reared as a searing gouge appeared in her flank, but Leon turned her and pushed her toward his partner.

“Leave the money!” he yelled as he stretched out a hand to his friend. “Come on!”

Jack made a run at him, reaching for salvation.

The two hands grasped when Leon’s grip faltered.

Pain through his upper arm caused the whole limb to fail, then Fanny reared again, frantic to get away from the burning projectiles. Leon did his best to control her and give Jack the opportunity to get on behind him.

Jack made a grab for the saddle horn, but he stumbled as his leg gave out on him.

“Leon, go!”

“No. Come on, you can make it—”

Another bullet nicked the top of Leon’s hand, then he saw Jack’s hat as it jumped forward on his head, then flipped into the air.

Jack fell forward, against Fanny, then crumpled to the ground.

In the same instant, Leon felt the intrusion of heat slicing through his side, and it was all he could do to hang on. Fanny powered into a gallop, and the last thing Leon saw was his partner lying face down in the dirt and bright red blood seeping through his curly hair.

Then they were gone, Fanny getting them both out of there as fast as her legs would allow.

Leon swayed in the saddle, but he hung on and let his mare take him wherever she wanted.

She wanted to go home. Not caring about well-laid plans, or diversionary tactics, she pointed her nose in the direction of Elk Mountain and kept on going.

The posse surrounded the fallen outlaw, but Sheriff Boxton didn't waste any time.

"Langford, Guthrie, see to this piece of crap. Fort Steele is the closest. If he's still alive, take 'im there. And check those saddlebags!"

Without a word, the two deputies swung down from their antsy horses, as the rest of the posse took off after the fleeing gang leader.

Guthrie picked up Jack's fallen Colt, but even knowing he was likely unarmed, the deputies were cautious in their approach of the motionless man. Coming up to him, Langford nudged his toe under the shoulder and rolled him over.

Jack's face was smeared with blood, and more of it continued to seep from the head wound. The outlaw groaned, indicating life, but he didn't awaken.

Langford untied Jack's bandana and did his best to wrap it around the wound, figuring something was better than nothing.

Guthrie took his own bandana and did the same for the injury on Jack's leg.

"Well, that'll have ta do," Langford decided. "We'll tie 'im to your saddle and see if he makes it ta Fort Steele."

"My saddle? Why don't we tie 'im ta yours?"

Langford came close to rolling his eyes. "Because I got the bigger horse, that's why. And we'll be ridin' double."

Guthrie sighed. "Yeah, okay. I guess that makes sense." He glanced at the fallen horse and remembered about the saddlebags.

Coming up to the dead animal, he pulled the rifle from its scabbard, then knelt and opened one of the bags. Reaching inside, he pulled out a bag, opened it and grinned at his buddy.

"Ha, ha. Sure enough. Looks like we got some a that loot back at least."

Langford came over and took a look.

“Good. And I bet Nash has some on him, too. We won’t get it all back, but this is a start. Grab that coat and the bags. It’s time we got a move on.”

“Yeah.” Guthrie returned the pouch to the saddlebag and undid the tie strings. The coat came off easily, but the one bag was trapped underneath the haunch of the horse.

Guthrie stood up and tugged at it, putting most of his weight into the efforts.

“Dammit. I’m gonna need some help here.”

Langford got down by the saddle and pushed against the dead horse. Nothing happened.

“Come on, push. Maybe if we get it rocking, we can lift it enough to pull the bag out.”

Both men set their shoulders to the horse’s back and heaved.

“You know, it would help if we both pushed at the same time,” Langford smirked. “On three. One, two, three.”

Even uniform in their efforts, the bulk of horseflesh didn’t budge. The soldiers stood and scowled at the horse, each scratching their heads over this dilemma. If they returned without the saddlebags there would be hell to pay.

Then Guthrie’s horse mimicked Fanny by dropping his head and rattling his gear with a full-blown body-shake. He snorted, gave his unruly mane another make-over, then licked his lips as he sent a doe-eyed enquiry to his rider.

Both men looked at the horse, then each other.

“I got an idea.” Came out in unison.

Within moments, a rope stretched from the saddle horn on the dead horse to the saddle horn on Guthrie’s horse. Once they were ready, Guthrie led his horse forward.

The horse dug in with its hind quarters and easily shifted the weight of the other horse onto its belly. Langford then grabbed the saddle bags and held them up in triumph.

The dead horse was released to roll back onto its side and Guthrie came over to retrieve his rope. Now that the problem of the saddlebags had been solved, he couldn’t help but notice the quality of the saddle his rope was attached to.

He stood up and chewed his lip.

“Shame to have ta leave that saddle behind.”

“Hmm.” Langford considered their options. “It is a nice hunk a leather, ain’t it?”

The two men grinned at each other, then Guthrie scurried back to his horse and the procedure was repeated.

Langford released the two girths and tugged the saddle free.
The dead horse rolled back onto its side, and the two men cheered.

It was a strange sight that entered the Fort just as dusk settled in for the evening.

Two sweaty, dirt-caked horses dragged their feet through the gate. The first one carried two deputies, and the second horse packed an unconscious man who was slung across one saddle, and another saddle was slung across him. Everything was tied down and secured like a month's supply of grub on a mule.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE PUSHING THE LIMIT

Leon hung on for his life.

I can't fall off. I can't fall off. I can't let Carlyle get hold of me again.
He shuddered at the thought.

Fanny galloped on.

Leon tried to guide her, but with one hand claspings the horn and the other arm injured, she was the one in control.

She galloped full out for five miles, partly because she sensed the urgency in their situation and partly to run away from the pain of the numerous bullet strikes. She was fortunate that all of them were nicks, but the pain was still real, and all she wanted to do was get home.

They crossed the North Platte, stopping only for a moment to drink and replenish the canteen before pushing on.

Night would soon be upon them, and Leon knew he had to stop. An outcropping of rocks nestled inside a stand of trees seemed like the best bet. There was no water and only a bit of grazing available, so it was going to be an uncomfortable night, but they needed to rest.

Leon slid from the saddle and, before he could stop himself, he sank to his knees.

Oh crap, I didn't think I was this tired. Grabbing the stirrup and then a tie string, he pulled himself back to his feet.

He gave the mare's dust-caked neck a pat.

"Sorry, girl. I can't take the saddle off tonight. I don't think I'd be able to get it back on. Besides, we might have to leave in a hurry. I will loosen your girth though, just a bit. How's that?"

Fanny swung her head around and nuzzled him, then she snorted and gave herself a full body-shake. She knew the routine of being on the run and accepted the discomfort of their situation like the pro she was.

Leon gave her another pat then dug into the saddle bag. He pulled out the last of the grain, a piece of flat bread and his last two pieces of jerky.

Removing Fanny's bridle, he poured out the grain for her and she tucked into supper.

He grabbed his coat and the canteen then found a clear piece of ground and, leaning his back against the boulder, he eased himself down to sit and assess his situation.

The gash on the back of his left hand was ugly but not serious. He flexed his fingers and still had full movement. The gash on his arm was also painful but not debilitating. The hole in his side was another matter. He was thankful that the bullet had gone right through, but he knew that if

it wasn't treated soon, he would be in trouble. It wasn't gushing blood, but it hadn't stopped bleeding either.

What a time to not have an extra shirt to wrap around it. And some of that ointment of Mukua's. *I don't know what he puts in that stuff, but it sure numbs the pain. Ha. Smells like high heaven, but I'd be glad for it now. Fanny too. She's hiding it, but I know those grazes must hurt.*

He glanced at the mare as she finished her grain and began nibbling at the sparse grass within their shelter.

He smiled through his own weariness.

"You're a good girl, Fanny."

The mare cocked an ear toward him then continued with her grazing.

Leon ripped off a bit of jerky and began chewing on it, and his thoughts turned to a subject he hadn't wanted to look at. But now that he was sitting quiet, he didn't have a choice.

Jack. *Dammit. I don't even know if he's alive or dead. His throat tightened at the thought, and he took a swallow of water from the canteen. What I saw of that head wound, it didn't look good. If he is alive, they've probably taken him to Fort Steele. Ha. And he's the one who didn't want to go near the place. We won't be able to get him out of that fortress, but they can't keep him there forever. When they move him to town, that's when we hit. If he's still alive.*

Leon felt tears prick his eyes, but he held them back and took another swig of water.

Don't think like that. He is alive, and we'll get him out. Yeah, we'll get him out.

The possibility that he himself might not get away was not allowed to surface. Carlyle was not going to get another crack at him, and that was the end of it.

Taking one more gulp of water from the canteen, he forced himself to his feet. He removed his hat to pour the last of the liquid into it and made the offering to his mare.

She pricked her ears, dug her nose into the hat and drank the contents.

Leon smiled and gave her face a rub.

"Sorry, there isn't any more. No, no, don't chew the hat: I need it."

Fanny accepted that the water was gone and returned to her meager grazing.

Leon returned to his boulder and with a sigh of surrender, slid down to the ground.

Full darkness settled upon them, and Leon wrapped his coat around himself as best he could. He wanted to lie down, but he knew he'd fall asleep if he did. He settled back against the rock and listened to the comforting sound of his mare grazing.

A rifle shot shattered the early dawn, the bullet chipping the boulder above Leon's head.

Both Fanny and Leon jumped, and Leon became fully awake in an instant. He cursed as he pushed himself into a seated position, realizing that, despite his determination, he had indeed fallen asleep. He grabbed his Remington and grimaced as he tried to kneel.

"Nash! We know you're in there. Be smart and give it up!"

Leon closed his eyes and groaned. He gave up trying to kneel and sank back down to sit against the boulder.

"Nash! You left a blood trail my grandma could follow. We know you're hurtin'. You're not gonna make it!"

Oh yes, I will.

He replaced his Remington to its holster, then glanced at Fanny who was on high alert and watching him.

Using the boulder for support, he pulled himself to his feet and got over to the mare. He tightened the girth and returned the canteen to the saddle. Taking the bridle from the horn, he fumbled with the headstall to get it into position.

Fortunately, Fanny was bridle-wise, and she took hold of the bit and pretty much put the apparel on herself. The throat latch remained undone.

Leon gathered the reins then stood and looked at the stirrup. *I don't recall it being this high.*

"Come on, Nash! There's no point ignoring us. We know you're in there! We got your partner in custody, and you're wounded. Do the right thing!"

Leon slumped with relief, his head resting against the skirt of the saddle.

Thank goodness: Jack's alive. Thank goodness.

He took a deep breath and managed to get his left foot into the stirrup. And there he stopped. Pulling himself up into the saddle wasn't coming as naturally as it usually did.

He took two more deep breaths then heaved. He barely got a foot off the ground when his left arm gave out and he fell back. Now off balance, his foot came out of the stirrup and he crumpled all the way down to lay sprawled in the dirt.

Fanny looked around at him and snorted.

"Yeah, I know. Give me a minute."

More rock chips jumped into the air as a second rifle shot sent out its message.

“Talk to us, Nash! We’re givin’ ya a chance ta give up peaceable. If you don’t talk to us, we’ll come in shootin’!”

Leon sighed as he stared up at the brightening sky. *Well, there’s incentive.*

He forced himself onto his knees, then again, using the stirrup and tie strings, he managed to get back on his feet.

Looking around, he spied another pile of rocks that would give him an advantage. He led Fanny to them, positioned her up alongside, then using the rocks as a natural mounting block, he finally managed to get on board.

Two more rifle shots sounded, and Leon felt one bullet wiz through the loose folds of his coat, and the other one thunked into a tree at the same level as his head.

Fanny bunched her hind quarters and jumped forward, almost unseating her rider. But Leon held on and, turning her head away from their pursuers, they scrambled up the rocky trail and lit out for the high country.

More shots followed him, then silence as the posse remounted their horses, and the chase was on again.

The going was tough on the rocky terrain. Normally, Fanny would have tackled this incline with ease, but she was still sore and tired from the previous day, and the strain showed on both. She stumbled more than once and each time, her ears flattened in anger at herself for being so clumsy.

It was all Leon could do to stay with her. His side injury had stopped bleeding through the night, but now it seeped again, and fresh blood mixed with the old on his clothing. He had to trust Fanny to keep them going in the right direction and fortunately, on those occasions when she did stumble, she went down and came back up so fast, he didn’t have time to lose balance and fall off.

At one point, Fanny stopped for a breather and Leon looked back over his trail.

He groaned. The posse was closing in on him. They had fresh horses, and though not the same quality as Fanny, they still clambered up the trail in good time.

Leon reached forward and stroked his mare’s neck.

“Come on, old girl. We just need to get over this ridge and we’ll be on level ground again. We’ll get distance between us then.”

A splash of movement caught his eye and he looked down at his boot. As he watched, another red drop rolled down the saddle then did a free fall to splatter onto his toe. Another drop followed but missed his boot and hit

the hard ground, leaving a clear beacon for anyone with sense enough to look.

His heart sank, but he refused to let despair take him over. With a nudge from his heel, Fanny gallantly carried on, her gaze now focused upon the crest of the ridge.

Up and over they went, then down the other side. Hitting relatively level ground again, Fanny needed no urging to pick up the gallop. They were into familiar territory now, and Fanny was determined to get her human home.

The noonday sun beat down upon them, but still the mare pushed on. She got no guidance from her human; no pats on the neck or words of encouragement, so she knew she was on her own. But this was okay; she knew where she was going, and her determination was undaunted.

Barely conscious, Leon could still tell that his mare was faltering. He could feel it in her stride and hear it in her labored breathing, but he no longer had the strength to control her. She'd drop dead beneath him before she gave up, and this knowledge worried him more than the persistent posse behind them.

His foggy mind suggested he simply let go; he would take the tumble and end the chase in order to save his horse. But he'd been holding on for so long now, his muscles wouldn't respond. His fingers remained clamped around the horn, and his feet stayed lodged in the stirrups. All he could do was pray they made it home before his gallant mare went down for good.

He had no idea how Fanny did it. He lost consciousness more than once, but each time he awoke, they were still at a gallop and getting closer to their sanctuary.

Late afternoon shadows were their companions when Leon awoke to the sound of rifle shots. He wasn't surprised. The lawmen had offered him the chance to surrender and he hadn't taken it, so now they were just going to kill him and be done with it.

And why not? his foggy mind reasoned. *They'd have bragging rights for years.*

Then he lost consciousness again, and his mare galloped on.

Malachi sat comfortably in the well-worn dirt patch of the look-out station. His eyes casually scanned the wooded area below them. He

scratched his chin, more out of boredom than irritation, then let lose a heavy sigh. He hated look-out duty.

His co-sentry jumped, then cursed. He dropped his whittling knife and shook his hand, spraying blood into the dirt.

“Dammit! How’d that happen?”

Malachi grinned through his chaw. “Can’t you do nothin’ without hurtin’ yerself?”

Redman used his bandana to wrap the bleeding digit. “I was just whittlin’ a stick.”

“Yeah, but yer a bigger klutz n I am. You oughta know better ‘n ta be handlin’ a knife.” Then movement caught his eye, and he sat up a little straighter.

Redman cocked a brow at him. “You see somethin’?”

“Mabee.”

Malachi raised the spyglass and searched the trail through the trees.

“Hmm. Mabee not. Oh. Wait. Yeah, there’s someone comin’.”

Redman peered out in the appropriate direction. “Who is it?”

“Wull, I cain’t tell yet.”

“Is it Nash and the Kid? They’s way overdue.”

“Naw, it’s just one rider. Wait a second. They’s comin’ up on the clearin’. I’ll get a better look then. There he is. Yeah, it’s Nash. Damn, he don’t look so good, and his horse looks plum stove in.”

Redman come up on his knees and peered out over their ledge.

“Ain’t the Kid with ‘im?”

Malachi searched the woods behind Nash then shook his head.

“Nope. It’s just Nash.” Suddenly, Malachi became animated, his body tense. “Hell, we got company. He’s bringin’ a posse with ‘im.”

“What?” Redman snarled. “He knows better n that. Damn, it’s his own rule. We hide out and lose a posse before we lead ‘em straight to the Elk.”

“It don’t look like he had a choice. Still . . .”

Malachi pulled his handgun and fired three shots into the air to give the head’s up that someone was coming in fast then added a fourth shot requesting help. He holstered his pistol, grabbed his rifle and took aim. There he sat, in position, waiting for the posse to come into range.

Redman did the same.

They aimed low, knowing that Leon didn’t allow killing, especially lawmen, if there was an alternative. He wouldn’t be too pleased about them killing horses, either, but considering the dire straits their boss was in, it might be their only option.

Malachi and Redman both got shots off, neither of them hitting a mark, but letting the posse know that they had opposition now.

The posse riders spread out but kept on coming.

Galloping hoof beats coming from behind the lookout let the fellas know that their call for help was being answered. Hank, Lobo, Gus and Mukua all flew by, riding bareback with rifles in hand. No time to saddle the horses, they grabbed bridles and weapons, then swung aboard. They didn't hesitate at the lookout, but streamed by, heading for their boss.

Rifles were brought to bear, and lead flew between the two parties. Hitting a moving object from astride another moving object was highly unlikely, but it's the thought that counts.

Fanny was so exhausted, she was on automatic. She barely acknowledged her herd-mates as they gathered around her, protecting her and her rider from the posse's rifles.

Gus and Mukua pulled up between the gang and the posse and, holding their horses steady, took aim for real.

Two posse horses went down. One lay still, but the other scrambled up and limped after his group. The two fallen riders stayed low and got behind the fallen horse for cover.

The rest of the lawmen came on, but the barrage of bullets from the lookout were becoming more accurate the closer they came to it. One more fallen horse and the posse gave up the chase. They realized there was no getting into the hideout this way, and the hopes of bringing down the outlaw leader before he got this close were now dashed.

Fanny seemed to know that they were no longer being pursued. She slowed to a staggering trot, with only the support of her herd-mates keeping her going at all.

Mukua placed a hand on Leon's back and spoke to him in his mother's tongue, but he got no response. Leon was out cold, with only muscle memory holding him in the saddle.

The entourage stopped by the leader's cabin, and as soon as Fanny became stationary, Leon began to slide from the saddle.

Gus cursed and hit the ground, grabbing his boss before he fell all the way.

"This bloody little up-start. Always gettin' himself inta trouble."

His complaining stopped abruptly as he settled Leon on the ground and rolled him over. Blood covered him from his hairline to his toes. His shirt was saturated with it, and the obvious wound in his side still seeped the red liquid.

Mukua knelt beside Gus and put a hand to the wounded man's chest.

"Hmm," he grunted and nodded, then he lifted each eyelid. "Hmm."

“Hmm, what?” Gus’s tone rose in his concern and irritation. “He’s still alive, ain’t he?”

“Yes. He has lost much blood and is exhausted, but he should live.” He stood, and Gus came up with him. “Take him inside and clean him up. I will make some tea.”

Gus snorted. “Tea? Is that all you ever do? Make that damn tea?”

“It works, doesn’t it?”

“Well,” Gus shuffled, “yeah. I suppose it do.”

“Hmm.” Mukua nodded, then cast a worried look over the chestnut mare. “Too bad Haley is no longer here. She was helpful with the horses.” He picked up Fanny’s reins and led her toward the barn.

She had to feel the tug of the bridle on her poll before she took a step, and then she nearly fell in the effort.

Mukua stepped back and stroked her neck. He spoke softly in Shoshone to her, and the mare picked up her head and followed him.

The rest of the gang stood around, looking helpless.

Gus rolled his eyes. “Jesus, you’d think you ain’t never seen blood before.” He knelt again and got his hands under Leon’s shoulders. “Rex, get his legs. Lobo, go help Mukua.”

“What?” Lobo protested. “Ya want me ta help nursemaid a horse?”

“Yeah. Go.”

Lobo snarled then spit, but he did turn and follow the Indian over to the barn.

“Hank and Murdoch, go take over the lookout. Who knows, maybe the Kansas Kid will still come stragglin’ in. They obviously got separated, and he might just be hidin’ out, waitin’ for the all clear.”

“Yeah, okay.” Hank grabbed the arm of the new-hire and pushed him toward his horse. “Time ta start pullin’ duty, kid.”

“The rest of ya, go back ta what you was doin’. Me and Rex’ll look after the boss.”

Knock, knock, knock.

“What?” Gus’s tone was anything but inviting.

The cabin door creaked open. “Just us, Gus. We was wonderin’ how he is. He didn’t look so good when he came in.”

“Oh, Malachi,” Gus’s tone softened. “Yeah, he’s doin’ okay.”

Malachi and Redman came into the cabin, then followed Gus into Leon’s room, where Rex was getting ready to stitch up the wound in Leon’s side.

“Damn,” Malachi shook his head, “he looks like he’s ridin’ up ta death’s door.”

“No, he ain’t gonna die,” Gus grumbled as he set the bowl of hot water onto the nightstand. “The boy-genius seems ta have a streak a luck sown inta his hide. He got hit a few times, but every one went right on through and didn’t hit nothin’ important neither. He’s just gotta rest some, is all. That Indian goop Mukua slaps on will keep any infection at bay.”

“Oh good. We was worried. Did he say where the Kid is?”

“No, he didn’t Ky. It’s kinda hard ta talk when you’re unconscious, ya know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Malachi scrunched the hat he held in his hands. “I just thought maybe he woke up for a minute and mighta said somethin’.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Okay.”

Redman squirmed as Rex pushed the needle through the lips of the wound and pulled them together.

“Ah, I got chores ta do.” He backed toward the bedroom door. “I’ll see ya later, Ky.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Gus snorted at the man’s hasty retreat. “For an outlaw, ole’ Redman ain’t too good with blood, is he?”

Malachi shrugged. “He don’t mind it, as long as it stays inside the body.”

Two days later, Leon sat up in bed, propped with pillows and tucked in with blankets. A few select members of the gang sat in a semi-circle around him.

“We got ambushed,” Leon informed them in a voice still weak with exhaustion. “He took a nasty hit to the head, and I couldn’t get to him.” He looked around at the solemn faces surrounding him. “Yeah, I thought he was dead, but the sheriff let slip that they had him in custody at Fort Steele.”

Expressions brightened at the news that Jack was still alive, but groans made the rounds at the mention of the well-manned fort.

“Yeah,” Malachi searched the other faces, ‘but we ain’t gonna jest leave ‘im there, are we? We’re gonna make a plan, right?’”

Leon nodded. “Sure, sure, Malachi. We will. We’ll get him out.”

Mukua harrumphed and stood up, preparing to leave.

Leon tried to sit up straighter and held out a hand to stop the Indian.

“No, Ata-i, I didn’t mean we were going to hit the fort.”

Mukua stopped, then nodded. "Okay. I will not go near the blue coats. They are worse than the Crow."

"Yeah," Gus pulled his shoulders back, trying to appear important. "None of us wanna go near them soldier boys. They don't play by the rules."

Leon shifted as he worked at staying awake. "I agree. We'll watch the fort and wait until they move Jack to town. They can't keep him in the fort forever."

"I can do that," Rex offered. "I rode scout for the army a while back. It'd be nothin' for me ta pick up that role again. If I can get inside the fort, I can find out what's going on."

They all looked at Rex. Some with confusion, others with humor.

"Since when did you have time ta ride scout for the army?" Gus asked him. "You can't be no more'n sixteen."

"I'm twenty-five," Rex insisted. "My pa was a scout, so I got in there real young."

"You was a scout?" Malachi chortled. "The things ya don't know about a body. Well, why the hell didn't you stay with that instead a becomin' an outlaw?"

Rex bowed his head. "It didn't pay much and was kinda dangerous." He sent a quick glance to Mukua. "Besides, I didn't much care for how they treated the Indians."

Leon and Mukua exchanged a look, and Leon smiled at the slight twinkle he detected in the Shoshone's eye.

"That could work," Leon said. "We'd have to get some papers made up for you. Something official looking. Malachi can do that. You just tell him what work papers look like, and he'll get it done."

Rex looked at Malachi and was met with a tobacco-stained grin.

Rex frowned. "But Malachi can't even read. How can he forge papers?"

"It's the darndest thing I ever saw," Leon mumbled as his eyelids fought gravity. "He may not be able to read what he writes, but he can copy anything and make it look legit. You fellas go on and get that organized. I think I'm going to get some sleep."

"Ah, yeah, right." Gus stood up and ushered Malachi and Rex out of the room. "C'mon, we got plans ta make."

"Yeah," Malachi's voice carried back into the room. "I get ta do my play writin' again."

Mukua sat beside the bed and watched as Leon settled into the blankets. Leon sighed and cracked open an eyelid.

"What is it, Ata-i?"

“Do not worry about your nephew. He is full grown and able to look after himself.”

“That never stopped you from worrying about me.”

“Hmm. This is true. But you are not as smart as he is.”

Leon’s eyes shot open. “What?”

“Jack listens to his Spirit Guide. Your Spirit Guide becomes frustrated with you, because you always argue with him. A smart man listens to what his spirits tell him, but you do not. Jack is smarter than you.”

Leon sighed. There was no arguing with that logic.

“I’ll try to listen better.”

“Hmm.”

Leon yawned and sank deeper into his pillows. “I’m going to sleep . . .” Leon’s head nudged to one side and his soft, rhythmic breathing suggested he was down for the count.

Mukua watched him for a moment longer, then stood up and left the room. He needed to make more tea.

Fort Steele, Wyoming

Jack awakened to a throbbing headache. He lay on the cot and tried to will the pain away but wasn’t having much luck.

Oh man, I feel awful. Everything hurts. When am I gonna learn not to drink so much? Then his body jolted, and daggers of pain shot through his brain as the blaring notes from a bugle attacked his senses. *What the hell?*

Then the nausea in his stomach over-powered the pain in his head, and he rolled over to his side and vomited onto the floor. The throbbing in his head increased as he continued to retch, and his inner voice screamed for mercy. With every heave his body made, he was sure his skull was going to burst apart until finally it did, and he passed out into blessed oblivion.

When he awakened again, his head still ached but not with the same nauseating throbbing of before.

He raised a hand to his head and felt the bandages there. It seemed like his whole skull was wrapped in the gauze as he gingerly felt his way around. He cringed when his fingers found the wound, and then he did the smart thing and left it alone.

Opening his eyes to slits, he cautiously looked around. The daylight streaming in through the bars did not cause his head to ache more than it

was, so he allowed his eyes to come fully open. He then slowly sat up and swung his legs off the cot so he could survey his enclosure.

Well, I know I'm in a cell; that much is obvious. But it don't look like any jail cell I've ever been in. I see somebody cleaned up the mess I made. That's good.

Gazing at the heavily barred window, he stood up and limped to it.

Ah no. No wonder it don't look like a jail cell; it ain't. It's the damned stockade. I'm in the fort.

He returned to his cot and sat down. *Dammit, Leon. This is the last place I wanna be and yet, here I am.*

Then voices alongside the walls of the fort caught his attention.

“Open the gates. We got riders comin’ in.”

Jack perked up and hopped back to the window.

As he watched, the gate at the far end of the yard opened and six civilians rode in upon tired, sweat-caked horses. Each horse carried two men, except for one that was being led, and that horse limped so badly the poor creature could barely keep up.

Jack caught his breath as the sunlight glinted off badges pinned to vests, and he realized that this was the posse that had been chasing them.

He couldn't help the hint of a smile. *Leon got away. And it looks like he gave them a wild chase, too. They must a split up, gettin' me here while the rest of 'em went after him. What a sorry-lookin' lot they are. Ha. Serves 'em right.*

He cringed as his snicker caused his head to thump. *Yeah. All right for Leon gettin' away, so he better have some plans on gettin' me outta here since it was his lame brain idea that got me in here in the first place. We shoulda gone ta Encampment. Dammit.*

Dizziness caused him to sway, and he glanced at his cot as though a deep chasm ran between them. His injured leg didn't want to take his weight and he didn't trust his balance to hop back to the cot. With a deep sigh, he leaned against the wall and sank to the floor, then on hands and one knee, he dragged himself back to the cot. He rested there for a moment, giving his head a chance to stop spinning, then with one final effort, he managed to heave himself up onto the mattress. And there he sat, holding his head. He swallowed as his stomach squirmed but fortunately, nothing came forth.

Then he groaned for real at the sound of the key clunking open the lock on the cell door.

A corporal pushed open the barred door and two men entered.

One was Sheriff Boxton, and he didn't look pleased. The other was an officer, although Jack wasn't sure what rank, as he wasn't familiar with military insignia.

He looked from one to the other, hoping this didn't mean a change of location just yet. He wasn't feeling up to traveling.

"Well, at least he's still here," Bostox growled, as he removed his hat from his head and slapped it against his thigh. Dust bellowed and caused the corporal to sneeze. No one paid him any mind.

"Where else did you think he'd be?" the officer inquired. "It's not like he's going to get out of here."

The sheriff snorted. "You'd be surprised, Doctor. I thought we had his partner pinned down for sure, but the bastard still got away from us." He sneered a laugh. "He didn't look too healthy by the time we had to part company though. You hear that, Kiefer? Your partner might a escaped us, but I'll be surprised if he lived out the night. The blood trail he left behind 'im was enough to knock down a horse. Not only that, but he led us straight to the entrance of your hideout. We know where it is now, so things are gonna get pretty hot for your buddies."

Jack didn't respond. The recommencement of the throbbing in his head made the sheriff's words inconsequential. Besides, he learned ages ago not to believe anything the law told him.

"Not feelin' too talkative, huh? Well, that's fine. We'll be heading out in the morning, and then I'm sure you'll be quite happy to talk once the experts get through with you."

"I wouldn't recommend that," the doctor said. "That's a nasty head wound. He needs to rest a few days before you attempt to move him to Rawlins."

The sheriff looked at the doctor like he was an idiot.

"I don't give a damn about his nasty head wound. The sooner I get him into my own jail, the happier I'll be."

The doctor sighed. "Fine. But you'll have to clear it with the major."

"Why? He's my prisoner."

"No, he's not. Your two deputies released custody to us because they didn't feel like hanging around here waiting for you."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!"

The sheriff's bellow caused Jack to groan and hold his head.

The doctor shrugged. "Take it up with the major. I'm sure he won't hesitate to release the prisoner back into your custody just as soon as he's ready to travel."

"Is that so? And who decides that?"

"I do."

"Ah for Christ's sake!" The sheriff smacked his hat against his thigh again, turned on his heel and stomped out of the cell.

The doctor and the corporal exchanged a quick glance and both allowed a hint of a smile.

“Get me the chair that’s in the outer room, will you, Corporal?”

“Yes sir.”

The doctor remained by the door until the chair arrived and was placed inside the cell.

The corporal returned to his place outside the cell and remained there on guard duty for the remainder of the visit.

“So, Mr. Kiefer,” the doctor moved the chair in front of Jack and sat down, “how are you feeling today?”

“Could be better, Doc. My head and leg are competin’ over which one can throb the most. Ah, it feels a bit cramped in here too, ifn you know what I mean.”

“Can’t help you there, son. But I can give you some laudanum. That ought to help ease the throbbing.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

The doctor placed a hand on Jack’s forehead then held up a finger in front of his eyes.

“Follow the finger but keep your head still.”

Jack did as instructed, then closed his eyes again with the increased throbbing the movement caused.

“Okay. You’re looking good. You should be ready to travel in a couple of days.”

“Yeah, thanks, Doctor . . . ahh?”

“Shelby’s the name. I’m a doctor by profession and a captain by rank. You may use either title.”

“Oh.”

Shelby stood and grabbed the back of the chair.

“I’ll have that laudanum brought to you and I’ll be back to check on you this evening.”

Then the doctor was gone, taking the chair with him.

Jack and the corporal locked eyes for an instant, then the door closed between them and Jack was left alone.

He lay back down on the cot and closed his eyes.

C’mon, Leon. We ain’t got all week.

Rex Templeton rode through the gates of Fort Steele with all the confidence of an experienced army scout. He wore the clothes, had the attitude, and the talk down pat, and nobody paid him much mind as he turned his horse’s nose toward the office of the commander.

A sergeant did approach him though, as he dismounted by the hitching rail.

“It don’t take much to figure what you are,” the sergeant grumbled then crinkled his nose at the body odor wafting off the scruffy, long-haired Rex. “Jesus, you been spendin’ too much time among them injuns. Don’t ya think ya shoulda cleaned up some before steppin’ back into civilization?”

Rex sent him a blank stare. “I did.” He smiled to himself. Mukua had done a good job in helping with the authenticity of his role.

The sergeant attempted to snort the odor out of his nose then shook his head and gave it up.

“Fine. Follow me.”

The pair entered the reception area and, seeing the door to the major’s office open, the sergeant stepped up and poked his head inside.

“Major, it looks like we got ourselves a new scout.”

The major glanced up from his paperwork and looked at the scout with some curiosity.

“Really? I never requested a scout.”

The sergeant shrugged. “Ain’t that typical. The army in their infinite wisdom won’t send us what we do need and insist on sendin’ us what we don’t.”

“Indeed. Well, bring him in.”

“Yes sir.”

Rex entered and found himself facing a handsome, clean-shaven man who didn’t seem to fit the role of a major commanding an outlying fort. Rex had expected an older man, gruff and rugged in his appearance, yet sticking to regimental protocol in matters of dress and countenance.

But as soon as those blue eyes met his, Rex knew he was dealing with a competent officer and he felt an instant of doubt at being able to pull off their scheme. This insecurity didn’t last long though, as the officer stood up to greet the newcomer and make introductions.

“I’m Major Thornburgh.”

“Sir.” Rex stepped forward and handed the major his papers. “Rex Templeton. Army scout assigned to Fort Steele.

“Umm hm.” The major took the papers with only a slight frown indicating the odor that came with them. He opened the folded paper and browsed over the details. “Looks legitimate enough. However, I did not request a scout. Why were you sent here?”

Rex shrugged. “They didn’t tell me, sir. Just gave me my papers and pointed this way.”

“Umm hm. Templeton? Did your father scout for the army back in ’62?”

“Yessir, he did.”

The major nodded. "Good man. All right, fine. My sergeant will show you to your quarters and you can get settled in. In the meantime, I'll figure out something for you to do."

"Yes sir."

Rex left the office and met with the sergeant again.

"All right, follow me," the man grumbled. "We'll get your horse tended to first, then I'll show you your room. And where you can get yourself cleaned up."

Rex smiled but remained silent. He took his horse and followed the sergeant, sending a casual glance toward the stockade as they went. He didn't see any activity, but he knew Jack was likely there. With the first barrier crossed, it was now time to fit in and keep his ears open.

Supper in the mess tent was a boisterous affair. Rex sat down with the other lower ranked enlisted men and kept his mouth shut. Not surprisingly the main topic of conversation was the repetition of beans and brisket, and hopes that the local Indians wouldn't get too uppity with the coming of the warmer weather.

Eventually though, the topic did turn in a positive direction.

"So how much longer are we gonna be doin' the work for the local law?" a private asked the corporal. "You're the one guardin' that outlaw. What's the doc sayin'?"

The corporal stuffed bean-sopped bread into his mouth but still managed to answer.

"Far as I can tell, that scum is ready ta leave. I dunno why we got saddled with 'im in the first place."

"Who's that?" Rex asked. "You guys holdin' onta some outlaw, or somethin'?"

"Yeah," the private answered. "A couple a deputies brought 'im in here a few days ago, all banged up, and dumped 'im on us. I hear he's worth some money, but you can bet we ain't gonna see none of it."

"What a joke," another private agreed. "We're feedin' 'im, guardin' 'im, and our doc is tendin' 'im, but I doubt that sheriff is gonna be spreadin' any of the wealth."

"He can't be worth that much," Rex ventured. "Start splitin' it with everyone involved and there won't be nothin' left."

Snorts and whistles made their way around the table.

"I hear he's worth about six thousand."

"Yeah. Maybe more."

Rex whistled. "Six grand? Damn. That is a tidy sum."

“Yup,” the corporal agreed, “but we won’t be seein’ none of it.”

“Yeah. And you figure he’s leavin’ tomorrow?”

The corporal shrugged. “Who knows? The sheriff returned ta town a couple a days ago. Even if we can get word to ‘im ta get back out here for his prisoner, it’ll take another couple a days. If the major decides to get some of us ta escort the prisoner inta town, he could be outta here tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Rex didn’t like this news. “Is that bound to happen? The major assign some of you fellas to take ‘im to town?”

Again, the corporal shrugged. “That’s anybody’s guess. Although, I don’t think the major is keen on usin’ us to do the law’s job.”

Rex nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Yeah, but then we’re stuck feedin’ ‘im for another couple a days. So, who knows?”

Walking back to his lodging, Rex pondered his situation.

Dagnabbit. If that major decides to use his own men, then they could leave as early as tomorrow mornin’. That means I gotta act on my own, ‘cause I won’t have time to get back to the Elk and let ‘em know. He glanced at the closed gates and the guards manning it. I sure can’t leave now. I got no good reason ta be out ridin’ the range after dark. Besides, that ain’t too safe anyway. Hopefully the major will decide ta send for that sheriff. I can find a reason ta leave during the day. Doin’ my own scoutin’ ta get familiar with the area, that kind a thing. Sigh. Yeah, let’s hope he sent for the sheriff.

Rex was eating breakfast when the sergeant came into the mess tent and then walked directly over to the scout.

“Major wants ta see ya.”

“Right now?”

“I wouldn’t a come lookin’ for ya if it weren’t right now. C’mon.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Rex stuffed another rasher of bacon into his mouth and took a final gulp of coffee, then pushed himself away from the table and followed in the sergeant’s wake.

“What’s this all about?”

“How the hell should I know? Probably gonna put ya ta work though. Can’t have you sittin’ around doin’ nothin’, now can we?”

“Hmm. I suppose not.”

Rex glanced toward the stockade and felt some relief when he saw arms hanging causally from the barred window. Apparently, Jack Kiefer was still in attendance.

“C’mon, keep up,” the sergeant snipped at him. “You might be accustomed ta idlin’ around all day, but I ain’t.”

“Yeah, I’m comin’.”

They entered the alcove and the sergeant knocked on the office door, then opened it a space.

“He’s here, sir.”

“Ah, good. Send him in.”

The sergeant cocked a brow at Rex then pushed the door open further and motioned for him to step in.

Rex entered the office and found himself standing at attention, awaiting the convenience of the major.

He frowned. *Why am I doing this? Damn, even if I was a real scout, I’m not in the military. The major can give me orders, but I don’t have ta kowtow to ‘im.*

Realizing this fact, he relaxed and spent the time looking around the office in hopes that there was something of interest to keep him occupied. There wasn’t.

Finally, the major looked up from his paperwork as though he’d just then noticed the scout standing in front of the desk.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Templeton. I hope you slept well.”

Rex didn’t answer. The major didn’t give a damn it he’d slept well or not.

Thornburgh sighed and leaned back in his chair. “It seems we have a problem on our hands, Mr. Templeton.”

“Oh yes?”

“I have a prisoner in the stockade who has no business being there. If I send for the sheriff to come collect him, the army will have to feed him for another two or three days. But nor do I wish to waste any of my good men on escorting the prisoner to Rawlins.” Thornburgh leaned forward, the front legs of his chair banging onto the floor. He looked up into Rex’s eyes. “It then occurred to me that I have a scout hanging around here with nothing to do. So, I’m going to put you to work.”

Rex couldn’t believe his luck. Was the major simply going to hand Jack Kiefer over to him? No, that would be too easy.

The major came to his feet, bringing a sheet of paper with him.

“Here are your orders, Mr. Templeton. You are to escort the prisoner to Rawlins. I will send a corporal along with you. Once you have signed the prisoner over to Sheriff Boxton, you and the corporal will return here. Then I will have to find something else for you to do.”

“Oh.” As though in a daze, Rex accepted his orders. He folded the paper and tucked it away in his shirt pocket. “Yes sir.”

“Be ready to go in an hour, Mr. Templeton. And by all means, stay away from Elk Mountain. I’m sure there is nothing that gang would like better than to get their gunman back. Deliver him safe and sound, Mr. Templeton, and there might just be a bonus in it for you.”

Rex smiled. “Yes sir. No worries. I’ll make sure he gets to where he needs ta go.”

“Good man. Dismissed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR MIDNIGHT

Jack set aside his empty plate and wiped a sleeve across his mouth. *I don't know why them soldier boys complain about the food. That breakfast was pretty darn good.* He picked up his coffee cup from the floor and swallowed down the last dregs. He frowned, gazing into the empty vessel. *I could use some more coffee though; and a bit stronger, too.* Heavy sigh.

Then he heard the key in the lock and the cell door opened.

Dr. Shelby entered and, as with all the previous visits, a private remained by the opened door to keep guard.

“Good morning.” The doctor smiled when he noted the empty plate. “Feeling better this morning?”

“Yeah. Still got a bit of a headache, but some more coffee would help.”

“No time for that. The major has ordered our scout to take you to Rawlins. You’ll be leaving in ten minutes.”

“Oh yeah? Just a scout?”

“He’ll have a corporal with him.”

“Uh huh.” Jack kept his smile to himself. *Obviously, these fellas ain't too familiar with the Elk Mountain Gang. Two men to escort me ta Rawlins, and the major actually expects that I'll get there? Ha!*

“Get yourself ready,” the doctor told him, as he left the cell. “The private will be here in a few minutes to prepare you for travel.”

The door closed upon the prisoner, and Jack sat there for a moment, trying to hide the smile from his face. Then he sighed and, standing up, he pulled the honey bucket out from under the bunk.

Ten minutes later, Jack limped across the open yard with an armed corporal escorting him. The fort appeared to be bustling with activity, but it really was just the usual daily routine of maintaining order and discipline. Jack looked around, calculating his chances of escape and vetoed any ideas that came to him before they took shape into anything concrete.

I'll have ta wait until we're on the road. These cuffs are gonna be a problem, but at least they're in front a me and not behind.

Walking through the busy yard, Jack focused on the small group by the corrals. Three horses, and a man preparing for travel, awaited them, and Jack took note of the scout. Nothing stood out at first, but then the scout straightened and turned to greet them.

“Howdy. Looks like we’re gonna be travelin’ together for a couple a days.”

Jack kept his expression neutral, even though his heart skipped a beat.

“Appears so,” was his casual reply.

Corporal Arkin wasn’t pleased about the situation. “Yeah, and I got saddled with the both of ya.”

“What’s the matter, Corporal?” Rex asked him. “You not feelin’ up to a cross-country ride?”

“No, I ain’t.” He patted his expanding gut, causing the excess flesh to wobble. “I’m too old and fat for this crap. Why the hell the major put me onto this duty is anybody’s guess. Goddammit. I like sleepin’ in my own bed and wakin’ up ta breakfast bein’ served.” He snorted, shaking his head in disgust, then gave Jack a shove to one of the horses. “Get up on that animal. And don’t you be givin’ me no trouble on this trip. I ain’t in the mood.”

Jack stumbled and might have fallen if Rex hadn’t grabbed him. The two men locked eyes for an instant, then both sent the corporal dirty looks.

Corporal Arkin didn’t notice or didn’t care; he was too busy getting his own horse ready for travel. Jack regained his footing, gave Rex a quick pat on the arm in thanks, then stepped up to the horse in question.

The animal was nothing to look at, not a bay, but not quite a black either, and though his coat was shining and healthy, he wouldn’t stand out in a herd of broomtails.

Well, Jack grabbed the saddle horn with his shackled hands and swung aboard. He’s good and solid. Looks like he could go forever. He settled into the saddle and shifted his injured leg in a vain attempt to get it comfortable, then he gave the dark neck a pat.

“Hey fella, what’s your name?”

“Midnight,” Arkin grumbled.

“What?”

“Midnight,” came the retort. “Ya asked what the horse’s name was. It’s Midnight.”

“Oh.”

Rex mounted the athletic chestnut he’d ridden in on, and Arkin hauled himself aboard the chunky bay that seemed the perfect mount for the aging soldier.

The group turned away from the corral and were just picking up a trot toward the gate, when the sergeant ran out from the office and stopped them.

“Corporal Arkin, hold up.”

Arkin scowled under his breath, then, “What now?”

The major forgot to give you these papers.” He handed them up to the corporal. “Make sure Sheriff Boxtton signs them when you drop off the prisoner.”

“Yes sir. No problem, sir.”

The sergeant sighed. “Don’t be givin’ me none a your lip, Corporal. Just get the job done and get back here. And don’t be runnin’ into that Elk Mountain Gang.”

“Yes sir. No problem, sir.”

The corporal booted his horse forward, and the three men trotted out the front gate.

Leon walked across the yard, keeping his eyes focused on the goal. The barn never seemed this far away on previous excursions. He felt better this morning; he actually had some energy again, so why wouldn’t a walk to the barn be a reasonable endeavor? But now, not even halfway there, his head began to swim, and he stopped. He closed his eyes and concentrated on standing upright.

“Hey, Boss. What ‘ya doin’ outta bed?”

Leon frowned but didn’t open his eyes. “What?”

“You don’t look so good. Did Preacher say you could be up an’ walkin’ around?”

“I don’t need his permission—”

And then he was on his knees. He hit the ground with a thump and would have ended up face first in the dirt if a hand hadn’t grabbed him. He opened his eyes and the world swam.

“C’mon, Boss. Let me help ya up.”

Leon squinted at his rescuer. “Charlie?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’s Jack?”

“He’s bein’ held at Fort Steele. Don’t ya remember? Rex has gone ta keep an eye on things.”

“An eye on things?”

“Yeah. C’mon, on yer feet or I’ll call Preacher out here, and he’ll give ya more of his tea.”

“Oh. No.”

Leon struggled to stand. He grabbed hold of Charlie’s arm and, between the two of them, managed to regain his feet. He turned around and squinted until the front porch of his cabin solidified. Then he pointed at it with his bandaged hand.

“There.”

“Yeah. That’s where we’re headed. Start walkin’, you can do it.”

Leon dragged one foot in front of the other, thinking that he was actually carrying his own weight.

Truth was, Charlie got an arm around Leon’s waist, pulled Leon’s right arm over his shoulders, and half carried, half dragged his boss back to his bed.

Charlie stood up from the bench in front of the barn where he’d been waiting for Hank and Mukua to return from lookout duty.

The two horses trotted into the yard and headed toward the barn and lunch.

Mukua frowned when he saw Charlie. He settled Buckwheat to a stop and dismounted.

“News of Jack already?” he asked.

“Nope, ain’t that.” Charlie nodded toward the cabin. “Nash decided he was gonna take a walk and didn’t quite make it. I got ‘im back ta bed, but I thought you’d wanna know.”

It wasn’t often that Mukua got riled, but both Charlie and Hank stepped back at the thundercloud that appeared in their midst.

Though neither man understood a word of Shoshone, it didn’t take a genius to figure that the flood of harsh words grinding their way from the Indian’s throat could only be cussing of the most profane variety.

Without letting up, Mukua swung around and strode off toward the cabin.

“That’s okay, Preacher-man,” Charlie called after him, “I’ll tend ta your horse.”

“Sheesh,” Hank rolled his eyes as they watched the Indian stride away. “I’m kinda hopin’ Nash has passed out. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the Preacher that pissed.”

“Yeah.”

Leon sat in his bed, propped up with pillows. The dizziness he experienced settled as soon as he laid down again, but the wobbliness to his limbs remained. He settled back, allowing his head to relax to one side, then he closed his eyes. He doubted he would sleep; his worry over Jack as well as Fanny took over his conscious thoughts.

Then the faint scent of tobacco and tea leaves invaded his nostrils, and he opened his eyes. He groaned.

Mukua stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, his arms crossed, and his brow furrowed.

Leon sighed. "What?"

"Humph. Just because I said you were not as smart as Jack, doesn't mean you need to prove it."

Leon slumped. "I wanted to see Fanny. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. As long as you can get from here to there without collapsing."

"I would have made it just fine."

"Hmm."

Leon sighed again. "Will you at least tell me how she's doing? And I want more than—"

"She is fine—"

"—she's fine."

Leon crossed his arms then decided against it. He sat in silence and glared at the older man.

Mukua contemplated the situation. He then grunted, pulled a chair over to the bed and sat down.

"Fanny is improving. All the injuries she got running from the posse are healing fine. She is still tired, though."

"I kind of figured as much. But she's healing okay?"

"No."

"But you just said—"

"Her recent injuries are healing, but that old one has returned and is on the war path."

Leon's complexion paled even more.

"Oh."

"That leg could handle the usual strain of a casual gallop, but not that long-distance push you were forced into. It is not going to heal this time."

"What?" Leon felt the breath leave his lungs. "You mean she is going to be lame and in pain from now on?"

"No. She will be fine and okay for, maybe, light riding. But nothing more. You cannot count on her now to get you out of trouble."

Leon's heart sank. "I broke her down." He hung his head, not able to meet Mukua's eye. "It's my fault; I shouldn't have let her run so hard. I should have surrendered rather than let her run her heart out for me."

Mukua shrugged. "That would not have helped anything. Eventually, you would have needed her to run, and the result would be the same."

Leon nodded. "I suppose. But now what do I do?"

"Get a new horse."

Leon barked a laugh. "A new horse? You make it sound so easy. There are not many out there like Fanny."

"This is true. But you will need a new horse. Like it or not."

"I suppose."

"Now, I will make you some more tea."

Jack kept an eye on Corporal Arkin's back, as the small group rode single file along the rough track that would eventually take them to Rawlins. With each passing mile they headed further away from Elk Mountain, and Jack was anxious over what Rex might have in mind. The opportunity to speak privately with his compatriot had not yet presented itself.

"Hey, Corporal, where are we stoppin' for the night?" Jack asked to the blue back.

"Never you mind." The corporal stopped his horse and turned to glare back at the prisoner. "What do ya wanna know for? You plannin' on gettin' word back to your buddies so they can plan an ambush?"

Jack raised his brows. No wonder this idiot was still a corporal.

"No sir. It's just my head is poundin' like it's fit ta bust. And my leg ain't so good, either. If we're stoppin' in a town, I'd like ta get some laudanum or somethin'."

"Too bad. We ain't stoppin' in a town. We'll be campin' out tonight, then we'll push on ta Rawlins. You can get somethin' from the doc there."

Jack groaned loudly enough for the corporal to hear.

Rex rode up beside him and whispered, "We'll make our move tonight." Then added in a louder tone, "C'mon, Kiefer, move it along. Consider your headache punishment for your sorry life of crime."

Jack sent him a look then mouthed, "My sorry life a crime?"

Rex smirked then shrugged.

Arkin looked back again. "C'mon, you two. We can get in another hour a ridin' before we stop for the night. Let's get goin'."

In an effort to distract himself from his aches and pains, Jack took the time to study the horse he rode.

Midnight might not have been blessed with the sleekness of a thoroughbred, but he was sure-footed and bridle-wise. He was also willing, and stayed between the reins, going over and through anything

Jack pointed him at. Jack leaned forward and gave the gelding a pat on the neck.

Yeah. This here just might be my new outlaw horse. I think I'll keep 'im.

Rex, who had been in the lead, pulled up and turned to face his companions.

“This is the best place to camp for the night,” he informed them. “It’s the only area around here where there’s water and decent grazing, not to mention shelter from pryin’ eyes. We can have a fire goin’, and ain’t nobody gonna see us.”

“Humph.” Arkin looked around and nodded approval. “All right. Dismount!”

Jack dismounted, easing himself down to land on his good leg. He wanted to take the time to get his injured leg working again, but he barely touched ground when the corporal grabbed his arm and hurried him over to a small tree.

“Here, meet your companion for the night.” And Arkin commenced to attach Jack to the tree.

“Ah, c’mon, Corporal, ain’t ya gonna let me relieve myself or nothin’? I got some rights, ya know.”

Arkin snorted. “You’ll get your moment once we set up camp. In the meantime, cross your legs.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Jack, his arms securely cuffed around the small trunk, sank down beside it and watched the camp being prepared. *Well, at least I don’t need ta work for my keep.*

Night settled in. Jack sat by his tree feeling resentful.

Rex and Arkin sat by the small fire enjoying what was left of the canned meat and quickly prepared flatbread. Shadows cast by the fire danced around them as they laughed and conversed about days gone by.

Jack sighed. He could have used a bit more of that meat, nasty tasting as it was, and his rump was cold.

How am I supposed ta sleep on this hard ground? The least they could do is give me my saddle and the pad. They ain’t even givin me a blanket. Rex is gonna hear about this. Look at ‘im over there, laughin’ and drinkin coffee like he don’t have a care in the world. Well, I suppose he don’t. I’m the one cuffed to the damn tree.

Then he stopped complaining when the conversation took a different turn.

“How would you like a drink, Corporal?”

“I am drinkin’. Ya want another cup?”

“No, I mean a real drink. I got some whiskey in my saddle bag.”

Arkin sat up and sent him a frown. “Oh, I dunno about that. I’m on duty until that worthless piece a humanity is delivered ta Rawlins.”

Rex cocked a brow in Jack’s direction.

“Worthless? I thought he was bringin’ in some good money.”

Arkin snorted. “Sure. Ta other people. I won’t be seein’ none of it.”

Rex turned away from Jack, though the outlaw could still see the firelight flicking across his features.

“Then no reason why ya can’t relax and have a drink. Like ya say, it ain’t your money.”

“True, but . . .”

Rex reached into his saddlebag and pulled out a flask.

“What harm will a couple a drinks do? I expect a big man like you could handle two or three.”

Arkin snorted and puffed up. “Two or three? Well, dammit, I can drink any of them sodbusters at the fort under the table. I’ve done so more n once.”

“There ya go.” Rex pulled the stopper from the flask and handed it to the corporal. “If nothin else, it’ll keep the night chill out of our bones.”

Arkin smiled as he took the offering. “Right you are, buddy lad, right you are.”

The stars twinkled in the night sky, but Jack felt miserable as he sat against his tree and watched the other two enjoy their whiskey. Though, on close inspection, Jack saw Rex block the spout with his thumb more often than not. As Arkin became increasingly tipsy, Rex smiled and laughed but remained as sober as the day was long.

All three men tensed at the sudden, sharp yapping coming from a pack of coyotes, as they picked up the scent trail of their dinner for the night.

Jack, not usually concerned about coyotes, now felt apprehensive. He was vulnerable, cuffed to the tree with no weapons and though, logically, he knew coyotes were unlikely to attack three men, he still felt the shiver tickle his spine.

Arkin snorted and tipped up the flask for another drink. “Ah, bloody scavengers. If it weren’t for this scavenger,” he nodded toward Jack, “I’d go hunt coyote tail for the bounty. Don’t pay as well as wolf, but it’d do.”

Another chorus of yapping pierced the night, a little closer this time, but further north.

“Listen to them damned things: Yip, yip, yip. Actin’ like they’re somethin’ special.” The corporal grinned and sent Jack a beady look. “Maybe we oughta just hang ‘in up by his toes and wait for them coyotes ta come check ‘im out. Hee, hee. We could hide in them shrubs over there and pick ‘em off. There’s decent money in coyote hide. Not as much as wolf, but—”

More coyote yipping, but now further away than ever.

“Nah,” Rex grumbled. “Sounds ta me like them fellas have other game on their minds. We’d just be sittin’ here in the cold, waitin’ for nothin’. Besides, I’m tired. And I do believe that flask is empty.”

“Oh. Now that there is a cryin’ shame. Why, we ain’t hardly had enough ta wet the whistle.”

“You are indeed a drinkin’ man.” Rex raised the empty flask in salute. “I’ve had more than enough and will likely sleep like the damned tonight. I best make sure our prisoner is secure.”

“Nope, nope, nope.” Arkin’s arms flailed as he struggled to attain his footing. “The prisoner is my responsibility. I’ll see to ‘im. It’s your job ta get ‘im where he needs ta be, safe and sound.”

Rex smiled. “Fair enough.”

Arkin stumbled toward Jack, his silhouette from the fire looking like a buffalo about to collapse.

Jack leaned back into his tree, instinctively retreating from the corporal just in case the big man did fall upon him. Then, as Arkin knelt to check the cuffs, Jack squirmed away for another reason. The alcohol on the blue-coat’s breath was enough to make him gag.

Arkin jiggled the cuffs then gave Jack a pat on the shoulder.

“It’s your lucky day, boy. We ain’t gonna use ya fer coyote bait after all.”

He belched then coughed, and Jack did gag, fighting the impulse to throw up.

Arkin, using Jack as support, lumbered to his feet and staggered back to the dying fire.

“He ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“Good.” Rex piled a few more kindling sticks and another good-sized branch onto the fire then spread out his bedroll. “Like I said, I’m likely to sleep right through any disturbances tonight. Hopefully we won’t be gettin’ any kinda visitors, two-legged or four.” He paused and frowned. “You don’t suppose we should take turns guardin’ ‘im, do ya?”

“You can stay up and guard ‘im ifn ya want, but I sure as hell ain’t. He’s not goin’ nowhere.”

Rex looked at Jack and chewed his lip. “I dunno. Maybe I should stay up for a while.”

“Whatever you want.” Arkin spread out his own bedroll and adjusted his saddle and blanket for as comfortable a night as could be expected. “I’m gettin’ some shut-eye.”

The corporal removed his gun belt and pouch and set them down behind his saddle then fumbled his way into his makeshift bed.

Rex sighed then yawned. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Dawn can’t be more n a few hours off anyway.”

“Hmm.”

Five minutes later, the corporal was snoring.

Rex sat up and watched him for a moment. Once he was sure Arkin was down for the night, he slipped out of his bedroll, pulled the holster and pouch away from the corporal’s reach and then rummaged through the pouch until he found the key to the cuffs.

“Finally,” Jack whispered as Rex scampered to him. “My hands are about froze off. Not to mention my butt.”

“I had to make sure he was good and drunk, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but the least ya coulda done was give me a blanket.”

“You’ll be all right, once we get moving.” Rex unlocked the cuffs, then helped Jack to his feet.

“Damn.” Jack caught his breath. “They ain’t workin’.”

“Come over by the fire and warm up. And stomp your feet a bit, get the blood goin’.”

“Stomp my feet? I can’t even feel ‘em.”

“C’mon.” Rex helped Jack hobble to the fire. “Just sit there and warm up while I get the horses ready. Keep an eye on him. Here’s his gun.”

“Damn it.” Jack nearly dropped the weapon, as his fingers were too numb to grasp it. He sat down by the fire with his feet and hands as close to the low flames as he dared. He set the gun between his knees. Glancing at the corporal, it didn’t seem he was in any danger of waking up.

Rex got their horses saddled in record time, then returned to the fire.

“What are we gonna do with him?” He nodded toward the corporal as he reassembled his bedroll. “This is still Injun country. It wouldn’t be right ta leave ‘im out here without a horse or gun.”

“Yeah, I know. We’ll leave those for ‘im. I figure he’s down for a few hours at least, and when he do wake up, he ain’t gonna be feelin’ much like chasin’ after us, so I think we’re pretty safe. Besides, I ain’t never stolen a horse in my life. They hang horse thieves, ya know.”

“Uh huh.” Rex helped Jack to his feet. “And what about that black we’re takin’?”

“Who, Midnight?”

“Yeah.”

“That ain’t stealin’. The army gave me that horse; he’s a gift. And I think I’m gonna keep ‘im.”

Rex’s teeth gleamed in the firelight as he flashed a smile. “Whatever you say; you’re the boss. You’re lucky he ain’t carryin’ a brand.”

Jack grinned. “I did notice that.”

Two days later, Jack and Rex rode into Elk Mountain. Both men and horses were tired and covered in caked-on sweat and dirt, so home was a happy sight.

Then Jack saw Leon leaning against the paddock fence and picked up on his friend’s distress simply from the tension in his back.

Jack dismounted and would have gone directly to his uncle, but other members of the gang, having guessed who had caused the lookout shots, appeared out of the woodwork and surrounded their boss.

“Hey, Kid,” Hank gave him a slap on the back, “good ta see ya. Even them blue bellies can’t hold you. Ha. Good goin’, Rex.”

Rex just smiled and, taking the reins of both horses, led them into the barn.

Gus gave a smirk that was meant as a smile. “Yeah, we thought you was a goner, didn’t we Ky?”

“Yeah.” Malachi’s smile, open and sincere, highlighted his buddy’s surliness. “It shur is good ta see ya. We thought you was done fer.”

“Yeah, thanks, fellas.” Jack shook some hands as he tried to extricate himself from the welcome home committee. He noted that Lobo was nowhere to be seen.

“How’d ya do it?” Charlie asked. “That place is built like, well, like a fort. How’d ya get out?”

“You can all thank Rex for that,” Jack said. “Why don’t ya all go and get the story from him?”

Heads turned to the barn.

“Oh yeah.” Malachi liked this idea. “Rex’ll fill us in.”

Having realized that Jack was a man of few words and wouldn’t likely give them the whole story right down to the last horse fly, they turned their backs on their leader and swarmed the barn.

Jack sighed with relief. He knew as well as the gang that Rex would give them the fully embellished version of the events, and enjoy doing it, too. Then his gaze traveled back to his friend. As far as Jack could tell, he hadn’t changed position and still stood, leaning against the fence railing, watching his mare.

“Hey, Leon. Glad to see ya got back safe.”

Leon turned away from the fence and leaned his shoulder against it as he gave his partner a soft smile. He folded his arms then flinched with the pain it caused. He covered his discomfort, but Jack wasn't fooled.

Leon gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Good to see you back, too. Have any problems?"

"Naw, not really." Jack rested his arms on the top fence rail. "The corporal they assigned to escort me is destined to remain a corporal."

"Hmm. Not too competent, I take it."

"Ha. You got that right."

"Still, I think I'm going to have to give Rex a raise."

"Yup. He is turnin' out ta be real useful."

Silence. Jack waited.

"Where'd you get that horse?"

Jack sighed. Leon insisted on skirting the real issue. "Army gave 'im to me."

"Oh yeah? Kind of rough around the edges."

Jack shrugged. "That's all right. He's a good horse. He's fast and sure-footed, too. And he seems ta know exactly what I want 'im ta do without me even askin'."

"Oh." But instead of being happy that Jack had found a new outlaw horse, Leon's mood slipped further into darkness. "Yeah, that's nice to have, that kind of connection."

Jack frowned. This was one of those times when Leon needed a nudge.

"Speakin' a rough around the edges, you ain't lookin' so good yourself. That posse hard on ya?"

"Yeah, I guess. I lost a lot of blood. Nearly didn't make it back. Fanny wouldn't quit though; she got me home."

Jack followed Leon's gaze and for the first time really looked at Fanny. Then all became clear. The mare was tucked up in the groin, like she hadn't had enough to drink. Her breathing seemed labored, often accompanied by a dry cough. When she did move, she did so cautiously, heavily favoring her forehand. Her mood was just as dour as her owner's.

"Aww no."

"Yeah." Leon rested his chin on his hands as he peered over the fence. "Mukua says she broke down getting me back here. I remember thinking I needed to stop her, but I didn't have the strength to pull her up. I would have jumped off her and let that posse take me, if that's what it took to stop her, but my hands wouldn't let go. Then I passed out. She kept running, Jack. For miles, even though she was hurting. She wouldn't stop and now she's done."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Leon. Can't Mukua make her better with one a his remedies?"

“No. Not this time.”

Both men stared at the mare as she grazed on her hay, then they sighed in unison.

“What are ya gonna do with her? Just let her retire and keep the other horses company?”

“No. We can’t keep horses here that don’t pull their weight.”

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t think anyone would mind. Well, except Gus, maybe. But the fellas here know how much she means to ya.”

“No, it wouldn’t be right. Can’t have one rule for the gang and another rule for the leader. Besides, Fanny wouldn’t want that either. She needs a job. Nope. I’m going to have to let her go.”

“Let her go?” Jack straightened and sent Leon a hard look. “You gonna sell her when she’s like this?”

“No, I’m not going to sell her.” Leon’s tone showed his insult with this accusation. “Even after we rest her up and get her sound again, it won’t last. Sooner or later, she’d end up at the knackers. After all she’s done for me, I’d never do that to her.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what I thought. So, ya intend ta let her loose then? Maybe she’ll join up with them wild mustangs.”

“No. Again, even if she could, she wouldn’t be able to keep up with them. Not now. A predator would pick her out in a heartbeat. She wouldn’t survive for long.”

“Well, what?” Then Jack’s heart sank as realization hit him. “Aw, Leon. You ain’t gonna shoot her, are ya?”

Pain radiated off Leon in waves. “What else can I do?”

“There’s gotta be somethin’. Ya can’t just shoot her; she’s too good a horse.”

The two men stood in silence.

Then a thought came to Jack that made sense to him. “Why don’t ya breed her?”

Leon straightened and frowned. “Breed her?”

“Yeah. She’d be a great ma. Why not?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about breeding horses. Besides, to make it worthwhile, she’d have to be having a baby every year, and that might be just as hard on her leg as riding would be. On top of that, any stallion we could find around these parts wouldn’t be anywhere near her quality.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Another combined sigh, and both men rested their chins on their hands as they gazed at the grazing mare.

Then Jack straightened again. “What about Haley?”

“Haley? What about her?”

“Damn, Leon, blood loss must be adlin’ your brain.”

“Hey!”

Jack chuckled. “C’mon, think about it. Haley’s got that ranch on the go, and she said she wants ta breed top quality horses. Fanny would be a good mare for her ta get started with.”

Leon’s stance softened as he considered this. “Yeah. But—”

“No, there ain’t no buts. Ya know Haley will look after her. She loves that mare almost as much as you do. She wouldn’t do nothin’ ta harm her.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“I know it’s hard for you ta let her go, but it’s better ‘n shootin’ her, ain’t it?”

Leon straightened and nodded. “Yeah, it is. In fact, I think it’s a good idea.”

“Good.” Jack gave his partner a slap on the back. “Now I ain’t hardly had any sleep in the last three days, and I got a headache. I’m gonna get me a quick hosit’ off, then I’m goin’ ta bed.”

Leon grinned, feeling better now that a decision had been made.

“Got a headache, huh?”

“Hmm.”

They turned their backs on the paddock and one walked as the other limped toward the cabin.

“I can ask Mukua to make you a tea.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll just sleep it off.”

“You sure? He’ll make you a tea that’ll fix you right up, and then you’ll sleep like a baby.”

“I’m gonna sleep like a baby anyway.”

“I don’t mind asking him.”

“Leon! I don’t need no damned tea!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

August 1879

Leon and Jack relaxed on the porch enjoying their after-breakfast coffee before the sun got too hot. The yard was quiet; even the horses dozed lazily in the paddock.

The bunkhouse appeared abandoned, but this was the opposite of the truth. Most of the fellas had been out late, celebrating their latest successful train job. The payroll and bonds had been more than expected so Leon turned a blind eye to the bunch invading Bear Creek for a night on the town. Now they were all passed out on their bunks.

Leon's eyes focused on his mare; this trip was going to be a difficult one.

"You sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "I like Haley, but now that she's gone, I'm missin' her cookin' more n her. You know what I mean?"

Leon breathed a smile. "Yeah."

"She wanted more than I could give. Besides, she's got the neighbor rancher interested in her, so it would be kinda awkward, me showin' up."

"Oh really? You never mentioned that."

"Yeah, well. He weren't bein' real pushy or anything, but he was givin' me the eye. Ya know what I mean?"

"Oh yeah."

"So, I think I'll stay outta this visit."

"Hmm."

Leon was disappointed, and Jack could tell.

"Maybe you can visit Gabriella and Hannah afterward. I know they'd be happy ta see ya."

As Jack expected, a spark came to Leon's eyes and he smiled.

"That would be nice. But I don't think so. Carlyle knows she and I are still connected, and he may be watching." Leon sighed and sipped his coffee. "I wish she would move here. It's a long ride to San Francisco, but I really would like to see them more often."

"If you think Carlyle is watchin' her, then movin' here won't make it easier. She'd have ta move right into The Elk, and I doubt she'd do that. Not with a baby an' all."

"I suppose."

"Why don't ya go see her? Take the time."

“Jack, I can’t. This is the busiest time of year for us. It’s bad enough I’m taking the time to deliver Fanny to Haley’s place. We have that big job coming up in ten days, and I need to be here for that.”

“But that’s just it. You got everything planned out to the last railroad tie for all the jobs we got lined up this season. You really don’t need to be here.”

Leon frowned. “Are you saying I’m superfluous?”

“Maybe, ifn I knew what it meant.”

“That I’m unnecessary. That you could all make do without me.”

“Oh. Well, yeah, I guess I am sayin’ that.”

The hurt look Leon sent his nephew caused Jack to reconsider his statement.

“Well, no. I didn’t mean it like that. I meant that you’re so good at plannin’ out these jobs that they practically pull themselves. I already know the details of ‘em, so if you wanna go spend some time with your family, you can go.”

Leon grinned. “My family? That sounded kind of nice.”

Jack chuckled. “Yeah well, that’s what they are now. I guess Mukua was right all along. She’s your woman now. Maybe when you’re there you can talk to her about movin’ this way. She don’t have to set up housekeepin’ right on our doorstep, but maybe a tad bit closer ‘n California.”

Leon sipped more coffee. “Yeah. Maybe I should.”

“Yeah. Just be careful. Ya won’t have me there to watch your back, and with Fanny the way she is, ya don’t wanna be in a position where ya gotta make a run for it.”

Leon’s grin widened. “Always the worrier.”

“Where you’re concerned? Yeah. Preacher’s right; you spend too much time inside your own head.”

“That’s where all the great plans are.”

“Ha. Yeah, okay. Just be careful.”

Leon stood on the platform in Golden, Colorado, looking around for someone who might be looking for him. Someone other than the law, that is.

He frowned as the travelers dispersed, concerned that the train might leave before he had time to get Fanny out of the stock car. He was just about to head that way when a familiar beckoning stopped him.

“Josh!”

Leon smiled, surprising himself at the pleasure he felt with the sound of that voice.

“Haley.”

Haley hurried forward and wrapped him in an affectionate hug. She rose onto her tippy toes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Hello, stranger.”

“Hello yourself. I wasn’t expecting you to meet me. Why didn’t you just send someone?”

“Send someone?” Haley stepped back and pursed her lips. “I can’t just send someone to escort the best brood mare the Second Choice Ranch will ever have.”

“I suppose you have a point there.”

“Mr. Harden.”

Leon turned as the conductor approached him.

“We’re going to be pullin’ outta here in about five minutes. You best get that horse a yours off the train, or it’ll be goin’ on ta New Mexico.”

“Oh well, we can’t have that.”

“I should say not.” And Haley strode off toward the stock car to rescue her prize.

Leon smiled after her then turned to the conductor. “Thank you. I expect the horse will be off your train before you get back to the engine.”

“Good enough, Mr. Hardin. Have a pleasant journey.”

“Thank you.”

As Leon suspected, by the time he arrived near the back of the train, Haley had unloaded Fanny and was showering her with loving attention.

Fanny herself, remembering this human from her stay at Elk Mountain, stood quietly with eyes half closed as she soaked up the affection.

Haley grinned at Leon, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“She looks wonderful. Shiny and fit as can be. Why, if you weren’t insisting that she’s not sound, I would expect you to saddle her up and go for a gallop.”

Leon’s smile held a note of sadness as he stroked the sleek chestnut neck. “No. Her galloping days are over. Although I think she would appreciate getting out for some light riding once in a while.”

“I’ll look forward to that.”

“Well, I guess I better get going.”

“Napoleon, no.”

Leon cringed at the use of his name. “Shhh. The law here in Golden doesn’t care much for train robbers.”

Haley sighed. "Well fine 'Josh'. I told you I would give you another horse in exchange for Fanny. You have to come out to the ranch to get him."

"Didn't you bring him into town with you?"

"No. Of course not. You have to pick him out yourself. I'm afraid I can't spare any of our mares, but we have a number of nice geldings for you to choose from."

"A gelding's fine." Leon gave Fanny another pat. "I prefer geldings. Fanny was the exception."

"Good. Come on. The buggy's over here."

Leon smiled and shook his head as Haley led the mare away. He sighed, knowing he had been expertly pushed into a corner where he could not refuse.

The trip to the ranch took longer than it would normally, due to the forced slow jog Haley kept the buggy horse at.

Leon glanced over his shoulder at Fanny tied to the back of the buggy to make sure she wasn't being overly stressed. He needn't have worried, as the mare trotted along with her ears up and her expressive eyes taking in the new scenery.

"How's Jack?" Haley asked as a way to distract her passenger.

"What? Oh, he's fine. He's busy with plans right now, otherwise he would have come with me—"

"Ha! You don't need to lie for him, Napoleon."

"I'm not lying."

"Oh, you are so. I don't know why people consider you to be such a great con man. I can always tell when you're lying." Leon frowned and clamped his mouth shut, which only caused Haley to laugh harder. She put her free hand on his knee. "Oh, Napoleon. Come on. Life is too short for games. Things between me and Jack have cooled. He doesn't want what I want."

"Oh. Yeah, I suppose."

"Besides, I want to raise horses and Jack doesn't have the same way with horses that you do. But I suppose you and Gabriella are still together, such as it is."

"Yes, we are."

"Oh well." Haley removed her hand from Leon's knee then turned a radiant smile to him. "A girl can always hope, can't she?"

All Leon could do was smile. This was odd. Haley had never indicated any such feelings toward him. In fact, they tended to grate on each other's nerves.

"Umm, Jack mentioned that one of your neighbors seemed interested."

"Jack is very observant. Yes. Mr. Madison seems very interested."

"Well then, what do you need with two sorry outlaws when you've got an upstanding rancher willing to merge?"

Haley laughed again. "Oh Napoleon, you have such a way with words."

Leon grinned, the twinkle returning to his eyes. "You're going to do fine, Haley."

She turned solemn eyes to meet his. "Thank you."

Once again, Leon stood leaning against the paddock fence, his chin resting on his arms, as he watched his mare munching her hay. She settled in right away, as though she knew that this was to be her new home, and she was fine with it.

Leon felt jealous, but he was also man enough to know this was a good thing. The easier the transition was for her, the easier her life would be. Besides, Fanny knew Haley and the two of them seemed content in each other's company. Leon knew in his sad heart that this was the best possible outcome.

"Here you are," Haley came up beside him, carrying a packed lunch. "Something for the road. Are you sure you want to ride all the way to California?"

"Thank you." Leon took the package and they walked toward the barn where a blazed-face chestnut gelding patiently awaited them. "I expect we'll take the train most of the way. But riding him will give us a chance to get to know one another."

"I suppose so. But be careful out there. You never know who you're going to run into."

Leon laughed. "And you think riding a train is safer? I'm more likely to be spotted on the train than I am on the trail."

"Oh. I never thought of that."

Leon stuffed the food into his saddle bag and took up the reins to his new horse.

"Well, thank you, Haley." He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

She gave him a hug back. "I should be thanking you. I have a feeling that Fanny is going to give us some wonderful foals."

"I hope so."

Leon tightened the girth on the saddle then mounted. “Goodbye Haley. Let us know if you ever need anything.”

“I will. Oh, this horse’s name is Chester, but you can change it if you want.”

Leon shrugged. “What’s in a name?”

He turned Chester away from the barn and pushed him into a trot that took them up to the paddock fence.

Fanny, sensing that this was goodbye, came up to him and reached her head over the top rail.

Leon rubbed her forehead. “Goodbye, my girl.” His voice sounded rough in his tightening throat. “You give Haley lots of nice babies, you hear?”

Fanny nudged him with her muzzle and snorted. Then she turned and walked back to her pile of hay.

Leon watched her for a moment, but his blinking eyes caused her form to blur. He looked over his shoulder and waved a final farewell to Haley. He could just make out the fuzzy image of her waving back and then he faced forward again, pushed Chester into a lope, and the door closed on another chapter of his life.

San Francisco

“Hello Mr. Barkley.”

Barkley cocked a brow and sniffed. Still, it was not up to him whom his employer wished to allow into her home. He stepped aside and allowed the scoundrel access.

“You may wait in the drawing room.” He ushered Leon into the open doorway of the now familiar room. “I have been instructed to offer you a drink.”

Leon smiled. “Yes, thank you. Something to cut the dust. The cognac your mistress always has on hand would be fine.”

Another heavy sigh from the servant. “Yes sir.”

The cognac was poured, and Leon settled himself into the plush armchair to await his love.

When the door opened again, Leon was quick to his feet and a smile took over his face as his two ladies entered the room.

“Ella.” He came forward and took her into his arms, including little Hannah in the embrace. “You look beautiful.”

“I wish you’d stop calling me Ella.” Gabriella laughed and returned his hug. “It sounds so, so, feminine.”

“Feminine is how I like you.” Leon leaned in and kissed her, making sure it lasted a good long time.

It would have lasted longer, but Hannah gurgled and tugged at Leon’s shirt, demanding attention.

“Oh, well, who’s this?” Leon asked as he smiled at his daughter. “This can’t be Hannah. Hannah is just a little baby.”

Hannah laughed and tugged again. Then she leaned toward her father and made it clear she wanted a separate hug from him.

“You want to go see your Uncle Josh?” Gabriella shifted the child’s weight so she could transfer her over to the waiting arms.

Leon took her in his arms and hugged her close, but his eyes bore into Gabriella. “Uncle Josh?”

“Yes. I think it best.”

Leon didn’t comment. He didn’t like his child not knowing who her father was, but maybe, for now, it was best.

He returned his attention to the child in his arms.

“What a big girl you are. You’re not a baby anymore, are you?”

Hannah giggled and squirmed. She gave her father one more hug then indicated she wanted down.

Leon set her on the carpet where she could play with her ever-present toys, or crawl around the room to see what mischief she could get into. She was even able to stand and walk as long as she had a human hand or a table leg to give her support.

“I can’t believe how big she is.” Leon watched her play and his heart ached for the love he felt. “I’m missing out on so much.”

Gabriella directed him to the sofa where they sat and watched their daughter.

“I’m sorry, but it can’t be helped. I won’t live in some outlaw hideaway. That’s not fair to her or me.”

“I know.” Leon spied his cognac and stood to retrieve it. “Would you like a glass?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Leon poured her a glass and returned to the sofa.

“Has Carlyle been around again?”

“Not that I’ve seen. And I’ve been watching for him. If he were in town, I’d know it.”

“Hmm. He might have sent someone.”

“Having been an undercover agent myself, I can spot one a mile away. No one has been watching us.”

“Well, since you’re not being watched, you could come back to Wyoming. Set up housekeeping in Gillette or somewhere.”

Gabriella cocked a brow. “That’s hardly wise. What are you thinking? Hiding in plain sight is a good idea?”

“Well,” Leon shrugged. “You’d be far enough away from the Elk. Nobody needs to know we’re connected.”

“And how would I make a living? A widow woman with a young daughter. No one would give me a job, not as a schoolteacher or a housekeeper. I’m supposed to stay at home and look after my child. No decent woman would consider anything else.”

“That doesn’t make sense. There’s no disgrace in being widowed. With no man to provide for you, it would be logical for you to get a job.”

Gabriella sighed, then smiled at her daughter playing on the floor. “Unfortunately, logic doesn’t have anything to do with it. It’s not acceptable. A woman with a child needs to stay home and tend to that child, even if she starves to death in the meantime.”

Leon rolled his eyes. “And you wonder why I became an outlaw. Anyway, it’s a moot point. I’ll provide for you and Hannah. You can tell the busy bodies that your late husband left you an income. Besides, you still have the money I gave you, don’t you?”

Gabriella smirked. “What do you mean ‘gave me’?”

“I let you keep it, didn’t I?”

Gabriella chuckled. “If you say so. Anyway, you know what that money is for. That’s important.”

Leon looked at his daughter, and the tug on his heart was inescapable. For the first time since meeting Gabriella, he understood the anguish she must be going through.

“Yes, it is important. Any luck?”

“No, not yet. It’s as though they’ve vanished off the face of the Earth. The man I hired is heading further West. British Columbia is still new territory, and people can disappear up there.”

“You think they’ve gone that far west?”

Gabriella shrugged. “I don’t know. But if they were still in Ottawa or Toronto, I would have found them by now. Maybe they went to Nova Scotia.” Heavy sigh. “I don’t know. All I know is that I have to keep looking.”

Leon put an arm around her and hugged her close. “I know you do. You’ll find him.”

The darkness surrounding them made her squishy, heavenly contours all the more enticing. Her wet and well-heated body encased him, the soft,

caressing walls closing in around him forcing him to press harder as he thrust deeper and deeper into her.

Their labored breath intermingled in butterfly kisses, but not a word was spoken as both parties allowed waves of passion to overwhelm their senses.

Gabriella moaned, her hands clutching his buttocks as her walls squeezed the life out of him.

Leon raised up on his elbows, his teeth clamping shut as he dug deeper and pushed harder so as not to get pushed out.

A moan escaped as her body arched with orgasm and fingers pressed into his flesh, holding him in place as his own orgasm burst inside her.

He collapsed atop her, their breath becoming one, with their bodies sticking together with sweat as the glue.

They froze, their gasping breaths held in a lung-aching vice when they heard footsteps on the stairs. The thumping came closer then stopped outside Gabriella's room. Three soft raps caused their nerves to jangle.

"Gabriella, are you all right?"

The lovers locked gazes. Gabriella grimaced.

"Yes, Helena. I have a headache and thought a little lie down might help."

"Oh. All right. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Maybe later."

"Mr. Barkley said your gentleman friend arrived. Although, I admit, he did not use that term. Is he in the guest room?"

"Umm, I think he went out for some exercise."

"Oh. Well, perhaps—"

A complaining yell announced Hannah's displeasure at being awakened from her nap. The parents glanced at her play pen as the toddler squirmed and demanded attention.

Leon felt his erection shrivel away.

The door knob rattled, and Gabriella thanked her intuition concerning the lock.

"Why have you locked the door?" Helena rattled the knob again, as though expecting a different outcome.

"Because I didn't want to be disturbed." Gabriella's tone held an edge to it, adding credence to her imagined headache.

"Let me in, and I'll tend to the baby. Then you can go back to sleep."

"No, never mind, Helena. Thank you anyway. I'm awake now; I'll tend to her."

"Well . . ."

"I'll be down in half an hour or so. Perhaps some tea would be nice after all."

“Yes, all right.”

The footsteps retreated and descended the stairway.

The lovers breathed sighs of relief, then both chuckled.

“Quick thinking,” Leon said. “Only now I have to find a way to get outside in order to come in again.”

Gabriella smiled. “You’re a thief, aren’t you? You can climb down from the balcony.”

Hannah, tired of being ignored, rolled onto her hands and knees and, using the side of her play pen, pulled herself to her feet and stood there grumbling at her parents.

Two sets of eyes turned to her.

Knowing she now had their full attention, she raised her voice and her arms at which point she lost her balance and thumped down onto her butt. Then the wailing began in earnest.

“Oh dear.” Leon rolled off his lady love. “I’ll get her.”

“Thank you. Bring me the washcloth, since you’re already up.”

Leon cocked a smile. He padded to the washstand, gave his nether regions a quick wipe down, then tossed the second cloth toward the bed.

Gabriella grabbed the wet missile out of the air. “And the towel?”

“You want the towel, too?”

“Yes!”

“My, but you’re demanding.” He snatched the towel from the bar rack and sent it her way.

He then turned to his daughter whose expression let her insult be known.

As soon as she saw his eyes upon her, she pouted and raised her arms again.

“All right, darlin’.” Leon picked her up and settled her against him.

He was then hit with the oddest of sensations. The touch of her bare skin pressing against his created goose bumps. They only lasted an instant, then dissipated to be replaced by a burning warmth and feelings of overwhelming love. He gave her a gentle squeeze and kissed a chubby cheek.

“Hey, sweetheart. I love you, you know.”

Hannah giggled and brushed a hand against his face.

He took the little hand in his and kissed the fingers. He glanced at Gabriella and saw her smiling at him. “What?”

“Nothing, silly. Come back to bed.”

Leon padded back and settled into bed again. He lay down and Hannah seemed content to snuggle in between the two warm bodies.

Leon reached over and brushed aside a strand of damp auburn hair. “In a way, it’s kind of fun sneaking around your sister’s house, but it’s silly,

too. We shouldn't have to do it."

"What would you suggest?" Gabriella teased. "Marriage?"

Leon's smile dropped. "Oh. Ahh . . ."

Gabriella chuckled. "Relax, cowboy. As I said before, an outlaw stronghold is no place to raise a family."

Leon's dimples flickered. "No, it's not. But I miss you, both of you. Come to Wyoming. Like I said, I can set you up there, wherever you want. You won't have to worry about finances. I'll make sure of it."

"Live off stolen money?" Gabriella cocked a brow.

Leon sighed and rolled onto his back. "Stolen money was good enough for your son but not good enough for me?"

"It's not the same." Gabriella reached across their daughter and caressed his arm. "I had no other choice. Would you rather I had taken Carlyle's money?"

Leon frowned. "Carlyle's money?"

"Yes. He offered me the rewards on you and Jack, if I helped him bring you in. I refused. I could have accepted it, you know. It would have been more legitimate."

Leon sighed. "I never knew he offered that. Carlyle's bad enough, but if he had recruited you to turn against us, we wouldn't have stood a chance."

"There you go."

"But I do miss you. I hate that I can't be around as Hannah grows up. The little snatches I do get are fleeting and leave me wanting more. I want her to know me, Gabriella. Not as her uncle, but as her father. Is that really too much to ask?"

"As long as you're an outlaw, yes, it is. You say you'll support us, and I'll never have to worry about money."

"I will. You're my family."

"But what if you're killed. Even if you're arrested and sent to prison, what then? We'd be destitute, with no one to turn to."

Leon sighed again and stared up at the ceiling. He couldn't answer.

Gabriella continued to caress his arm. "You have so much potential, Napoleon. You could be anything you wanted. Quit Elk Mountain while you still can. We could move to Canada and disappear. We could have a life together and raise our family."

"What about Jack? He's family, too."

"Jack is a grown man. It's time he settled down himself. What about him and Haley? I seem to recall her only objection to marriage was the same as mine. It's time both of you grew up and took some responsibility."

"I'm trying to take responsibility. You won't accept it."

“You’re side-stepping it. You have a daughter now. You need to think of her welfare.”

“By how? Leaving my profession and running away to a foreign country? I’d have to start all over again. I’ve got it good now. I can provide for you and Hannah. Besides, I don’t want to leave Elk Mountain. It’s a good life. Don’t make me choose between you. I could never be happy spending my life working for someone else.”

“You wouldn’t have to work for someone else. My goodness. You have a brilliant mind. You could set up your own business—”

“Doing what?”

“I don’t know! We could figure that out along the way.”

Hannah became antsy with the stern tones crossing back and forth above her. Her soft humming was morphing into irritated cries before either parent noticed her discomfort.

“Oh, my darling.” Gabriella snuggled the child close to her. “I’m sorry. Come. Let’s get up and join your Aunt Helena for tea.”

Mr. Barkley opened the front door and was met with one of those rare moments of confusion. He frowned at the caller, then snatched a glance back down the hallway. He brought his eyes forward again and squinted with suspicion.

“Mr. Harden.”

“Yes.” Leon’s smile took over his face as he pushed past the servant. “Beautiful day for a walk. Is Mrs. Tanguay feeling better?”

“Yes, sir, but—”

“Yes, Mr. Barkley?”

“Apologies, sir, but I don’t recall seeing you leave.”

“Just because you didn’t see me leave doesn’t mean that I did not. How else could I be now walking through the front door?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

Leon’s bright smile lingered. “Well?”

“Oh. Yes, sir.” Barkley’s mouth closed along with the front door. “Pardon. The ladies are at tea. This way.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX THE INVITATION

Elk Mountain, Wyoming

“Hey, Leon. Welcome home.”

“Yeah. Good to be back.” Leon dismounted in front of the barn and presented his new horse. “This is Chester. What do you think of him?”

Jack stood back and scrutinized the chestnut gelding. “Hmm. Looks like a fine animal. Where’d ya get ‘im?”

“Haley gave him to me in exchange for Fanny.”

“Oh yeah?” Jack grinned. “That was nice of her.”

“Uh huh.”

Leon led the horse into the barn, but the animal hesitated. He pulled his head back and blew a blast through his nostrils.

“Whoa. It’s okay there, fella.” Leon patted his neck. “I know it’s a new barn for you, but you’ll settle in quick enough. Just wait until you taste Mukua’s cooking.”

The horse cocked an ear, not sure if he believed this human.

“Come on.” Leon encouraged the horse further. “Come into the stall and I’ll get you some grain.”

The horse stepped forward, still not sure about this strange place, but it did smell nice, full of hay and hops. It might do.

“There you go.” Leon led Chester into a stall and turned him around. “Get him some grain, will you?”

Jack dug into the grain barrel and brought half a scoop of feed over to the stall and dumped it in the manger.

Chester’s ears pricked and, as soon as the bridle was removed, he nosedived into the food.

Leon grinned as he removed the saddle and put it on the rack in the aisle.

Jack closed the stall door. “So, how is she?”

“She settled in right away. I admit, I was a bit jealous that she took the exchange of ownership so well.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s nice, but I was actually referrin’ ta Haley.”

“Oh. Come on, let’s go to the cabin. Maybe we can take a couple of mugs of beer with us.”

“Ain’t ya gonna rub your horse down? Preacher will skin ya alive ifn ya don’t.”

Leon looked at his horse, noting the dirt and dried sweat where the saddle had rubbed the hide. He slumped.

“I suppose I should, shouldn’t I?”

“Uh huh.”

“Where is he?”

“He and Charlie are out huntin’.”

Leon hesitated. “I really could use a beer.”

Jack grinned. “Come on, Leon. I’ll go get some water from the well, and you dig up a couple of sponges. We’ll get him cleaned up and you can tell me about your trip.”

Before Leon could argue, Jack picked up a pail and headed out to the well.

“Ah well. Jack is right. I should tend to my horse.”

Water trickled down off the chestnut hide as the partners worked.

“So, how’s Haley?” Jack asked again.

“She fine. It was strange though. She flirted with me and hinted at whether Gabriella and I were still together. She was disappointed when I said we were.”

“Oh yeah?” Jack smirked. “Couldn’t get the gravy so she tried for the drippin’s?”

“Hey!” Leon shot him a frown. “That wasn’t very gentlemanly.”

Jack shrugged.

Leon considered the remark. “But, yeah, I guess. I don’t know why she bothered. You’re right; her neighbor is showing interest. She admitted it. Yet, at the same time she’s flirting with me. I mean, she was always nit-picking at me when she was here, now all of a sudden, she’s acting interested. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah. Well, Haley never did make much sense. Other than what she wanted in life. Now that, I got loud and clear.”

“Hmm.” Leon nodded as he rubbed down Chester’s foreleg. “Yeah, me too. That hasn’t changed. But thank goodness. I think this will work out fine for Fanny.”

“But not for you?”

“Well, if I wasn’t with Gabriella, maybe. But, since I am,” Leon finished the sentence with a shrug. “I encouraged her to encourage the neighbor.”

“Ha! Yeah. Good for you.”

The two friends sat on the front porch with their well-earned beers, when they spotted the shock of red hair and freckles headed their way.

“Oh, what’s goin’ on here?” Jack mumbled.

“Hmm.”

The young man stopped in front of the porch. He smiled up at the boss as he gave his red mane a brush back from his brow.

“Howdy Mr. Nash.”

Leon frowned at the formality. “Redman. Why don’t you join us on the porch?”

“Oh yeah.” Redman gazed at the steps as though he’d never seen them before. “Yeah, okay. Thanks.”

He trotted up them, aiming for nonchalance, but hooked a toe on the top rim of the step and nearly wound up face first on the boards.

Both Leon and Jack grimaced.

“Oh crap.” The lad righted himself, but his face was heating up almost as red as his hair.

“Never mind,” Leon told him. “Pull up a chair.”

“Oh yeah.” He looked around for a third chair, then pulled it over and sat without further incident.

He sat there, rocking back and forth while he chewed his lip.

“What can we do for ya?” Jack asked.

“Oh well, ah,” he rubbed his hands against his pant legs. “Ah, you know I’ve been thinkin’, ah, I don’t think outlawin’ is the right career for me.”

Leon nodded with a casual air, but inside he wanted to leap for joy. Oh, thank goodness. “Well, you have had a hard time settling into the job.”

Redman nodded so hard the partners thought his neck would snap. “Yeah. I ah, I’ve been seein’ a gal over in Rock Creek. I’m thinkin’ a gettin’ married.”

“That’s nice,” Jack said. “But you can always bring your wife here. No reason ta go and—”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Leon cut his partner off. “With the money we’ve brought in this summer, you have a decent grub stake coming to you. Buy a place of your own, if you want.”

“Yeah. That’s what I was thinkin’.” He looked back and forth between the bosses. “So, ya don’t mind?”

“Mind?” Leon raised his brows. “No, no. You did a fine job here, Redman, but I sure don’t begrudge a man wanting to move on to something better.”

“Oh.” Redman smiled with relief. “Okay. Well, I’ll be headin’ out in the mornin’ then.”

“Sure thing.”

The three men stood and shook hands all around.

“You take care of yourself,” Jack told him. “Good luck.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Redman grinned, his face lighting up with genuine pleasure and relief. “Thank you. Yeah. I’ll pick up my earnings tomorrow, before I go.”

“Fine.” Leon tried to extricate his hand. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yeah.” With one more pleased glance to each man, Redman pivoted, tripped over his vacated chair and had to grab the railing to save himself a fall.

“Ya okay there, Redman?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Ah, thanks again.”

The partners sat down and watched the red menace hurry across the yard to the bunkhouse.

“Funny,” Jack commented, “you weren’t quite that understandin’ when Taggard left.”

“Taggard was a friend and an asset to this gang. Redman is an accident that keeps on happening. Sooner or later, he was going to kill himself, and maybe, take someone else with him. He’s just not got the knack to be an outlaw.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right about that.”

“And what were you thinking, suggesting he bring his wife here? Between the two of them, they’d likely burn down the bunkhouse.”

Jack chuckled. “Yeah. I weren’t thinkin’ clear. That’s what happens when I’m hungry.”

“Oh yeah. What do we have for supper?”

“There’s some rabbit stew in there. It ain’t as good as Haley used to make, but it’ll do.”

“Oh. Rabbit stew?”

“Uh huh.”

“Hmm. I could eat.”

Another decent haul from a northbound freight train had the gang in good spirits. As usual, after the job, everyone headed back to the Elk to get the plunder squared away and give any possible pursuit a chance to wear itself out. Then, when all was quiet, the fellas took turns hurrahing the town of Bear Creek.

Leon, Jack, Gus, and Malachi leaned elbow up to the bar nursing their second or third glasses of beer discussing their entertainment plans.

“I don’t know about you, but once Lobo is done with Claire, I might just take a poke.” Gus turned around and scanned the saloon. “A course, there’s the new one, Brenda. Maybe I’ll give her a—oh crap.”

Brenda, a dark-haired beauty who had yet to lose her fresh bloom, spotted Leon and moved in to lay her claim.

Elbowing Gus out of her way, she nuzzled into the outlaw leader.

“Hey there, Napoleon. You lookin’ for a fresh gal?”

Leon grinned at her. “Well, since you ask.”

“Dammit,” Gus slapped his beer onto the counter. “You always gotta move in and take the best, don’t ya?”

Leon looked at him in some surprise. “What?”

Malachi snickered, and Gus turned his storm cloud onto him. “Shut up. I don’t see you doin’ no better.”

Malachi grinned. “But I like Louise. She’s real soft and warm. I’m just waitin’ fer Hank ta be done.”

“Well, I’m tired of taking seconds. Maybe I’ll just—” One of the bedroom doors in the back closed, and Lobo emerged from the hall and headed for the bar.

Claire appeared behind him but stopped and scanned for her next customer. Business was always good when the Elk Mountain gang came into town. Her eyes lighted on Gus, and she smiled at him while squeezing a breast in his direction.

“Yeah. Well, ah, I’ll see you fellas later.”

Gus walked away and disappeared down the same hallway with Claire under an arm.

Malachi slid Gus’s half empty beer glass over and poured its contents into his own glass. He grinned at his bosses, but only Jack saw him do it.

Leon had his eyes elsewhere.

“What do you say?” Brenda rubbed against him. “You want to join me in the back?”

“I dunno,” Leon teased, his eyes already saying yes, “you’re new here, how do I know you’re worth the price?”

Mike, the bartender, among other things, snorted as he walked by. “She’s worth it. Take a peek at the merchandise if ya want. But no touchin’ till ya pay.”

Brenda cocked a smile at him and pulled loose the ties on her bodice. The material spread apart, and she pulled one side away to reveal a plump and perky tit.

Leon licked his lips, as he peered down her opened bodice. She wasn’t as buxom as Lucy, but she had enough for a mouthful and then some. Not to mention her long, red nipple looked enticingly suckable. He dug into the pocket of his tightening trousers and slapped some coins onto the countertop.

“That enough?”

Mike spread the coins out to count them. “Yup. You’re good for half an hour.”

Leon tweaked his brow at Jack. “See you in half an hour.”

“Uh huh.”

Leon and Brenda disappeared down the same hallway.

Jack picked up Leon’s half-finished beer and poured the contents into his own glass.

Malachi haw hawed. “What about you, Kid? You gonna get yourself a gal?”

Jack looked around the room. “They all seem to be taken for now. Maybe later.”

Their attention was then drawn by the local handy man as he pushed through the front flap of the canvas entrance and headed straight for the bar.

“Hey, Mike. I got your supplies from Carbon. Let me have a beer and I’ll unload it for ya.”

“Sounds like a deal, Woodrow. Any mail?”

“Yup. Just gettin’ ta that.”

Woodrow slung his saddle bags onto the bar and opened one side of them. He gave the bag a shake, and several letters and telegrams fluttered out. “Here ya go.”

He shoved all the correspondence toward the barkeep, just as Mike plunked down the beer for him.

Mike rummaged through them. “Hmm. Okay, he’ll be in tonight. Oh, a letter for Mrs. Jenkins. Probably from her sister; that woman has no end of gossip. Anyway, her husband will be in later, I’ll give it to him to give to her. Ah, a telegram for Kurtis and, oh,” Mike frowned and glanced toward the hallway. “There’s a letter here for Nash.”

Jack perked up. “Oh yeah? Here, I’ll give it him when he’s done.”

Mike looked at the outstretched hand. “I dunno about that. By law, I’m supposed ta give letters only to the person whose name is on it.”

Jack snorted. “Since when do you go by the law. Besides, you just said you were gonna take Mrs. Jenkins’ letter and give it to her husband.”

“That’s different, he’s her husband.”

“And Nash is my business partner, so give it to me. I ain’t gonna open it.”

“Then what do ya want it for?”

Jack’s right hand darted out and snatched the letter.

“Hey! What the hell?”

Malachi giggled. “That’s what ya get fer goin’ up against the fastest gun in the country.”

Jack grinned as he tucked the letter inside his vest.

“There,” he gave the pocket a pat, “safe and sound. How about another beer?”

Mike grumbled but accepted that the debate was over.

“Yeah,” Malachi quickly drained his glass and plunked it down, “I’ll have another one, too.”

Half an hour later, Leon emerged from the hallway looking pleased. He settled in at the bar beside Jack and motioned to Mike for a beer.

“So,” Jack asked, “was she worth it?”

Leon’s smile spread from dimple to dimple. “Oh yeah.”

“Okay.” He put his own payment onto the bar as Mike came over with Leon’s beer. “For Brenda, when she’s ready.”

Mike nodded and scooped it up. He was having a good afternoon.

Leon looked around. “Where is everybody?”

“Ah, well, Rex and Charlie went to eat, and Lobo’s sitting in the corner playing some kinda card game with Hank and Murdoch. Gus is in with Claire, and Malachi’s doin’ time with Louise.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh.” Jack dug into his pocket. “A letter arrived for ya.”

Leon swallowed his beer and frowned. “A letter?”

“Uh huh.” Then Jack grinned as Brenda appeared. “I’ll see ya later. It looks like Brenda is open for business again.”

“Umm hm.” Leon opened the letter and was taking in the first few lines.

“I like goin’ in after you.” Jack gave Leon a slap on the back as he headed toward the lady. “It gives me a chance ta show ‘em how it’s supposed ta be done.”

“Umm hm, okay.” Then Leon frowned, and his eyes came up from the letter. He shot a glance after his partner. “Hey! What?”

When Jack came out, appearing satisfied with his experience, none of his friends were at the bar. He looked around then spotted Leon at a table occupied with two beers and two sandwiches. The letter was set out flat in front of him.

Jack came over and sat opposite. “Thanks. I am hungry.”

“I thought you might be.”

Jack picked up a sandwich and took a mouthful. “So, who was the letter from?”

“Gabriella.”

Jack stopped chewing and frowned at him over top the beers.

“Gabriella?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.” Continues chewing. “What’s she say?”

“Says she wants me to meet her in Rawlins in two days.”

“Oh. What about?”

“She doesn’t say.”

“Oh. You sure it’s from her? Maybe it’s the law, settin’ a trap.”

“No, it’s from her. We have kind of a code, so I’ll know if it’s not her.”

“Hmm. Okay. Still, Rawlins is kinda risky.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

“Hmm. You better eat that sandwich. If we wanna get back to the Elk before dark, we better get goin’ soon.”

“Oh yeah.” Leon sat up straighter as though he’d forgotten all about lunch. He picked it up and tucked in. “It’s been a good day.”

Jack’s blue eyes twinkled. “Yeah.”

Rawlins, Wyoming

As soon as the knock sounded, Gabriella hurried to the door of her hotel room.

“Thank goodness, you’re finally here! Oh.” She stopped when she noticed Jack standing just behind her lover. “Oh, Jack. I hadn’t planned on you being here.”

Jack tipped his hat as both men came into the room. “Don’t worry about it, Gabriella. I’m just here ta make sure everything is okay. I won’t be stayin’. I got another room just down the hall.”

“Oh. Well, even that is—”

“Too close?”

“Oh. No, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that I have something of a personal nature to discuss with Napoleon.”

Jack smiled. “I won’t listen.”

“It’ll be all right, Gabriella,” Leon took her in his arms and kissed her on the cheek. “He’s just doing his job.”

She smiled at Leon, her stance softening. “I know. I’m sorry, Jack. I just wasn’t expecting you. I should have though, shouldn’t I?”

“That’s okay.” Jack took a quick look around the room. “Well, I don’t see no Wells Fargo men hidin’ in the closet, so I guess I’ll head down to the saloon for some entertainment. See ya later.”

“Yeah, thanks Jack. I’ll see you down there.”

“Yeah, sure ya will, Leon.” He tipped his hat again to Gabriella. “Good night.”

Jack left and closed the door behind him.

Gabriella smiled at her lover. “He’s not going down to the saloon, is he?”

Leon grinned. “Nope.”

“He’s going to his room, which I expect is right next to this one, to make sure it isn’t a trap, isn’t he?”

Leon nodded. “Yup.”

Gabriella sighed. “You two. I swear.”

She started to move away, but Leon grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him. “He won’t listen in.” He tipped her chin up, then leaned in for a real kiss. He glanced at the bed and maneuvered them toward it. He didn’t care how important her news was, consummating their reunion came first.

She must have agreed because she didn’t stop him.

Lying in bed, Leon could not have felt more content. Gabriella snuggled in beside him, the warmth of afterglow covering them in a soft sheen of sweat and love. With eyes closed, their breathing slowed to a gentle ebb and flow as both drifted into a light doze.

An hour went by before Leon grunted, and the misty doziness lifted back to reality. He sighed and looked at his lady love, as he brushed a strand of red hair away from her face.

She moaned and smiled but didn’t open her eyes.

He caressed her lips with a gentle kiss. “Wake up, sleepy-head.”

Gabriella moaned again and, rolling onto her back, she stretched, causing the sheet to fall away from her arched loveliness.

Leon smiled as his fingers captured a nipple that pointed skyward.

Gabriella giggled. “What? Again?”

In answer, Leon shifted. He pulled his lover to him and maneuvered to cover her. Within seconds he was into her again, softly pumping.

“You really do force me to make bad decisions.” Gabriella wrapped her housecoat around herself, then returned to the fluffed-up pillows. She leaned against them and smiled at her lover. “It really isn’t proper for a man to be in a lady’s room. What will the desk clerk think?”

“He’ll think I’m with Jack. As long as nobody sees me leave, I don’t see the problem.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Men never think of the consequences.”

“Consequences?” Leon sat up and turned to face her. “What does that mean? Everything’s fine.”

“No. Something has happened. I should have foreseen it, really. Or at least been prepared. Goodness knows, I could have prevented it, so why didn’t I?”

Leon frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Gabriella sighed and looked Leon straight in the face. “I’m expecting, again.”

“Expecting?” Leon’s expression was blank, then realization dawned. “Oh. Expecting.”

“Yes.”

The brown eyes sparkled and competed with the smile on his face.

“Ha, ha! You’re expecting?”

“Yes. Helena was quite cross with me. I should have known better, she said. And of course, she’s right. I really should have.”

Leon didn’t hear a word she said, as he laughed and embraced her. “I can’t believe it. Another little one! Isn’t it funny how things change? When I first found out about Hannah, I was scared you wanted me to be there for you and her, but I didn’t want anything to do with her. Until I met her, that is. Ha, ha. Now I can’t get enough of her, or you. And we’ve another one on the way?”

“Yes.”

Leon sat back against the headboard, still smiling. “Wow. I can’t wait to tell Jack. I can already see the look on his face.”

Gabriella cast a glance to the wall partitioning their two rooms. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Jack already knows.”

Leon sighed, folding his arms and turning contemplative. “Well, I suppose you’ll have to leave your sister’s place.”

“Yes. Hard to explain a second child when my husband is supposed to be deceased.”

“The best solution to that problem is to take another husband.”

Gabriella cocked a brow at him. “Who? You?”

“Of course, me! Who else?”

“I told you, Napoleon. I won’t raise my children at Elk Mountain. And I won’t marry you as long as you remain an outlaw.”

Leon pursed his lips and pouted. “Then why did you even bother telling me about it. Why didn’t you get rid of it, or simply take Hannah and disappear?”

Gabriella pushed herself off the bed and collected her clothing. “Perhaps I should have. I know the herbs that cause a miscarriage. It would have made things a lot easier.”

She turned her back and began dressing.

Leon sat on the bed. The news that had brought him spontaneous joy a moment ago, now caused heartache and fear.

“You won’t though, will you? Get rid of it?”

Gabriella turned back to face him as she buttoned her blouse. “No. I could never do that.”

Leon smiled and, rising from the bed, he came to her and held her in his arms.

“Then why don’t you do what I suggested before? Come and set up a home here. I’m serious, Gabriella. We can get married. I want to now. We can tell the folks in town that I travel a lot with my business. Which is true, when you think about it.”

Gabriella turned out of his embrace. She stood in front of the vanity, brushing her long hair. “I really don’t have much choice, do I?”

Leon slumped. “I don’t want you to marry me because you think you have to. Don’t you want to? Don’t you love me?”

She turned and met him, her eyes glistening. “Of course, I love you. Against all my better judgement and disdain of your ‘business’, I do love you. How could you doubt it?”

“Then marry me.”

“I will not marry an outlaw.”

“Then what?” he said, hurt smothering his tone. “What will you do?”

“I will come and live in Gillette. It’s a big enough town so they must have a doctor and a school. Perhaps they’ll even have a church. That will help with this charade. I’m an actress; I will be quite convincing as your wife.”

“You think that living in sin is more honorable than being married to an outlaw?”

“It’ll have to do for now. I still wear my wedding band. No one will be the wiser.”

“I will be.” Leon sighed and chewed his lip. “Will you meet me halfway?”

Gabriella frowned. “Halfway? Isn’t that what I am doing?”

“No, I mean, you won’t marry me as long as I’m an outlaw, but I still want you to be my wife.”

“Well, I really don’t see—”

“Let Mukua marry us.”

Gabriella’s eyes popped. “What?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Leon paced the room, animated with his solution. “He can conduct a Shoshone marriage ceremony. You and Hannah—where is Hannah, by the way?”

“Oh, suddenly you notice your daughter isn’t here.”

Leon stopped and frowned at her.

Gabriella sighed. “She’s with Helena.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay. Ah, right. You and Hannah can come up to the hideout and Mukua can marry us. I mean, it won’t be legal, not in a white man’s court, but it’s good enough for me. And then we won’t be living in sin. When I come to town from my numerous business trips, I can call you my wife and look your neighbors in the eye. Not to mention my own children.”

Gabriella squinched her face. “I don’t know. I’ll need to think about that.”

“All right. How long?”

She laughed. “At least over supper.”

Leon grinned. “Yeah. Okay.” He went over to the partitioning wall and slapped it. “C’mon, Jack! We’re heading down for supper!”

“Napoleon!” Gabriella stopped him as he headed for the door.

“What?”

“Don’t you think you should get dressed first?”

Elk Mountain Hideout

Dr. Helena Dion stood on the porch of the leader’s cabin, bouncing a gurgling Hannah on her hip as she watched the festive coach pull into the yard.

The compound looked more like a Christmas village than an outlaw haven with every building adorned with ribbons and even a variety of hay bouquets sticking out of various sidings of wood.

Mukua put a stop to it though, when they tried to string decorations along the paddock fences.

“Horses will eat the ribbon along with the hay and get sick,” he’d told them, and they had all complied. When it came to the horses, Preacher-man was boss.

Now Helena shook her head and rolled her eyes at what her young sister was getting herself into. It was one thing to have a dalliance with a charismatic rouge, but quite another to actually marry him. Even if it was through some heathen ritual that gave the new mother a way out once

things turned bad. And turn bad, they would. Of this, Helena had no doubt. She only hoped that hearts would be the only thing left broken when it did.

Cheers and waves erupted from the wagon, as Rex brought the team to a halt in front of the steps. Hank stepped down from the seat and came around and opened the coach door. He took the first daintily gloved hand to present itself and helped the bearer to step out. It was Mary, and close behind her came Bess and Haley.

“That road gets more difficult to traverse every time I use it,” Bess complained as she stretched out an aching back. “Or maybe, I’m just getting older.”

“No,” Mary gave her friend a hug, “I think it’s getting harder.”

“Gabiella!” Haley embraced her old roommate. “How wonderful to see you again, and on such an auspicious occasion. And what a sweet little girl you have. I must admit, I’m jealous.”

“Thank you,” Gabiella smiled at her sister and daughter. “And so much like her father, I never know what she’s going to get up to.”

“Oh, they’re all like that, my dear,” Bess informed her. “But perhaps, some more than others.”

They looked at Napoleon as he joined the group, then laughed as one.

Leon frowned. “What?”

“Oh, just talking about the apple not falling far from the tree,” Bess teased.

Helena came down off the porch and Hannah began making the rounds, her happy gurgling and smiling face winning everyone over.

Leon slipped his arm around Gabiella’s waist, and the parents beamed with pride at their daughter’s social skills.

“Oh, she’s a charmer, that one.” Bess smiled at Leon. “Yes, not far from the tree at all.”

“Where is Jack?” Haley scanned the yard but couldn’t spot her one-time intended.

“Ah, I think he’s still behind the bunkhouse.” Leon glanced back at the building. “He and Lobo have a fire pit going for the evening’s celebration. And, I believe Murdoch and Hank are brewing something special in the barn.”

“Oh no.” Haley rolled her eyes. “I do hope you have tea available. Oh dear. I never thought to bring any. And I don’t mean Mukua’s tea either. I mean tea tea.”

Her comment received some hoots and cackles from the attending gang members.

Leon chuckled. “No, we have real tea. We even have biscuits, and Malachi baked a cake. I’m not sure what he used for ingredients, but it’ll be interesting.”

“Oh dear.” Haley frowned. “I should have arrived a few days ago. I could have helped.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Helena assured her. “I’ve made sure to have edible items available for this special day.”

“Yes,” Gabriella smiled at her sister. “Helena is a wonderful cook when we can entice her to indulge.”

“I admit,” Helena said. “I abhor anything that takes place in a kitchen. That’s what the servants are for. But I do seem to be able to achieve success when I put my mind to it.”

Everyone looked at her as though noticing her presence for the first time.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Gabriella stepped up. “This is my sister, Helena. She’s come all the way from San Francisco to be here for this day.”

“Oh!” Everyone brightened and took turns giving Helena a proper welcome.

By mid-afternoon, guests and residents alike were settled in various areas around the compound, indulging in their chosen beverage and enjoying discussions.

“Raising your children here would certainly be an adventure.” Helena smiled at Malachi, who was sitting on the ground, playing with Hannah. “And no end of baby-sitters.”

Gabriella chuckled. “You do have a point. And if their business was legitimate, I might consider it.”

“It wasn’t so bad, living here,” Mary commented as she sipped her tea. “We were never in any danger. It was a worry though, whenever they went to work. Bess and I would make projects for ourselves to keep busy until they returned.”

“That’s exactly my point,” Gabriella said. “Aside from the fact that I don’t approve of his profession, I don’t need to be on pins and needles whenever he’s gone. It’s not healthy for a child to grow up like that.”

“I suppose you have a point.” Bess snatched a cookie from the makeshift table. “But living in town won’t change that. And you’d see him more often here. Gillette isn’t all that close.”

“And that is also part of my choice. I wish to keep my children as far away from his lifestyle as possible.”

The other ladies exchanged glances.

“Then why are you doing this at all?” Helena asked. “You could go home, you know.”

“People know me in San Francisco. How would I explain this?” And she pointed at her still flat tummy.

“I didn’t mean my home. Our family still have property in Toronto.”

“And I’m sure our family friends all know that Teddy was killed, and that I have no legitimate reason to be with child again.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Helena waved it away. “They don’t know about your life since then. You can take the name Mrs. Harden and tell people that your husband needs to stay in the States due to business. If you’re going to live a lie, you’d best make it as close to the truth as possible.”

“If I’m going to masquerade as Mrs. Harden, Napoleon wants it to be as close to the truth as possible. Which is the only reason I agreed to this ceremony at all. I will not be tied down to an outlaw.”

“But you already are tied down to him,” Bess said. “One child and another on the way. How more tied down can you be?”

“No.” Gabriella shook her head. “I love Napoleon, but I need to keep my options open. He knows where I stand. The choice is his.”

Haley snorted. “Yes. That was the mistake I made. Trying to force Jack into choosing me or this life. Still, I couldn’t see myself living here permanently. I want to accomplish more with my life than just be catering to a man’s whims. Not that that’s a bad thing,” she slipped in when she noted the looks directed at her from Mary and Bess. “It’s a matter of choice.” She shrugged. “I suppose it worked out for the best. One of us would have to submit to the life of the other. Neither of us would have been happy.”

“Exactly.” Gabriella nodded, feeling justified.

“Wull, I like livin’ here,” Malachi spoke up from ground level. He smiled at Hannah playing in the dirt. “And I wouldn’t mind baby-sittin’, neither.”

“Thank you, Malachi. And if I ever do come to live here, I will keep that in mind.”

“Yeah.”

Leon walked around to the back of the bunkhouse and spotted most of his gang members gathered around the firepit, drinking hooch.

He threw up his arms in irritation.

“What are you all doing back here? The firepit doesn’t need supervision.”

“What do ya think we’re doin’?” Jack laughed. “Getting away from that gaggle of females that have taken over the cabin.”

“It’s not that bad,” Leon groused. “Malachi’s enjoying himself.”

“Yeah well, Malachi.”

Murdoch chuckled. "Yeah. I'm too old now ta start playin' with babies. No offence, Nash. I'm sure your young'un is the most precious creature to crawl the earth. It just ain't for me."

"It ain't so much the young'un," Rex piped in, "but more the ladies. I'm sure they're all gatherin' around Gabriella and giving her all sorts of advice. That ain't man territory."

Jack nodded. "I'm sure Haley is goin' on about me. This is supposed ta be a fun day, so I'm avoidin' that bowl of honey."

Leon sighed. "What a bunch of cowards. Are whores the only ladies you fellas can relate to? If they were whores, you would be all over them. But as it stands, here you are, hiding behind the bunkhouse."

"Aw come on, Nash," Murdock complained. "Some of them ladies is too high-falootin' for the likes of us. Unless I got a specific lady in mind, I'd rather spend my time right here. Dang, some of them ladies in town look at me like I'm some kinda low-life reptile that don't have no business walkin' the streets. Chewin' the fat and drinkin' hooch sounds a whole lot better n makin' polite conversation with a bunch a women."

Charlie and Gus tapped their mugs and drank to that.

Gus peered into his mug and turned it upside down. Two drops of hooch headed for the ground. "I'm out. Where's Lobo with the next round?"

"I'm right here, ya ungrateful lout."

Lobo came up to join them, hauling a bucket of fresh hooch. He plunked it down in the center of the group, causing it to splash and hand over a dousing to the good earth.

"Hey, careful," Gus complained. "Don't go wastin' the good stuff."

Charlie came up to join the group, carrying three more mugs. "Hey, Nash. Saw ya headin' this way. I figured ya might wanna join us before ya bargain yer life away." And he handed his boss a mug.

"Oh yeah, thanks. I think I will."

Jack gestured to the bucket. "Help yourself. It's one of Lobo's best."

Leon grinned, dipped his mug into the brew and took a seat on an empty log.

Lobo and Charlie did the same.

When the newcomers were settled, Jack refilled his mug, then Gus, followed by the rest of the company according to who got there first.

Leon took a sample and coughed as the fiery liquid took his breath away. "Oh yeah," gasp, "that is good."

"Yeah." Lobo emptied his mug in one gulp and grinned. "My pa knew how ta make hooch. He didn't know how ta do nothin' else, but he did know that."

"Let's make a toast," Jack raised his glass.

Leon groaned. "Oh no."

Jack ignored him. "To the best gang leader this sorry bunch a hooligans ever had. May married life not be his downfall."

"Here, here!"

"Yeah!"

Everyone tapped mugs and drank to the toast.

Gus scowled but kept his opinion to himself. "I'm gonna get Malachi. He's missin' out on some mighty fine hooch."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN THE BLANKET CEREMONY

Elk Mountain, Wyoming
August 1877

Nobody knew how long Mukua stood by the corner of the bunkhouse, watching the gang get tight. His expression was blank, showing neither amusement nor disapproval; he simply stood and waited.

Leon reached forward to take another helping from the bucket when he stopped half-way. His full-bodied laughter died in his throat as the wise dark eyes bore into him.

He leaned away from the hooch and sighed. "Looks like it's time."

All eyes turned to Leon then followed his gaze.

"Oh, yeah."

"Time ta get down ta business."

"Hey, Preacher. Why didn't ya say something?"

"C'mon, Leon." Jack took his partner's arm and assisted him to his feet. "Time ta get hitched."

"Yeah." Leon grinned and swayed.

It was barely perceptible but Mukua frowned.

Jack leaned in and whispered, "You ain't drunk, are ya?"

"No. Of course not."

"Uh huh. You sure you wanna go through with this?"

"Yeah. What do you mean? Come on, let's go. This is an . . . auspicious . . . occasion."

"Yeah, uh huh. Can ya walk?"

"Sure, I can walk. Let's go." And to prove this statement, Leon strode forward without a hitch.

He smiled at Mukua as he walked by, but the Indian did not smile back. Instead, he cocked a brow at Jack who could only shrug.

The ladies were already gathering in front of the barn where an array of items was laid out upon a table. A Kerosene lamp with the wick turned low, an elk skull with a small bundle of sage resting in it, and a two handled pitcher with water, and a homemade blanket Haley brought with her, from the ladies at the Second Choice Ranch, all vied for room.

Leon smiled when he saw Gabriella and lengthened his stride to arrive at her side before the rest of the gang. He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss on the cheek.

"None of that," Helena teased them. "The least you can do is wait until after the ceremony."

Considering she was snuggling Hannah on her hip, and everyone knew there was a second one on the way, this comment received hoots and chuckles from those in attendance.

The happy couple simply smiled at each other and awaited the presence of the holy man.

Mukua, bringing up the rear, made his way through the throng. He turned and faced the group, and all eyes were on him.

He peered at Leon as though looking into his soul, and Leon's smile wavered just a bit.

"Hmm." Mukua nodded then turned his gaze to Gabriella.

Her gaze held steadfast, and again, Mukua nodded.

"You both wish to be joined?"

The two people gazed at each other and they smiled.

"Yes."

"Hmm."

Mukua turned up the wick on the lamp and placed the bundle of sage into the small flame until the plant began to smolder. Once there was a fine head of smoke rising from it, he raised the sage to the couple and encircled them with the smoke ring, all the while chanting in his native tongue.

When the smoke flickered down, he set the sage to the flame to reignite and began the process again.

"The smoke from the sage will cleanse your souls and carry your prayers and wishes to the Creator. The Creator sees into your hearts and knows the truth of your love and intentions."

He returned the sage to its skull bowl where it continued to smolder with a wispy smoke throughout the rest of the ceremony. He began with the chanting again, as he picked up the vase and held it on high. When he returned it to chest level, he looked to the couple.

"You will each take a drink from the vase. Then you will both hold a handle and drink from it together."

He offered it to Gabriella first.

She glanced at Leon, who nodded encouragement, then took the vase and raised it to her lips. Once she took a sip, she handed it to her intended.

Leon took his sip, then each held one of the handles and made the attempt to drink together. This proved challenging due to their difference in height, but Leon bent his knees and together they managed to take another sip. A small amount dribbled down Leon's chin, which he brushed away before they handed the vase back to Mukua.

Mukua noticed the minor spill but, though he frowned, he said nothing as he set the vase back on the table.

Next, he unfolded the blanket and, coming forward, he wrapped it around the couple. He spoke the ceremonial words first, then translated in English.

“This blanket symbolizes the beginning of your new life together. In the eyes of the Creator, you are now joined as husband and wife. Keep this blanket with you in your home as a reminder of the commitment you have made to one another and to your children.”

Leon and Gabriella hugged the blanket around themselves, then embraced and kissed.

Gabriella opened the blanket just enough for her to welcome their child into a second embrace that encompassed their family. Though Hannah squirmed at being confined in a double hug, encased in a warm blanket on a hot day, she seemed to understand the importance of it all, and accepted her fate.

Clapping and cheers arose, and the joined couple unwrapped themselves from their blanket. Both smiled with pleasure and even Hannah shrieked with laughter as her father bounced her on high.

Then the small family were besieged by well-wishers with hugs and handshakes raining down upon them.

“You sure enough done it,” Jack said. “You are officially a family man. Congratulations.”

“Yeah.”

“Talk about doin’ time,” Gus mumbled. “They don’t call it tyin’ the knot for nothin’.”

“That was a real nice weddin’,” Malachi grinned. “Ifn I ever get hitched, I’ll hav’ ta get the Preacher-man ta do the same fer me.”

Gus snorted. “And what makes you think you’ll even find a woman willin’ ta marry you?”

“Hey, I ain’t such a bad catch.” Malachi spit a stream of tobacco juice off to the side. “I got plenty a ladies interested in me.”

“Yeah, as long as you’re payin’ ‘em.”

Gus and Malachi headed toward the bunkhouse taking their argument with them.

“Congratulations, boss.” Rex offered his hand. “Real nice ceremony. My pa described one that he’d seen, and this one was real close.”

“Yeah, thanks, Rex. It was nice.”

Rex nodded and tipped his hat to the lady. “Mrs. Nash.”

Gabriella’s eyes lit up. “Oh my. That sounds strange.” She smiled at her husband. “But it sounds nice, too.”

Then the ladies came around Gabriella with their hugs and kisses and well wishes.

All but Helena, who gave her a hug and whispered in her ear. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

Gabriella stepped back and gave her a look but before she could answer, she found herself being swept away toward the cabin.

“Come on, everyone!” Haley announced. “It’s time to cut the cake. Now where did all those men get off to?”

The celebrations carried on far into the night.

Fortunately, sleeping arrangements had already been sorted out.

The gang members had cleared out one of the rooms that had once been occupied by the two previously established couples, so Bess and Mary could have some privacy. Jack also offered to sleep in the bunkhouse so that Helena, along with Hannah, could have his room in the leader’s cabin.

Even though Leon and Gabriella had retired early, they privately indulged in each other and were awake into the wee hours consummating their status as a newly married couple.

Even at that, Leon was up with the dawn. He had slept solidly for four hours, but once awake, his mind took over with all the things going on, and he could not get back to sleep. So, rather than disturb his bedmate, he arose, dressed, and padded out to the kitchen to get coffee going.

By the time he was seated on the porch with his brew, the sun had chased away the morning dew, and the compound showed promise of another hot day.

He sighed, leaned back and closed his eyes. He smiled as he felt the warmth of the morning sun touch his face, and he was content.

After a moment, he opened his eyes again, and the smile on his lips broadened. Jack was walking toward him.

“Good morning.”

“Hey, Leon. Didn’t think you’d be up this early. I was gonna get coffee ready for ya.”

Leon raised his cup. “No need. Fresh pot. Help yourself.”

Jack didn’t need any prompting and shortly he too sat on the porch and enjoyed his first cup of the day.

“That was some shindig. I ain’t never seen an Indian weddin’ before.”

“I have,” Leon said. “But I was just a child and didn’t really understand what was going on.”

“Yeah? Ya understand it now?”

Leon cocked a brow at him. “Sure. Things here aren’t going to change. This was to legitimize our children, you know that. When we get back

from Denver, Gabriella will set up housekeeping in Gillette, and I'll return here."

"And that's okay with her?"

Leon shrugged. "It was on her insistence. She doesn't want to live here, and it's too dangerous for me to live in Gillette. You already know this. What's up?"

"No, nothin'. I just wanted ta be sure, is all. Mukua ain't happy about it."

Leon slumped. "Oh. That's what this is about. Did he ask you to talk with me?"

"Well . . ."

"Oh great. I can see, he and I have a discussion coming up."

Jack grinned. "Better you than me."

"Thanks. Is he in the barn?"

"Nope. He was there before dawn ta feed, but he's back in the bunkhouse now. I think he's gettin' coffee goin' for when the rest a them yahoos wake up. Bess was awake though, and I expect she's gettin' breakfast goin'. You know what she's like."

"Yeah. Always making sure everyone gets fed." Leon sighed. "I don't know about the rest of you, but after all that food last night, I think I'll just stay with coffee."

"For once, I agree with you. That fire pit venison sure turned out good, though. And even Malachi's cake weren't that bad."

"True." Leon's smile dipped as he spotted movement at the bunkhouse. "Oh, here he comes."

"Ha. Yup. I'll get him a cup of coffee."

Jack stood and disappeared into the cabin just as Mukua approached the steps.

"Ata-i. Good morning. Jack is getting you a cup of coffee. Come up and join us."

Mukua nodded. Once on the porch, he dragged a third chair over to the others and sat.

Jack came out, handed him a cup, then returned to his own chair.

Mukua took a sip and sighed. "Coffee always tastes best in the morning."

Leon chuckled. "Yes, it does."

"I am surprised you are up this early. Did the night not go well?"

Leon and Jack exchanged a glance, then both laughed at the Indian's lack of subtlety.

"No, Ata-i, the night went very well."

"Hmm. Good."

“It’s a good thing nobody’s plannin’ on leavin’ this morning,” Jack observed. “I don’t think we’d a been able ta get ‘em outta bed in time ta catch the train. It’s gonna be a lazy day in the Elk, today.”

“Yeah,” Leon grinned, his eyes sparkling. “That’ll be nice. A bit of a holiday for everyone.”

“You are not leaving today?” Mukua asked.

“No,” Leon said. “Tomorrow.” He hesitated but knew this was going to come up sooner or later anyway. “We’ll be gone for a couple of days, then I’ll be back here.”

“Then your wife will be alone.”

“No,” Leon pretended to misunderstand. “Helena will stay with her until the baby arrives. She’s going to help Gabriella get settled in the house. Make it her own, you know.”

“This is not a good plan.”

Leon sighed, glanced at Jack, who wisely chose to stay out of it, then looked back at Mukua.

“This is what we agreed to. You know that.”

“Yes, I know. I was honored to join you in the sacred ceremony. But I still believe this is not a good thing.”

“You don’t think I should have married her?”

Mukua smiled in his soft, indulgent manner. “It is a good thing that you married her. It is a bad thing that you don’t wish to be her husband.”

“What?” Leon was incensed. “But I want to be her husband. I wanted her to come live here and be with me. She’s the one who insisted on this.”

“No. She insisted she did not want to live here and raise her children among outlaws.” He shrugged. “I’m not sure if she is making a wise choice or not. With the Shoshone, a child belongs to the village. All take a hand in its raising. This is your village; this is where your children should be.”

“Yes.”

“On the other hand, perhaps the village here would not be a good influence for the children. A child becomes what he sees around him. Maybe she does not want this for her children. In which case, she is making a wise choice.”

“Okay.” Leon sent a questioning look to Jack, who merely shrugged. “So, you’re agreeing with our decision.”

“No.” Mukua clarified. “I agree with her choice. I do not agree with yours.”

Leon slumped. “I need another cup of coffee.”

“I’ll get it.” Jack jumped up and grabbed all three cups before anyone could intervene.

“Coward!” Leon called after him.

Silence settled on the porch.

“You are a good man,” Mukua finally stated. “In many ways you make me proud.”

“What?” Leon’s jaw dropped. It took him a few seconds to hoist it back up. “I always thought you found me wanting.”

“No. I was hard on you because you have so much more to give than this. You are the only hope for our family line. I am an outcast; I cannot go home again. My name is no longer spoken in the teepees of my children, as I am dead to them. If I have grandchildren, I do not know them. But that aside, they are stuck in a life that is slipping away. Our people must change or die, and I fear they will not change. You are of our people, but also of your father’s people. You are the transition. This is why the spirits gave you the name that they did. You will always be *Napai’aishe*: Two at the Same Time.

“It is a hard life, not knowing where you truly belong. You think you belong here, but you do not. Only bad things will come to you if you remain in this place. You have taken a white woman as your wife, and your children will be raised in the white man’s world. There is where you belong.”

“But I like it here. Life is good here. It’s not safe for me to move to Gillette, just as it is not safe for you to return home. Here is where I belong.”

Mukua shook his head. “No. I agree, you would not be safe in Gillette, or anywhere else where you are known. You should leave the West. Take your family and move someplace where no one knows you. You must become someone else.”

Leon felt a stab to his heart. “And leave you? Leave Jack? Leave the only family I have left?”

“You have a new family now. Your life should be with them. I am an old man; I will not see many more winters. Jack is a young man. Perhaps it is time he finds his own family now, too.”

The conversation was interrupted by a cup clattering to the floor inside the cabin.

Leon smiled. “I don’t think Jack agrees with you.”

A smile came to Mukua’s wrinkled eyes. “There is nothing to say that he cannot go where you go and raise his family with yours. You can make your own village. That would be a good thing.”

Leon sighed and leaned back. “Where is Jack with that coffee?”

“He is leaving us to speak alone.”

“Ha! Yeah. He always did have good timing.”

“Hmm.”

“Still, I don’t know, Ata-i. This has been my home for a long time. I feel safe here. In control. I will think on what you say, for I know you to be a wise man, but I will need the summer here in any case, to get a stake together. By then the baby will be coming due, so not a good time for a move. Then it will be winter. Perhaps the following spring . . .”

Mukua nodded and smiled, though his eyes showed regret.

“You are not ready yet. I can only tell you what I think, I cannot make the choice for you. You will know when it is time.”

“Here we are.” Jack arrived with the coffee. “Helena’s gettin’ breakfast goin’. You gonna join us, Preacher?”

Mukua grinned. “Yes.” His eyes sparkled at Leon. “Your wife’s sister is a good cook.”

Gillette, Wyoming January 1878

“Madam Dion, a word if you please.”

Helena rolled her eyes as she turned to face the persistent gentleman.

“Yes, Mr. Radcliff?”

Mr. Radcliff’s round face shone ruddily from within the folds of his embracing scarf. “Please, Madam Dion, I am a professional man of medicine. Why must I repeatedly remind you to address me by my title. It is common courtesy.”

“And I am a professional woman of medicine, Mr. Radcliff, yet you refuse to address me as such.”

Radcliff snorted through his walrus mustache. “A woman’s brain is not capable of grasping the intricacies of medicine. Mankind will rue the day the universities began admitting women into the sciences.”

“Then I am surprised you design to speak with me at all.” Helena turned and continued her cautious walk along the icy boardwalk. “Good day to you.”

Radcliff scrambled to catch up with her. He put a gloved hand upon her arm to stop her.

“I am concerned for the welfare of your sister, madam. You have not permitted me entrance to her home since her confinement began. I do not like this situation, not one little bit. I demand you allow me access to examine her. She must have a doctor in attendance when the time comes.”

“She does have a doctor in attendance. I shall assist my sister in the delivery of her baby.”

Dr. Radcliff's red face beamed redder as he puffed himself. Grumbling indignation rumbled from his throat. "This is unheard of! A woman cannot be in attendance at such a time. Why, it's, it's unheard of."

"You think it more acceptable that a man be probing around in a woman's nether regions at such a time?"

Radcliff nearly choked on his mustache.

Passersby gaped at the pair and, as room on the snowy boardwalk permitted, they put distance between themselves and the uncouth conversation.

Radcliff sent furtive glances at the good citizens, many of whom were also his patients.

"Please, madam. Here is hardly the place to be discussing this matter. Show some decency and follow me to my office."

Radcliff turned and headed off in the other direction with the certainty that the woman would do as he instructed.

Helena cocked a brow as the irritating man walked away. She pursed her lips with annoyance then continued on her own way.

By the time Dr. Radcliff realized he had been disobeyed, Helena had turned the corner and disappeared.

Helena closed the door behind her. She had knocked as much snow off her boots as she could before entering the alcove of the cozy home, but even at that, she stomped more off them as she unbuttoned her coat.

"You're just in time," Gabriella's voice welcomed her from the kitchen. "The kettle is just beginning to boil."

"Oh yes, a cup of tea would be marvelous. I've picked up some more biscuits as well as a lovely pair of chops for supper."

Gabriella appeared in the entrance way. She stood, straddle-legged, her shoulders arched while her hands pressed against the small of her back.

"Thank goodness this little one is due to come out soon." She brought one of her hands around to caress her rotund midriff. "I don't know why you insisted on my keeping confinement with this one. We didn't with Hannah."

"We've already been over this." Helena hooked the heel of her boot into the jack and pulled it off, then did the same to the other. "Hannah was born in San Francisco. This is Wyoming, and people are not quite so liberal-minded here. Besides, last night's snow has not been swept off the boardwalks yet. They really are quite treacherous. You're much better off staying home." She pulled on her slippers, picked up the packages and headed for the kitchen. "Is the tea ready yet?"

Gabriella smiled and followed. "By the time we get the biscuits out, it should be. Did you happen to get any milk?"

Helena set the packages on the counter and smiled as she pulled out a glass bottle of milk from a bag and set it on the table.

"I would hardly forget milk when I know we're having tea." She then pulled out a copy of the town's newspaper. "There's an article in here you might enjoy."

"Oh, good!" Gabriella leaned on the table, then, with much care, sat herself down on the chair. "Since you insist on keeping me a prisoner in my own home, the paper is the only gossip I can indulge in."

"Oh, nonsense. I fill you in on all the town gossip, and you know it."

Helena set out a small platter of biscuits and poured the tea as Gabriella opened the paper and scanned it for anything interesting. It didn't take long.

"Oh, good heavens. Talk about behind the times. They pulled this job back in October, before the heavy snows blocked the pass."

"Yes." Helena sat down beside her and they gazed at the article together. "But it still makes for interesting reading. What a scoundrel he is. I think he refused to leave this profession because he loves the thrill. He certainly doesn't need that money considering what a successful summer the gang had."

"Hmm. Perhaps with a family to provide for, he's feeling pressured."

Helena puffed. "Oh nonsense. You know as well as I do, he's not hurting for cash."

Gabriella focused on the article. "Says here, he and Jack walked into the Wells Fargo Exchange, bold as brass, and made off with \$30,000. Oh dear. Carlyle must be pulling his hair out, what little he has of it." She sighed and put the paper aside. "He really is taking too many chances. I wish he would stop and find something more honorable to do with his talents. But I think you're right, Helena: he's addicted to it now. I don't know if he can stop."

"Do you still feel you made the right choice? You and Hannah hardly ever see him, especially during the winter."

Gabriella sipped her tea as she contemplated the question.

"I still have the option to leave without being disgraced." She laughed. "If not having two children with an outlaw isn't disgraceful enough. But in my own mind, I know our marriage won't hold up in court. It pleased him to feel we were married, and I'm content to go along with that. At least until Hannah gets old enough to truly understand what her father does for a living. If he ever decides to stop this nonsense and get a proper job, will then, I might consent to marry him for real."

Now it was Helena who laughed. “You’re just as much a scoundrel as he is. I fear what the two of you will get up to after I head back home.”

March 1878

Hannah Harden ran to the men standing in the alcove, but her arms reached out only to one of them.

“Papa, Papa!”

Leon beamed and squatted to meet his daughter at eye level.

“Hello darlin’.” He scooped her up and hugged her as he straightened.

“It is so good to see you.”

The small arms encircled his neck, and she kissed his cheek.

“Me too. You didn’t come for Christmas.”

“I know. There’s too much snow for me to get here during the winter. Didn’t your mama tell you that?”

Hannah pouted. “Yeah. But I miss you.”

Leon gave her another hug. He closed his eyes and breathed in her innocent scent. He missed her so much.

Gabriella entered the room and smiled at the father/daughter greeting. Eventually she put her hands on her hips and did a good imitation of a pout herself.

“Don’t I get a hug?”

Leon took his attention away from Hannah and smiled at his wife.

“Of course, you do.” Still holding Hannah, he took Gabriella into an embrace and kissed her. “I’ve missed both of you so much.”

Gabriella laughed. “Yes, I can tell. Hello Jack, how are you?”

“Real good.” Jack came forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Nice ta see ya again, Gabriella.”

Leon glanced around the kitchen, then grinned at Gabriella, a blazing sparkle in his eyes.

“So, where is she?”

Gabriella raised an eyebrow. “You know you have another daughter?”

“Sure. We got word through Bear Creek.”

“But the pass was snowed in. I never got a message to Bear Creek. How did you . . .? Oh, never mind. Help yourself to some coffee, and I’ll go get her.”

“I’ll get the coffee,” Jack offered. “You appear ta have your hands full.”

Hannah maintained her hold around her father’s neck and made it clear she didn’t want to be set down.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Leon pulled out a chair at the table and sat. He settled Hannah on his lap, and she seemed content to stay there.

“So, do you like your new sister?” Leon asked Hannah as Jack set coffee down in front of him.

Hannah shrugged. “She’s okay, I guess. She isn’t much fun though. All she does is cry and sleep.”

“Let her get a little older, then I expect you’ll become best friends.”

“Hmm.”

Gabriella returned, carrying a swaddled bundle.

“Here we are. Hannah, get down for now so your papa can meet Ella.”

Hannah pouted but did as she was told.

Leon’s grin broadened as the baby was settled into his arms.

“You named her Ella?”

“You didn’t know? I thought you had a handle on everything.”

“Not that.”

“Oh. Yes, I named her Ella. I thought if I gave the name to our daughter, then you’d stop calling me that. Nothing else seemed to work.”

Leon chuckled. “It’s a lovely name. And you’re probably right.”

He smiled at the infant in his arms, humbled by the fact that he had made such a marvel.

“Look at her, Jack. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Jack had been watching both father and daughter, and though to him, Ella looked just like any other baby he’d seen, he appreciated his friend thinking her special.

“Yeah, she’s cute. She must take after her ma’.”

“Ha!” The infant yawned and two tiny dimples presented themselves. “Aww, look ‘it that. She’s already got my charm.”

Gabriella chuckled. “Those dimples are a dead giveaway. Even Carlyle and Hoag put it together. There’s no hiding their heritage.”

Leon sobered as he gazed at his baby girl. “The shape of her eyes are like my mother’s, but they’re not brown, are they?” He gazed at Gabriella. “They look green, like yours. It was your eyes, you know, that day I first saw you in the mercantile. Your eyes mesmerized me, and I knew I had to get to know you better.”

“I’ll say,” Jack grumbled. “I swear, you forgot what we were there for.”

“Just you wait,” Leon grinned at his nephew, “until a set of pretty eyes sends your sense packing.”

“Uh huh. I can appreciate a pair a pretty eyes. But I can also appreciate a plan that needed your attention.”

“We got the job done, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. But I also recall a good chunk of that money did not arrive safely at the Elk. And neither did you, for that matter.”

Leon brushed a wisp of dark hair from Ella’s face. “It was worth every penny.”

The summer of 1878 was one of the best for the Elk Mountain Gang.

The winter spent in frustrating confinement produced several well planned out jobs that netted more than their usual take for the season.

Leon was also in good spirits. He enjoyed the best of both worlds, spending as much time as he could playing house with Gabriella, yet carrying on as a bachelor with the ladies in Bear Creek when getting to Gillette was not an option. Brenda had become a regular.

Nobody saw any contradiction with this behavior; a man needed a woman and it wasn’t like Leon was neglecting his familial obligations. He provided for Gabriella and his daughters. They lived well.

But Gabriella was no fool. Even though she didn’t know absolutely, she suspected that Leon found other ways to warm his bed through the winter months. But considering, in her heart, she hadn’t truly made a full commitment to him, she turned a blind eye, and the family prospered and was content.

She also worked. Even with two little ones at home, and Helena long since departed for San Francisco, Gabriella found time to teach music and take in laundry. Some deemed this work unfitting for a young mother whose husband, being a successful businessman, already provided a decent home for her. She laughed it off, stating that she liked to keep busy and the extra pocket money it provided helped her afford some of the nicer benefits.

Truth was Leon’s contribution more than paid for their lovely home and all the niceties that went with it. The money she earned on the side was all put into a savings account as a safety net. Her original concerns about Leon’s lifestyle were not alleviated. She had two children to provide for, and if anything happened to their father, and the income he provided dried up, she needed to have a way out.

But being a woman of intelligence, she still found life busy but mundane. She loved her children and would not trade them for anything, but she still needed more than what motherhood and menial jobs provided in the way of stimulation.

So, in the evenings, when the children were asleep and the house quieted, she took out pen and paper and wrote her stories. Partially autobiographical, she wrote murder mysteries, getting much of her

subjects and information from the life she'd spent with her first husband. She enjoyed this quiet time when she allowed her intelligence and creativity to run free. It also rekindled her passion for forensics and the sciences behind solving a mystery.

She found a small publishing house in Denver that accepted her manuscripts. As long as she wrote under the name of G. N. Tanguay, they were happy to accept her writing and pay her a tidy sum for each story she sent them. They were adamant though: she could not reveal that she was the author. Nothing would kill sales more than suggesting that a woman was capable of writing a murder mystery. The female mind simply could not understand the complexities of tracking down a criminal. The fact that she was a woman, and that her stories sold well, was not examined too closely.

Leon valued the time with his family. He loved his daughters more than he thought possible. The twinkle in their eyes, the dimpled smile upon their faces made his heart melt and he'd do anything to protect them.

Except give up his career. Just like with Gabriella, his keen intelligence and thrill for adventure defied the mundane. The one place where he truly felt complete was sitting in front of a safe with his nimble fingers seducing the beast to his will. The money, though necessary, was secondary to the exhilaration of outwitting each new obstacle the safe manufacturers threw at him.

Jack was no different. Oft times, he joined Leon on a trip to Gillette, though he usually took a room at the hotel. He came to be known as Leon's friend and business partner, and nobody thought twice about him spending time with the young family. Jack also enjoyed the pleasures the town had to offer, though he kept his gun skills to a minimum. The sheriff accepted them at face value, and they wanted to keep it that way.

As spring rolled into summer, Jack found himself falling in love with Leon's two girls almost to the same extent as Leon himself. Though actually cousins, Hannah came to know him as Uncle Jack and loved him almost as much as she did her papa. When both men showed up to visit, Hannah monopolized her father's attention, so Jack often spent his visits playing with Ella.

Her green eyes lit with pleasure whenever he focused his attention upon her. Jack surprised himself with how much he enjoyed playing with the baby and that got him thinking that maybe being a family man wasn't such a bad thing. Maybe, one day, he would have this for himself. If Leon could do it, why couldn't he?

His thoughts returned to Haley, but he knew that was over. The life she had planned for herself was not what Jack wanted. She wouldn't accept him unless he gave up what he loved more, his lifestyle. And he wasn't

willing to give that up, not for her and, he figured, not for any woman. And since, still being in his early twenties, he couldn't imagine his priorities changing, he figured he'd just have to wait for a woman like Gabriella to come along for him. But for now, he enjoyed being an uncle to his two small cousins.

He also had the best of both worlds, being part of the family for a few hours, then heading off on his own to enjoy the benefits of bachelorhood. More than one feminine eye turned in his direction, and he had no shortage of lady companionship while in town. Life was pretty good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT THE OFFER

Elk Mountain July 1878

Leon and Jack rode toward the hideout after a two-day hunting trip. Normally a job like this would be delegated to a couple of gang members, but this time, Leon felt the need to get away for a while, and Jack decided to join him. They'd been lucky and found a young buck elk during the early morning mist of the second day. A quick shot to the lungs brought the animal down, and the pack horse was put to use.

Charlie and Murdoch were on guard duty when they approached the look out, and neither of them were comfortable with the news they had to deliver.

The two men perched on the hill debated who would have the task.

"You've been here longer," Murdoch reasoned, "therefore, you oughta tell 'em."

"But that makes me senior to you, so I'm sayin' you can do it."

Both men sighed and gazed out at the two horsemen.

Charlie cocked a brow. "Well?"

Murdoch grinned. "How's about we toss a coin?"

"You got a coin?"

"Yeah, I do."

Murdoch rolled onto his side and dug into a pocket. "Here."

Charlie took the coin and examined both sides of it. "Okay. Call it."

Leon pulled his Remington and was just about to fire a signal shot into the air, when Jack touched his arm.

"Don't bother. We got company."

"Oh, yeah." Leon replaced his handgun and waited.

"Howdy, Murdoch," Jack greeted the young man. "Why the escort? Something wrong?"

"Howdy." Murdoch glanced from one to the other. "Well, there ain't nothin' wrong, as such."

The partners exchanged a glance.

"Something's up," Leon said, "or you wouldn't come down to meet us."

"Yeah, well." Murdoch squirmed in his saddle. "We got company is all. He showed up early this morning. We didn't know what to do with him."

Gus and Lobo refused to let him in the bunkhouse, so he's waiting for ya in your cabin."

"Who?" Jack asked.

"Well . . ."

Leon sighed. This was getting ridiculous. "Who, Murdoch?"

Murdoch braced himself. "Taggard Murphy."

Stunned silence followed.

"Taggard?" Jack frowned and another glance passed between the partners. "What's he want here?"

Leon shrugged, then both looked to Murdoch again.

"What does he want?" Leon asked when no explanation came forth.

"I dunno. He wouldn't say. Other than it was important, and he had to talk to both of you."

Silence again as the outlaws considered their options.

Leon chewed his lip. "Is he alone?"

"Yeah," Murdoch nodded. "Hank and Lobo went out to scout the area to make sure, but they didn't see nothin'."

"I didn't notice anything either," Jack said. "I can usually tell when we're bein' watched."

Leon nodded, accepting this statement as fact.

"Well, I guess the only way we're going to find out is go talk to him."

"Yeah," Jack turned to Murdoch again. "Is he still armed?"

"Oh. I suppose. I mean, he used to ride with us. Nobody thought ta take his guns."

"Used to ride with us being the main point," Jack grumbled. "He's a lawman now. I ain't so sure I trust 'im."

"Yeah, he's a lawman now," Leon agreed. "But he's also a friend. He's had more than one opportunity to arrest any one of us, and he didn't do it. I'm going to talk with him. You don't have to come along, Jack."

"No, I'll come along. He said he wanted to talk ta both of us."

"Uh huh. Thanks for the head's up, Murdoch."

"Sure thing, boss."

With his task completed, Murdoch headed back up to the lookout, while Leon and Jack continued home.

Dismounting at the barn, Malachi and Mukua greeted them.

"I hear we have company," Leon said as they dismounted. "He's in the cabin?"

Malachi glanced toward that structure. "Nope. He's on the porch."

"Oh."

Jack and Leon followed Malachi's gaze and spied Taggard sitting on the front porch, a cup of coffee in his hand.

He nodded to them.

"Huh. I'm surprised you didn't see him there, Jack."

"You ain't half as surprised as me. I don't like this."

Leon handed the horses over to Mukua.

"What do you think, Ata-i? Should we be worried?"

"No. He just wants to talk."

Leon grinned and slapped Jack on the back. "See? He just wants to talk."

"Yeah."

"Good lookin' buck, ya got there," Malachi eyed the elk and grinned. "Me and Rex can get it butchered. Looks like elk steaks tonight."

Taggard stood as the two men arrived on the porch.

"Howdy boys. You two have been busy this summer."

"Business is good," Leon said and shook his friend's hand. "Nice to see you, Taggard. But you must have something important to discuss for you to come all the way up here."

"Yeah." Taggard noted the guarded stance of the gunman, and that Jack did not offer his hand for a shake. "Let's discuss this inside," he looked over the yard and noticed more than one set of outlaw eyes watching them, "in private."

Leon nodded and went through to the common room. Taggard followed him with Jack bringing up the rear.

Leon gestured to a chair at the table. "Have a seat. Or is this going to be a standing conversation again?"

Taggard sent his young friend a frown then pulled out a chair and sat.

"Would you like more coffee, or perhaps something stronger?"

"Coffee will be fine."

Leon cocked a brow at Jack who nodded.

Setting out two more cups, Leon poured coffee then replenished Taggard's cup. He returned the coffee pot to the warm stove, handed Jack his cup and sat opposite the lawman at the table.

Taggard glanced over his shoulder at the gunman who still stood, leaning against the counter.

"How about you come join us, Jack? This is about you, too."

"I can hear what ya got to say just fine."

Taggard sighed and turned his attention to Leon.

"You fellas have been real busy since I left the gang."

“Hmm.”

“Too bad about Wes and Ed, though. I don’t like ta hear about friends gettin’ killed.”

“It’s always a risk.” Leon wondered where this was going.

“I don’t wanna hear it about you two.”

Leon groaned. “You about to give me another lecture, Taggard? I thought I made this clear.”

“Not a lecture, Leon. An offer.”

Leon laughed. He caught Jack’s skeptical eye then looked back at the lawman. “You mean like the one you got? We surrender to you and we become your deputies?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

Jack snorted through his coffee.

Leon kept his smile neutral. “I don’t think so. Sorry you made such a long trip for nothing.”

“Just hear me out, will you? This is an official offer, right from the top.”

“What? Governor Thayer is so fed up with us, he wants to offer us pardons?”

“It’s Governor Hoyt now. He replaced Thayer in April. And yes, Hoyt doesn’t want the headache of trying to bring you two to bay. He has an offer that could lead to you getting pardons.”

This time it was Leon who snorted, then he laughed out loud.

“Damn it, Taggard, I was kidding. There’s no way the governor is going to offer us pardons, just like that. You’re a fool if you don’t see a trap in the making.”

“I can understand you being skeptical.”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s not a trap. Governor Hoyt is serious. Nobody can catch ya, or at least, if they do, they can’t hold onto ya. He’s fed up with it. But he sees opportunity. Both of ya got talent, and he wants to use that talent for the good. If you’re willin’ ta work undercover for a couple of years, he’ll consider granting you pardons. Both of ya.”

Leon sat back. His eyes flicked to Jack again and was met with a smirk.

“A couple of years, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“Who’s to say Hoyt will still be in office in a couple of years?”

“It won’t matter. The deal is with the Governor’s Office, not the governor himself.”

“Hmm. Can this deal include Mukua?”

“No.”

Leon’s jaw set. “Then no deal.”

“C’mon, Leon. Use your sense. Mukua’s a murderer. The governor can’t offer a deal like this to him.”

“Not to mention, he’s an Indian.”

“Yeah, well,” Taggard dropped his gaze for an instant. “There is that, too.”

“I don’t think so, Taggard.”

“I suggest you consider it. You walk away from this the governor is really going to turn the heat on. He’ll up the reward and give Carlyle full sway. Which means that man can kill you if that’s what it takes to bring you down. And I don’t mean during a robbery, I mean, he can spot you on the street and kill you without warning. Is that what you want to go walkin’ into?”

“That’s always been a risk. You and I both know it.”

Taggard slammed his hand onto the table, causing both outlaws to jump.

“Dammit, Leon! This isn’t just about you and your ages-old vendetta. You got men followin’ your lead. You’re gonna get ‘em all killed.”

Leon’s mouth tightened into a hard line. “What are you talking about? What vendetta?”

“C’mon, Leon. I’ve known you too long for this crap. Given a choice you always go after the Navarres. I don’t know why ya do, but ya do. Plain and simple.”

“They’re the biggest safe manufacturer out here, surpassing even Yale. Of course, I’m going to target them the most; they have the biggest payoff.”

“Wells Fargo is the biggest payoff.”

Leon sighed, already tired of this conversation. “Wells Fargo is too well guarded. The fellas they hire to ride shotgun on their coaches don’t care who they kill. It’s too risky. I’ll hit Wells Fargo when their money is locked up in a safe in a bank. And generally, it’s a Navarre safe.”

“You’re pushing your luck. I’ve been tellin’ you that for years. The time is coming, Leon, and you too, Jack, when things will get too hot for you. Don’t your men, your friends, deserve better than that?”

“They can leave anytime they want. They know that. If they stay, it’s their choice.”

“Why would they leave when you’re bringing in the biggest hauls this gang has ever had?”

“Exactly!” Leon’s tone increased with his own anger. “They know when they’ve got it good, and you’re telling me I should turn my back on them. I am responsible for those men, and I don’t intend to knife them in the back.”

“But you are knifing them in the back when you drag them into your vendetta!”

“Arrgg!” Leon threw up his hands. “There is no vendetta. We’re a family here. Just because you chose to leave—”

“You have another family now that’s a bigger responsibility,” Taggard argued. “The fellas here are grown men; they can look after themselves. Gus can take over the gang. He’s competent enough. It’ll be his dream come true.”

“Ha! Gus. He doesn’t have the brains to—”

“Yeah. They’ll be penny-ante again. Much safer for everyone concerned.”

Leon glared at the lawman.

Silence weighed over them.

Taggard sat back in his chair and shook his head with a sigh.

“You have a wife and two little girls, Leon. Don’t you owe it to them? Don’t you wanna be around for them? Watch ‘em grow up? Cause, I’m tellin’ ya, you stay on the course you’ve set out for yourself, and Jack, it’s only gonna bring you heartbreak. It’s one thing for your men being willing to risk it all for you, but what about Gabriella and the girls? You’re putting them at risk too, Leon. Carlyle ain’t above using them to get ta you.”

Leon shot up, shoving his chair back to where it almost tipped over. His brown eyes dark with anger, he leaned on the table, a finger pointing in Taggard’s face.

“Don’t you dare use my family against me! Gabriella’s no fool. She’ll keep them safe.”

“She’s a fool when it comes to you, Leon.”

“Get out, Taggard! Get out and go back to your cozy little sheriff’s office. You tell Hoyt, no deal. I’m my own man, and I sure ain’t putting myself into harness for the governor. He’ll have me turning on my own friends!”

“No. He wouldn’t ask that—”

Leon went into a slow burn. “The answer’s no. Goodbye, Taggard. Don’t come back.”

Taggard heard Jack shift, and he knew he’d worn out his welcome.

He drained his coffee cup and stood. “All right, I’m goin’. But the door ain’t closed on this offer, unless ya go doin’ something stupid. I only hope you come to your senses before tragedy hits.”

Leon straightened, the outlaw taking over from the friend. “Taggard—”

“Yeah, Leon. I’m goin’.” Taggard looked back at Jack and tipped his hat. “Watch your back, Jack. And his.”

“Always do.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Gillette, Wyoming

Leon sat in the family room, nestling Ella to sleep while Gabriella tended to Hannah's nighttime routine. He leaned back in the cushioned rocking chair and gazed down upon his youngest daughter. She had nursed her fill and was ready for sleep, but she still blinked tired eyes up at her father.

At six months of age, Ella was no longer considered a newborn, but she was still a baby to her father. She still liked to hold his finger as he rocked her to sleep, and the trusting love that shone up at him through her striking green eyes filled his heart to bursting.

She was becoming an individual. Not just a baby anymore, but a tiny human being with a personality all her own. She was a happy child and laughed a lot. She was a gentle soul, unlike Hannah, who at four years of age, was boisterous and demanding, always determined to get her own way. And Ella let her.

By this time, Hannah had decided that Ella did make a suitable playmate, and she took on the role of older sister with a seriousness that made both parents smile. They played together for hours in the nursery, with Hannah talking a blue streak, and Ella laughing and trying to imitate the sounds. They were good for each other. Ella taught Hannah that everything wasn't all about her, and Hannah taught Ella how to stand up for her rights, even when her own natural gentleness often let her down.

Leon found that during the warmer months, he spent more time in Gillette than he did at the Elk. He even considered the possibility of spending the winter here, rather than holed up in the mountain hideaway. He regretted missing out on Ella's birth and would like to spend Christmas with them this time around if he could arrange it. He wasn't sure how Jack would feel about this, but it was worth considering.

Looking at his daughter now, as she yawned and her eyes closed into slumber, he smiled and knew that this was where he wanted to be. It made sense to spend the winter here. He could still plan the jobs for the working season and be at the Elk with the gang during that time. Why spend a winter of enforced idleness when he could be sharing that time with his family? Yeah, it made more sense to switch his schedule around. Winters here at home and summers at work. Yeah.

The girls were in bed, and Gabriella had tea steeping for a quiet

evening with her husband. With him gone so much, these times were precious to her and to him.

When the tea was ready, she set the pot and tea service along with a plate of sweet cake onto a tray and brought everything into the sitting room. Leon got up to help her but was a little late with this effort. She had everything set down on the small table before he had a chance to take over.

“Sorry.” He smiled at her as they sat on the sofa. “I should have been paying more attention.”

“Hmm.” Gabriella was used to his distractedness. “Were you miles away?”

“No, actually, I was right here.”

“Oh yes?” She poured a little milk into each cup then added the tea. “Pleasant thoughts, I hope.”

“Umm hm.” He accepted his saucer and cup, then took a sip. “I was thinking about spending Christmas here. Would you like that?”

Gabriella cocked a brow at him. “It would be lovely, but you’re snowed in for the winter. How would you get here?”

“I wouldn’t be snowed in if I came down in October and stayed until April.”

Gabriella sipped her tea and considered this option.

“I thought you said that it would be too dangerous for you to stay here for too long at one time. It would give the law a better chance of tracking you down and planning something.”

“True, in the summer. But winter? Everything slows to a halt in the winter. The law is too busy trying to work out my schedule for the spring. They wouldn’t even be looking for me down here. I think it would be safe enough.”

“Hide in plain sight?”

“Something like that. Even Taggard wouldn’t look for me here.”

“Taggard? Why would he be looking for you? Don’t you have a gentlemen’s agreement?”

“I thought we did.” Leon popped a piece of cake into his mouth. “He came to the Elk a few weeks ago to make us an offer.”

“Really?” Gabriella’s heart skipped a beat. Could this be the chance she hoped for? “What is he offering?”

“Oh, he says that the new governor, Hoyt, doesn’t want to be saddled with us. He’s willing to give us the chance of a pardon, if we agree to work undercover for him.” He smiled. “Notice it’s a chance of a pardon.”

“Yes. But a chance is better than none at all.”

“Hmm. I think it’s just his way of keeping us on a short leash. I don’t trust it and neither does Jack.”

Gabriella's hopes sank. "What about Mukua. What does he say?"

"I haven't talked to Mukua about it. The offer doesn't include him, and that right there, is enough for me to decline it."

"Mukua knows that offer is beyond him, but I don't think he would begrudge you taking it." She set her saucer down and turned her full attention to her husband. "It would be a chance for you and Jack to make a break. You could be free men, and we could—"

"Free men?" Leon laughed. "We wouldn't be free. We'd be in harness, doing the governor's dirty work for him and still walking around with a reward on our heads. All to maintain cover, you understand. No. We're free now."

"But for how long? You're a father. Don't you want to be with your family?"

"Jack and Mukua are my family, too."

Gabriella pursed her lips. "You know what I mean. Don't you love us enough to give up this lifestyle?"

"That's not fair." It was Leon's turn to set his saucer down. "You knew when we married what my feelings were on this. And haven't I just offered to come spend the winter with you? Besides, if you think it would be safer for us to accept the governor's plans, then you're not seeing the picture. He would be sending us into far more dangerous situations. Situations that I'd have no control over. Besides that, I doubt I would be able to see you and the girls any more often than I do now, probably less. You know what it's like working undercover. Jack and I would disappear. I wouldn't even be able to keep in touch. And besides, as I said, I don't trust it. I think it's a set up."

"Don't you trust Taggard?"

"Yeah. But who's to say he isn't being set up as well?"

Gabriella sighed. "He's smarter than that. If he says the offer is legitimate, why can't you believe it?"

"What is this? Jeez, I wish I hadn't told you now. I'm not doing it, Gabriella, and that's the end of it."

Gabriella's jaw set. To give herself a moment, she stood and took the tea pot back to the kitchen to refill, not that it actually needed refilling. But she did it anyway. When she returned, she poured more tea into both cups and settled back down again.

"Perhaps we better hold off making a decision about Christmas," she finally stated. "I'm not sure I want you underfoot for that long a time."

Elk Mountain Hideout

“What’s got a bee up your butt?” Gus snarked. “You’ve done nothin’ but snarl at people since ya got back.”

“Nothing,” Leon said, though the dark cloud prevailed. “I’m just thinking about our next job.”

Gus and Jack exchanged a look across the open fire pit. Remnants of three spit-roasted grouse were scattered about the makeshift supper location. Men sat back with full tummies and coffee as they belched out their contentment.

Jack reached for the coffee pot and poured himself a refill. “Gus is right. You’ve been a grouchy old bear all day. You and Gabriella have a fight or somethin’?”

“What if we did?” Leon grabbed the pot from Jack and poured himself another cup. Then he cursed as he over-filled it and splattered hot liquid on his hand.

Malachi made the mistake of snickering, and Leon flashed him a dark glare. The diminutive outlaw dropped his smile and picked on an already bare grouse bone.

“Nothin’,” Jack answered the question. “It’s just you shouldn’t be takin it out on everybody else, is all.”

“Fine.” Leon stood up. “I’ll head back to the cabin and leave the rest of you in peace. How’s that?” He turned and stomped off into the evening, taking his coffee cup with him.

“Sheesh.” Rex looked after the vanishing leader. “That’s not like him. What’s up?”

Jack shrugged. “Damned if I know.”

Everyone turned eyes to the Indian.

Mukua sat, smoking his pipe.

“Well?” Jack asked.

Mukua exhaled the smoke from his pipe. “He and his woman had a fight.”

“We kinda figured that,” Gus grouched. “What about?”

“It is not for me to say.”

Groans made the rounds.

Mukua pointed the mouthpiece of his pipe to each of the present gang members.

“Each of you have come to me for council. I like to think my council was worthy of your trust.”

They each nodded, none looking at any of their fellows.

“Yeah, sure.”

“You always give good ideas.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Mukua nodded. “Would you still come to me, if you knew I would spread your words like gossip around the campfire?”

“Oh, no, I guess not.”

“I don’t suppose so.”

“Nope.”

“Ain’t no way.”

Mukua nodded again. “Hmm.” And he returned to smoking his pipe.

“Wull,” Malachi glanced at his friends. “What do we talk about now?”

“Aww, Leon. What did ya tell her for?”

Leon threw up his hands. “I dunno. It just kind of slipped out.”

“Yeah, well. Since ya did tell her, ya can’t really blame her for bein’ mad that ya ain’t gonna go for it.”

“Why? I’ve made it clear from the start that I’m not giving up what we have here. We’ve worked too hard for it.”

“I know. But she’s also made it clear that she wants ya ta quit and make an honest livin. Just like Haley, and I sure ain’t tellin her. Damn, I’d never hear the end of it.”

Leon plunked into the armchair, his mouth set in an angry pout. “That’s it. Rub in what a fool I was.”

“Naw, that ain’t what I mean. It’s just,” Jack shrugged. “I dunno. Give her a week then talk to her again. She might be more forgivin’.”

“I suppose. I was thinking of spending the winter down there this year. Make up for missing so much last year. I’m not sure if she wants me to now.”

“Hmm. Ya want a whiskey?”

“Yeah, okay. Just one though. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Jack poured out two shots and brought them over.

“Ain’t that kinda risky? You’d be stuck in Gillette for a few months, and that’s if it’s an easy winter. The law might be keepin’ watch on her place.”

Leon shook his head. “There’s been no indication of that. They would have grabbed me by now.”

Jack sat opposite and they tapped their glasses before each took a sip.

“I suppose.” But Jack didn’t sound convinced. “You’d be there on your own though. I won’t be around ta watch your back.”

“I know. I’d be careful. But like I said, I don’t think she wants me around now.”

“Naw, she’ll get over it. She loves ya.”

“You think?”

“Uh huh.”

As it happened, Jack was right.

Against her better judgment, Gabriella welcomed her husband back into the arms of his family. Hannah was overjoyed that her papa would be staying with them through the winter, and Leon wrapped himself in wedded bliss.

The only downside was that being with his daughters every day over an extended period of time, he came to understand how much he missed during the times he had to be away. They changed every day, as did his relationship with them. He began to truly feel like a father, that he had a real life now, away from the Elk. All he had to do was walk away from the gang and all this could be his forever.

But he knew it couldn’t be. He was too far down the outlaw trail and, sooner or later, someone would come looking for him. It was risky enough, being here through the winter. Spring and summer would be setting himself up for disaster. Besides, he still craved the excitement and figured that, even now, by the time spring rolled around, he would be bored and eager to begin a new season of hunting.

No, he wasn’t about to give up his passion to become a full-time family man. He simply wasn’t made to live that kind of life.

In the meantime, however, he would enjoy this magical time with his daughters. They were the light of his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE SHATTERED

February 1879

“C’mon, darlin’. You ready for a sleigh ride?”

The four-year-old girl beamed a smile, her face came alive with dimples. “Yes, Papa. A sleigh ride! Let’s go, let’s go.”

“Hang on,” Leon told her. “Your sister isn’t quite ready yet.”

Hannah pouted. “She slow. I wanna go!”

“Manners, young lady.” Gabriella got one-year-old Ella settled into the carriage. “It takes a little longer to get your sister ready for an outing. You must learn patience.”

Hannah’s pout increased. “Why?”

Leon knelt beside his eldest daughter. “Patience is important. I remember one time, early in November it was. It was cold, just like it is now.”

Hannah nodded. “Yes. Cold. Christmas!”

Leon chuckled. “Yes, Christmas was coming. But me and your Uncle Jack weren’t going to have a Christmas if we didn’t make any money.

A little brow creased. “Oh.”

“Umm hm. We had a big job all lined up. It was to be the last job before winter set in for real, and we needed it to work. And it was cold. An early snowfall had dusted the ground, and the sky was a slate grey letting us know that more snow was on its way. I mean, it was so cold we had to keep the horses moving so their joints wouldn’t freeze. It was so cold if we blew on our hands to warm them, by the time our breath reached our fingers it had turned to ice crystals.”

Hannah gasped. “Really?”

“Cross my heart.” And Leon put action to his words. “We had that job planned right down to the minute. But wouldn’t you know? That train got delayed by a snow slide and it was running four hours late.”

“Oh, oh. Go home.”

“Yeah, but, we couldn’t. We needed that money to see us through the winter or we wouldn’t have anything to eat.”

“Oh. No good.”

“No, it sure isn’t. Anyway, we sat, hiding behind those trees, with our butts frozen to the hard ground, waiting for that train to arrive.”

Hannah giggled at the thought of frozen butts.

Leon cocked a brow. “Oh, you laugh. That was a hard four hours. But we knew we had to be patient. One of my employees started griping that it

was going to be dark soon, and we had to get home, but nope: I insisted we had to wait. And you know what?"

"What?"

"When that train finally did get there, we ended up with the best payday of the season."

"Wow."

"So, you see? It pays to learn patience."

Hannah glanced at her sister now settled in her carriage. "If I'm patient, will I get a good payday?"

Leon chuckled and gave his daughter a hug. "Maybe not in money, darlin', but in a sister's love, yeah."

Hannah shrieked in laughter as her father blew a raspberry on her neck.

"Oh really, you two," Gabriella interrupted them. "Now we're the ones waiting. Shall we go?"

"Yes!" Hannah made a dash for the front door and darted out into the yard.

Gabriella maneuvered the carriage through the door as Leon held it open for her.

"Really, Napoleon, you shouldn't be telling her stories like that."

Leon shrugged. "She doesn't know the difference. It's just an average workday for her papa."

"Yes, until she starts school and the children talk about what their papas do for a living."

"Hmm." Leon frowned. "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe we can stop her from growing up."

Gabriella laughed as Leon picked up the front of the carriage and helped to carry it across the snowy yard to the boardwalk. "Fat chance of that. She's already outgrowing a cute little outfit Helena sent her. Heavens, Ella's going to be wearing it soon."

Leon chuckled. "You showed wisdom in producing a second daughter. This way, Ella always has a wardrobe waiting for her."

"Until she's old enough to realize they're hand-me-downs."

"As I suggested before: we need to stop them from growing up."

"I'll do my best."

"Uh huh. Hannah! Don't get too far ahead. Come back and take my hand."

Hannah slumped. "No!" She pointed down the street where the two horses, all decked out in bells and harness, waited patiently by the mercantile. "Sleigh ride!"

"And we have a busy intersection to cross before we get there. Come, take my hand."

Hannah decided on the compromise. She didn't come back, but she did stop and wait for her family to catch up with her.

Leon held out his hand and the child grasped it.

"Pick me up, Papa."

"Pick you up? Last I looked you have a pair of legs, and they work just fine."

"Slushy."

Leon looked at the intersection and agreed that this section of the road was heavy with slush. He smiled and, unable to resist his daughter's pleas, took her under her arms and hoisted her up to settle upon his hip.

"You happy now?"

Hannah wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss. "Yes."

Coming to the intersection, the family stopped and waited for a pair of chestnuts pulling a four-seater to trot by, then made their way across the street. Leon used his free hand to again pick up the front of Ella's carriage and help it across to the boardwalk.

Before they were half-way across, Ella began to fuss and by the time Leon set the carriage back down, she was into an irritated cry.

"Oh dear," Gabriella grumbled as she noted a few arched eyebrows being sent her way. "She must be hungry. She wouldn't eat earlier, so I hoped she would wait until we got back."

"She's noisy," Hannah said. "Make her stop."

"You're not being very nice to your sister," Leon noted. "Don't you love Ella?"

Hannah shrugged.

"She's jealous." Gabriella stopped and took the younger child into her arms. "She still wants her papa all to herself."

Leon sent Hannah a quizzical look. "Really? You don't want to share me with your baby sister?"

Hannah smiled and hid her face in Leon's shirt, a clear indication that the truth was being spoken.

Leon chuckled. "You're going to have to get over that, sweetheart." He noted Gabriella trying to handle the carriage and the baby all at the same time. "I think now is a good time to start. Down you get."

"Aww, no. I don't wanna."

"Come and help me," Gabriella held out her free hand for the child. "Help me push the carriage."

Hannah brightened. "Okay!"

Hannah wrapped her mittened fingers around the lower handle of the carriage and really did try to help.

Unfortunately, her efforts didn't amount to much, and Gabriella still found dealing with both children a bit much. Especially since the younger one continued to cry.

"Here, let me take over the carriage," Leon offered. "Then you can focus on the baby."

"She's just fussing," Gabriella bounced her to try and calm the tears, but Ella wasn't happy. "I'd rather you take her. The children have become accustomed to you being here. Like Hannah, she probably just wants some father time. I'm not looking forward to the temper tantrums once you head back to the Elk."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that." But now that it had been pointed out to him, he was pleased that his children would miss him.

Gabriella rolled her eyes as Ella's fussing escalated. "Please, take her."

"Okay. C'mon, pumpkin. Come to papa."

Once Ella realized she was being handed over to her father, she stopped crying and reached her hands out to him.

"See?" Gabriella laughed. "It's a good thing I'm not the jealous type."

Leon took his baby daughter and settled her on his left hip. He bounced her along and made little blurping noises at her.

She laughed with delight.

Leon smiled at his wife. "I'm glad you're not the jealous type, too. But it is nice to be wanted."

"You're wanted, all right," came a familiar but hated voice. "Napoleon Nash, stand where you are."

Leon's eyes snapped up and a chill hit his lungs. "Carlyle."

Carlyle's lip curled in a crooked smile. "Right you are, boy. Let's not cause a scene right in front of your family, eh? Hand the baby over to its mother. We don't want any bloodshed here."

Movement to his left caught Leon's eyes and he took an involuntary step backward as he recognized Detective Hoag. He felt a rising panic and the thought of fleeing hit his brain. He pushed it down, knowing he could do nothing with his family all around him. He brought his right arm around to lift the baby off his hip and hand her to her mother.

But he didn't get that far.

"No!" came the shouted order from Carlyle at the same time as a Colt .45 blasted its bullet toward the outlaw.

Leon didn't have time to think. He was barely aware of the bullet sliding across his ribs before he felt his baby daughter shudder with the impact. She made not a sound but went limp in his arms as blood pumped from her chest and saturated his shirt.

His brain whirled as he saw the life-light fade from Ella's beautiful green eyes. Then she was gone, grabbed from his arms by her mother.

Gabriella cradled the bloody mass that was her daughter, as she sank to the slushy ground. Her scream began in the depth of her heart and burst forth as a wild, desperate wail of rage and despair.

Leon's eyes, black with fury, zeroed in on Carlyle.

"You bastard! I'll kill you for this!"

He made a lunge for the detective, but two sets of hands grabbed him from behind and forced him to his knees.

"No!" He fought against them, not caring what they did. He squirmed and turned, punching and scratching to get free. "You murdered my daughter! You bastard!"

In his rage he was barely aware of what went on around him. He only vaguely noted Hoag holding Hannah in his arms, attempting to comfort the screaming child, while Gabriella sat shattered on the boardwalk, rocking the body of her baby and wailing her anguish to the world. Blood seeped into the snow around her and spread like a rising tide.

One of the deputies came into view, smirking a smile as he twirled his handgun and slipped it back into its holster.

"I got 'im," he crowed. "Did ya see that? I don't know what all the fuss was about. That weren't so hard. Just hit 'im where it hurts. Ha! Ain't that right, Nash?"

He gave Leon a back-handed slap that sent the outlaw sprawling into the hands of his captors, then he turned his attention to Gabriella.

"Shut up, bitch. What did you think was gonna happen? You lie with dogs you're gonna get—"

Gabriella was on him in an instant. Covered with her baby's blood, she howled in rage and attacked her child's murderer. She went for his eyes, her long nails gouging deep ruts across his brow and down his cheek. She screamed at him as she grabbed for his throat.

The deputy stumbled back. "What the hell? Get off me, you whore!" He slapped her across the head, then shoved her against the hitching rail.

"Leave her alone!" Leon yelled. "Let her go—" He roared in frustration and struggled against his captors. But they had the cuffs on him by then, and they were determined to hold him down.

Gabriella reached into the hidden pocket of her skirt and pulled the small Derringer with the full intention of blowing the deputy's head off.

Then arms encircled her, forcing her aim off target and the bullet impacted into the boardwalk.

She screamed and kicked backward, but Carlyle was too quick for her. He held her in a vise and wrestled the gun from her hand.

"No!" Her wail was anguish itself. "You murderer. You killed my daughter!"

“Don’t do this.” Carlyle’s whisper entered her brain like a knife. “He’s not worth your life.”

“He has to pay! He murdered my daughter!”

“And you have another daughter right here, who needs you.”

Gabriella’s sobs did not abate, but her eyes did flick to Hannah.

The child clung to Detective Hoag, her cries of fear competing with those of her mother.

Once Carlyle felt the woman’s attention turn to her surviving daughter, he released her, and she ran to Hannah with arms outstretched.

Hoag set the child on her feet, and mother and daughter came together in a heap of anguish.

“Get her outta here,” Carlyle told Hoag. “Take her to the station. And you,” he pointed at an on-looker, “go get the doc!”

The man shrugged. “What for? That baby’s deader than a bug on the stove.”

“For the woman!” Carlyle yelled at him. “Go!” He then turned his rage upon the first deputy. “You’re up on report, mister. What the hell were you thinking, shooting at him while he was holding the baby?”

That man smirked. “Geez, all this commotion over some outlaw’s bastard brat. I should get a recommenda—”

The sentence didn’t get finished as Carlyle charged. In an instant the detective had his hands around the man’s throat and he squeezed with murderous intent.

“You little prick. You killed that child. I’ll see you hang for this, that is if I don’t choke the life outta ya right now.”

The man’s eyes bugged, and he was turning blue before the two detectives holding Leon let him go and came to pull their boss off their comrade.

Leon, his hands cuffed behind him, and his breath coming in ragged gasps, crawled to the body of his baby girl. He couldn’t help his grief as it burst from his lungs and poured out upon the boardwalk.

Leon paced the perimeter of his cell, hitting the bars with his fist when he wasn’t grabbing hold and shaking them.

“Gabriella!”

He could hear her and Hannah in the front office. Hannah could not stop crying, but Gabriella was a force to be reckoned with.

“I’ll see you hanged!”

“I’m hardly going to be hanged for doing my job. Damn. Nothin’ more vicious than a woman with long fingernails. I’m gonna be scarred for life.”

“Give me my gun and I’ll put you out of your misery.”

This was followed by a scuffle of feet and more shouts as a chair was knocked over.

Carlyle’s voice rose above the din. “Mrs. Tanguay, please sit down. Let the law deal with this man.”

“The law!” Gabriella snorted. “It’s the law that killed my daughter! Get away from me with that needle!”

“Ma’am, it’s for your own good,” came a voice Leon assumed was the doctor. “It will ease your hysteria.”

“Get away from me with that! Let go of me—”

“It’s just a sedative to calm you,” Dr. Radcliff assured her. “See how your daughter is quieting down? It will help.”

Leon rattled the bars of his cage. “Gabriella! Carlyle, let me see my wife! Gabriella—”

Carlyle entered the cell block, his beady, dark eyes darker and beadier than ever.

“Your ‘wife’ doesn’t want to see you right now. The doctor is tending to her and her daughter.”

Leon lunged forward, his arm snaking through the bars to grab Carlyle’s shirt.

The detective was too quick for him and stepped back.

“What do you think that’s gonna serve?”

“I wanna see my wife.”

“And I said not now.” He glanced at the blood on Leon’s shirt. “Are you injured?”

“What?”

“Is that all your daughter’s blood or did you get injured?”

“I don’t know. What do I care?”

“Once your wife and daughter are settled, I’ll send the doctor in to check you.” The detective then turned and walked away.

Leon tried to grab him again but with no more luck than the first time. “Carlyle! Let me see them!”

But the detective ignored him and kept walking.

“Carlyle!” Leon shook the bars as curses spewed from his lips, but all he got in return was Carlyle’s back.

The doctor’s words “Who is Mrs. Tanguay? I thought this woman was Mrs. Harden.” It was the last he heard before the cell block door was shut upon him.

“Napoleon.”

Leon glanced up from the trance that had encompassed him all through the night and into the morning. As soon as he saw her, his anguish arose to choke him again.

“Gabriella.” He stood up from his cot and came to her. He took her hands in his, but she pulled away. “Gabriella?”

“Please, don’t.” Gabriella turned red-rimmed eyes up to meet his and then, as though the hurt she saw within those dark pools was too much for her to bear, she dropped her gaze and stared at her clasped hands. “I’m leaving.”

“You’re going home?”

“Yes, I’m going home. To San Francisco.”

“All right. I understand you wanting to do that. Your sister will be a great comfort to you.” He dropped his voice. “I’ll get out, Gabriella, you know I will. I’ll get out of here and come get you. You and Hannah can come live at the Elk—”

“No!” The word came out in a strangled cry.

Leon flinched. Fear fought his words. “Gabriella . . .”

“I’ll stay with my sister until I can get my finances sorted out, then I’m leaving. I have money saved, thank goodness. I’m going to take Hannah and disappear. Don’t come looking for us, Napoleon. It’s over.”

Leon’s heart shattered upon the floor. “No, you can’t. Gabriella, please. You can’t take her away from me. You can’t—”

“I can. And I am. I was a fool to think this could all work out. I wanted it so much, I ignored my own instincts, my own common sense. And now —” Her voice choked. “Ella.” She sobbed and she took a hanky from inside her sleeve to staunch her tears. “My sweet baby girl.”

Leon’s face contorted with pain. “She was my baby girl, too. You can’t leave me. You can’t take away everything that’s ever been good in my life. Please Gabriella.”

Gabriella hardened herself and forced her eyes to meet his. “No. I’m sorry. We’re leaving. I’ve lost two children. I could not survive losing a third.”

Leon returned her gaze and saw resolution there. A darkness smothered his dreams.

“Let me see her. Let me say goodbye.”

“Don’t you think she’s suffered enough pain? My god, even sedated so she could sleep, she’s been wild with nightmares. The last thing she needs is to see you like this. She can’t look at you now without seeing her sister in your arms covered in blood. I won’t do that to her. I can’t.”

Then she turned and walked away.

“No, Gabriella! Please. You’re doing to me exactly what your in-laws did to you. Can’t you see that? Gabriella, please! Don’t do this! Let me

see her, one last time. Please!”

But the cell block door closed upon his entreating, and she was gone.

Leon couldn't stop it then; the sob that wrenched his soul. He grabbed the bars and shook them with all his strength as his anguish turned his mind to night.

Carlyle stood outside the cell. He noted the food tray on the floor, still untouched. The occupant sat on the cot, his back resting against the bars as his dead eyes gazed into nothing.

“For what it's worth, I'm sorry for what happened. Officer Dicks should never have taken that shot. He'll pay for it too. Wells Fargo doesn't need a loose cannon like that in the ranks.”

Leon didn't respond; he simply sat and stared at nothing.

Carlyle sighed. “Eat somethin', boy. We've got a long trip ahead of us in the morning.”

The detective returned to the front office where Hoag was just pouring two cups of coffee.

“We gonna work on him this afternoon?”

“Naw.” Carlyle came over to accept his brew. “For our methods ta work, the subject has ta give a damn about his life. The mood he's in, he'd probably see it as doin' 'im a favor.”

Leon didn't move all that day. Trays of food came and left untouched, words spoken to him went ignored. He sat and stared at nothing as the hours ticked by.

Evening settled in and the jailhouse quieted as visitors and lawmen headed home or to the hotel. The dinner tray lay where it had been placed on the floor just inside the barred door.

The night deputy leaned against the bars, his arms folded, and ankles crossed.

“C'mon Nash, ya might as well eat somethin'. Once them Wells Fargo guys get ya to Cheyenne, meals might be few and far between. I have it on good authority that they don't tend ta feed fellas they're interrogatin'. Ya know what I mean?”

Leon sat and stared straight ahead.

The deputy snorted. “You are gonna be singin' like a caged bird once they get goin' on you. Why, I hear tell they'll start pullin' out your fingernails ta get the information they want. And they don't end there, no

siree. Them nimble fingers a yours won't be card sharpin' or opening safes once they get through with you. They'll break 'em one at a time. I know of a fella who knows a fella who heard of a fella who, after all that, still wouldn't talk. Them Wells Fargo guys stripped 'im naked, hung 'im up by his ankles and castrated 'im with a huntin' knife, right there in the cell.

"I tell ya, the prisoners witnessin' that sure did change their attitude then. Ha! Yup. Can't blame 'em none though, can ya?" The deputy stopped talking and turned an eye to the untouched pot roast and mashed potatoes. "Ya know, Miss Georgette is a real fine cook, and I am especially partial to her pot roast. Even cold, it's the best in town." He cocked a brow at the outlaw who continued to ignore him. "Well, ah, since you ain't gonna eat it, I think I'll just . . ."

The deputy took his ring of keys from his belt, unlocked the cell door and leaned over to retrieve the plate.

The ghost of a night shadow slipped into the side alley that led to the back of the livery stable.

Inside the jailhouse, the deputy lay unconscious on the cell floor. The napkin from the dinner tray was stuffed into his mouth, and his hands were cuffed behind his back. The cell door had been shut and locked upon him.

In the front office, the ring of keys sat on the desk, and the safe, which had contained \$100 cash and Leon's holstered Remington, now sat ajar and empty. A gentle breeze drifting in from the open window rustled Leon's wanted poster that was still pinned upon the bulletin board.

Leon slipped a bridle over the head of a likely looking bay gelding and then led the animal out of the corral and tied it to the hitching rail. Several saddles had been slung across the rail by the barn door, and Leon casually snatched up one that was fully rigged and looked in good shape.

He learned a long time ago that if you act like you had every right to be doing what you were doing, nobody paid you any mind. So, even though several people walked past him as he saddled up somebody else's horse, no alarm was sounded. The coming shadows of the evening did wonders to hide the blood on his shirt and, as long as the actual owner of the horse did not arrive, he was sure he could get out of town unhindered.

Still, not wanting to be hung for a horse thief, Leon took twenty dollars out from the hundred he'd taken from the safe and tucked it in the crease

of a saddle blanket. Never let it be said that Napoleon Nash would stoop to stealing a man's horse.

Giving the cinch an extra tug, Leon gathered the reins and mounted.

The horse tossed its head at the feel of a stranger on his back, but other than that, the animal accepted Leon's guidance and they rode out of town at a casual lope.

Leon's mind was so scattered that he functioned on instinct alone. He kept the horse at a fast lope until the nighttime darkness made it too dangerous to continue. Then he took to ground.

He didn't know how much time he had until a posse came after him. He figured the horse would be missed long before the deputy was discovered. How quickly the law put the two events together was anyone's guess. He hunkered down in the darkness and waited out the night.

He didn't know what he was going to do. The pain in his heart and mind was worse than any bullet wound he'd ever received. He still couldn't believe what had happened, how drastically his life had changed in just a few short hours. If it wasn't for the bullet graze across his ribs and his shirt now stiff with blood, he would question the reality of it. It felt like a dream: a bad dream.

Except for the aching in his heart and the tears in his eyes.

He cried there, in the cold loneliness of the night with only the horse to witness it. He cried as he had never cried before. Everything was gone, and it was his fault. He had been so arrogant, so sure that Gabriella and the children would be safe in Gillette.

They hadn't seen any sign of Carlyle for ages. It was easy to dismiss him, to convince himself that the detective had moved on to other things. What a fool he was. He should have known better. A man like Carlyle wasn't going to give up on him. All he did was pull back and regroup, waiting for the exact time to strike. Waiting until Leon was in a vulnerable position, surrounded by his family.

And Leon had failed, as a husband and a father, to protect them. Maybe it served him right that Gabriella had taken their eldest daughter and left. She had trusted him, and he failed her. This was all his fault. But knowing this didn't diminish his pain and anger.

How could she do that to me? Just leave and not even let me say goodbye. How could she do that? Ella was my daughter too. Doesn't that give me any rights? How could she just take Hannah and leave? I can understand her taking Hannah someplace safe, but to not even let me

know where they're going. I have a right to know where my family is. She's my daughter, too, dammit!

And so his rage built upon itself throughout the night.

When morning seeped into his awareness, he was red-eyed from exhaustion and sorrow. He had no clear idea of what he was doing or where he would go. He only knew he couldn't go back to the Elk, not yet. Even if the pass was clear, he couldn't face them with this tragic news. Somehow, by not telling Jack and Mukua about this made it less real. Once the words were spoken then there was no going back to how it used to be, and he wasn't ready for that yet.

But where he was going to go, he had no idea.

Scratching the gauze that covered the red streak across his rib cage brought home to his mind that he needed to find a new shirt. He had his coat, but a sweater and scarf would help, along with a pair of gloves. He had a horse and money, but he knew he couldn't go into any town around here. Telegrams will be sent letting the law know he was in the area and on the run.

Taggard. Would he help? As soon as the thought surfaced, he dismissed it. *No, I can't go to Taggard. He's probably still mad at me for not taking the Governor's offer.*

He blew on his red, stiffened fingers and stamped his feet. His teeth chattered as the cold morning air bit into him and he pressed his hands into the thick winter coat of the horse. This helped to warm them enough for him to tighten the girth on the saddle and mount up. He rode away with no real clear idea of where he was going.

CHAPTER THIRTY TAKING REFUGE

**Golden, Colorado
February 1879**

“Hey, boss, you gotta come see this.”

Brook Newton, foreman of the Second Chance Ranch, cocked a brow at the wrangler who’d interrupted him.

“Dammit, Holtz, don’t you think that could wait until I’m done delegating?”

“No sir. I’m thinkin’ you’ll wanna see this.”

Newton sighed as the other cowhands waited for their orders. They were bored and cold just standing around. Some folded their arms, others stamped their feet. They wanted to get on with the workday, and Holtz had a reputation for overreacting to nothing.

Newton eyed the wrangler, who stood chewing his lip.

Another sigh from the foreman. “All right. What is it?”

Holtz sprang into action. Grinning like a down-on-his-luck gambler who’d just won the pot of the night, he pivoted and waved his fellows on to follow him.

“C’mon. He’s in the barn. It’s the dangest thing.”

The others stepped in line though they showed much less enthusiasm than their overly dramatic friend.

Upon entering the barn however, the group stopped as one. Jaws dropped and heads were scratched at the sight that met them.

“Well, I’ll be.”

“Ya don’t see that every day.”

“Who is that? Do we know ‘im?”

“I thought you’d wanna see this. I ain’t sure what to do about it.”

Newton stepped toward the man who lay sprawled, face down, in the loose straw, but he didn’t get far.

That damn chestnut mare the boss-lady had acquired from who knows where, stood over the prone figure, and wouldn’t let anyone come near. She laid back her ears and snaked her neck at the foreman as soon as he made the move toward them.

“Dammit. How the hell did he get here?”

Holtz jutted his chin into the shadows. “I’m assumin’ that there is his horse.”

All heads swiveled in the desired direction.

A bay gelding, still fully tacked, stood in the corner. His tail was tucked tightly to his rump, his head held high as the white rolled in his eyes. His limbs trembled with fear and exhaustion.

“Hmm.” Newton looked back to the man in the straw. “Hey, mister. Wake up!”

The tattered figure didn’t move.

“Jesus.” Newton spit to the side. “All we need is some ragged vagabond taking up residence in the barn.”

He looked around and spied a frozen ball of horse dung. Picking it up he backhanded it at the tramp, hitting him on the shoulder. The turd hit hard, bounced off then banged against the boards

The body still didn’t move, but the mare bared her teeth and feinted a charge, causing everyone to take a couple of steps back.

The bay gelding tried to disappear into the wall.

Newton considered his options. Shooting the mare was high on his list, but he knew there’d be hell to pay from the boss-lady if he did that. For some reason she was partial to the cantankerous beast.

“Jonsie, get a bucket of grain. Maybe we can coax her into her paddock.”

One of the wranglers broke rank and retrieved the peace offering.

Newton took the bucket and gave the contents a shake.

“C’mon, you bitch. Come get your damned breakfast.”

The mare simply tossed her head then shook her red mane in an adamant *no*.

A soft nicker from the corner again drew eyes to the gelding.

That horse stared at the bucket, his eyes wide and ears pricked forward. His nostrils quivered as he licked his lips.

The mare pawed the floor and gave him the stink eye, and the gelding knew he was out of luck. Another sigh from the foreman. This was no way to start a workday.

“Well, I better go get the boss. That mare seems to like her.”

Haley strode into the barn two steps ahead of her foreman. As soon as she saw the situation, she stopped and gasped, surprise and concern widening her eyes.

“Do you know him, ma’am?”

“Yes, of course I know him. It’s Nap—Josh Harden. What in the world has happened to him?”

Newton's eyes narrowed at the slip-up but sprang open again as Haley dashed toward the prone man. He reached out a hand to stop her, but she was too fast for him and was in striking range of the mare before anyone could think twice about it.

But nothing happened.

Haley stroked the mare's neck.

"What a good girl you are, Fanny. You've done a fine job, protecting your friend."

Fanny snorted and nuzzled against Haley's coat.

Haley smiled and rubbed her face. "Yes. You're a good girl. But I'm here now, and I need to help him. Nothing is going to happen to him, so don't worry."

Fanny sighed; her relief evident. Stepping over the prone figure, she backed up to give Haley room.

Haley knelt beside Leon and touched his shoulder. "Josh?" Nothing happened. She gave him a gentle shake. "Josh?"

Leon started, then, pushing himself up, shrank away from her touch.

"It's all right, Josh. It's me, Haley. You remember me?"

Leon stared at her; his eyes wide with panic. But then he did recognize her, and his expression softened. He blinked and brushed the loose strands of straw away from his face.

"Haley."

Haley smiled. "Yes. What happened?"

A dark chasm of pain filled his eyes, and Haley gasped from the power of it.

The dreaded thought came to her, unbidden. *Is it Jack? Has something happened to Jack?*

"Never mind," she whispered, touching his arm. "You can tell me later. Can you stand?"

Leon organized himself and slowly stood.

Haley took his arm and helped to steady him. "Can you make it to the house? You look in need of a hot meal." She frowned when she noticed the streak of blood on his shirt. "And perhaps some tending."

"Yeah."

Newton didn't like the way this was heading. "Ah, ma'am, would you like some help?"

"No, we're fine, Mr. Newton."

"Perhaps I should take him to the bunkhouse. He'll get the tending he needs there."

"Don't be silly. You men have work to do."

Newton stepped in front of them. "Ma'am, it ain't proper, you taking a strange man into your house with only you women folk there."

Haley flashed her eyes. "He's not a strange man, Mr. Newton. He is a friend. It's time you got on with your day's work." She shot a glance at the gelding. "Have one of your men tend to that horse. The poor thing looks done in."

Having experienced his boss's stubborn streak on previous occasions, Newton gave up the argument and stepped aside, though he still wasn't happy about it. "Yes, ma'am."

Haley assisted Leon out of the barn.

Fanny followed close behind and put herself back in her paddock where she knew her breakfast waited for her.

Newton turned to his men; his face dark. "Jonsie."

"Yeah, boss?"

"You ride on over to the Lazy C. Maybe Madison can talk some sense into that woman."

Before Leon gathered his wits, Haley had him seated in the front parlor and was unbuttoning his shirt.

Jiang entered then gasped, nearly dropping the coffee tray.

"Miss Sherman! No, no, this not right."

Haley removed Leon's shirt and tossed it on the floor. "Don't be silly, Jiang. He needs tending."

"No, no. You in room alone with naked man. You go too far. This not right."

"He's not naked. Go get some hot water and a washcloth."

Jiang set the coffee tray on the table and headed for the kitchen door. "No, no. I not help you. This is not proper. You call Mr. Madison. He tend to this man."

Haley's mouth hardened in irritation. "Don't be silly. Mr. Madison is an hour away. Now get me that—"

But Jiang was gone, complaining in Chinese as she put emphasis into her kitchen duties.

Haley put hands on hips. "If you're not going to help me, then get Bess. At least she's not an old fuddy duddy."

Silence in the kitchen suggested that Jiang was at least willing to follow this order.

Haley poured a shot glass of whiskey and set it on the table in front of her friend.

"Drink that."

Leon gazed at the glass through dead eyes. "I don't want anything."

“Napoleon,” she whispered, “you’re a fright. You’re cold and done in. You look like you haven’t eaten in days. The whiskey will help to warm you, and we’ll get some hot soup going. In the meantime, this gauze is glued to your chest. I’ll soak it, but it’s still going to hurt when I pull it off.”

Leon sat, a picture of despondency.

Haley sat beside him, a hand on his arm. “Napoleon, what happened?”

Leon couldn’t look at her. His burning eyes blinked, and a tear rolled down his cheek.

Haley gasped, fearing the worst. “Jack? Has something happened to Jack?”

Leon gulped, fighting the cruel emotions. He shook his head.

“No.” His voice rasped from the cold and his despair. “Jack’s fine.”

Haley frowned with puzzlement and then a chill went through her.

“Gabiella,” she whispered. “Are the children all right?”

Leon’s face crumbled, and the sob he’d been fighting won. He hugged himself with one arm, while the other hand came up to hide his tears, but they would not be staunched.

Haley felt her own tears threaten. She took her friend in a hug, and he cried like a baby.

Bess arrived on the scene then, carrying a basin of steaming water. She was closely followed by Mary who supplied the washcloth and towels.

Seeing Napoleon in such a state, both ladies deposited their items on the table and rushed over to encase their friend in a warm, feminine cocoon.

Leon all but disappeared under the blanket of female sympathy, but he was okay with that as the tears he couldn’t stop confirmed his presence underneath that huddle.

“What’s happened?” Bess stroked Leon’s hair. “Is it Jack?”

“No,” Haley shook her head. “Something has happened to his family.”

Mary gasped. “Gabiella and the girls? Oh, Napoleon, where are they?”

Leon sniffed as his tears abated. Then shivers attacked him as the three ladies loosened their embraces.

“I’ll get him a blanket.” Mary leaned down and kissed his head, then hurried to the linen closet.

“Napoleon, please, drink this.” Haley pushed the glass of whiskey at him. “I’ll get Jiang to make you something.”

“No,” Leon rasped. “I can’t eat.”

“When was the last time you did eat?”

Leon shrugged and shook his head. “I dunno. Two, three days, maybe. I dunno.”

Haley and Bess exchanged looks overtop of the dark head.

“We have that chicken broth in the cooler. I’ll get it heated,” Bess said. “And you’re going to drink it, Napoleon, whether you want it or not.”

She disappeared into the kitchen just as Mary returned from the hall door.

She wrapped the blanket around Leon’s shoulders as Haley examined the gauze stuck to his rib cage.

“Is this a bullet graze?”

Leon nodded as he eyed the whiskey.

“Well, we better get that gauze off.” She soaked up the warm water with the cloth and gently pressed it against the dried and caked on blood. Leon flinched. “I’ll try to be gentle.”

Haley slowly worked the stiffened gauze away from the wound, and Leon did his best to keep his hands out of the way. Halfway through the procedure, the whiskey found its way down his throat. The wound bled as the scabs were pulled off, but Haley was relieved to find that the injury was not bad.

She set aside the old dressing just as Bess returned with a bowl of steaming soup.

“Now you drink this, young man. You need to get something in your stomach, whether you want it there or not. In the meantime, Jiang is getting a hot bath ready for you. You soak in that for a while and then you’re going to bed. And that’s the end of it.

“My god, woman, have you no sense? You’ve already got half the town gossiping about you. You need to consider your reputation.”

“Cole, you’re overreacting. Those ladies in town are talking nonsense, and you know it.”

“Of course, I know it, but that doesn’t stop them from spreading it around. And this isn’t going to help.”

“You expected me to turn him away? A friend in need, simply to protect my reputation? My reputation wouldn’t be worth much if I did that.”

Cole growled. “You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met. Why do I even bother with you? Dammit.”

Haley crossed her arms and stood silently defiant.

Cole growled again. “Well, who is he? You claim he’s a friend, but I don’t recall you ever mentioning him.”

“Of course, I’ve mentioned him. He’s Jack Adam’s business partner. He’s also the gentleman who gave me Fanny.”

Cole’s expression fell. “Oh, that friend.”

“Yes, that friend. So, I’m hardly going to turn him away in his time of need.”

“Well, what happened to him? Why did he come here? Where is his business partner now?”

“I don’t know,” Haley admitted. “Something has happened to his family, but he was too tired and upset to discuss it. Once he’s rested, I’ll find out more.”

“Once he’s rested, he’ll be on his way.”

Haley’s demeanor hardened. “At this time of year? It’s a miracle he made it here in the first place. Thank goodness that snowstorm isn’t due until tomorrow. Then we’ll all be dealing with harsh conditions, so he won’t be going anywhere. He’s not up to it anyway. He’s a wreck. He needs rest and food. He’ll be on his way when he’s feeling better and the weather permits and not before.” Her expression softened as a thought occurred. “I need to get word to Jack. He’ll be worried.”

Leon slept all the rest of that day and into the evening. He awoke briefly, had food encouraged down his throat and then he returned to his bed. When he awoke the following morning, his body felt better, but his heart remained broken.

He was offered scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast, but he only picked at it as he sat at the table bundled in warm flannel and a blanket. His stomach tightened into a knot when he tried to put food into it and eventually, he lay down the fork and sighed, giving it up as a lost cause.

The three ladies chatted amiably throughout the meal, trying to keep the mood light despite the suffocating pall that had settled over the room.

Leon did his best to join in.

“What’s that building across from the barn?”

“That’s lodging for the women we have staying here,” Haley informed him.

“Women?”

“Yes. Aside from raising horses, I wanted to bring something positive back to this old ranch. I offer a safe place for women who are down on their luck. Give them a chance to get back on their feet and start afresh. I was fortunate where I landed, but not all have it so lucky.”

“Yes,” Bess said. “We owe you and Jack. You gave us a sense of family.”

Leon smirked. “Family? Wes is dead and Luke’s in prison. What good did I do you?”

The ladies exchanged glances.

“You gave us a place to call home,” Bess told him. “Even after Wesley died, you let me know I was welcome to stay. You’re a good man.”

Leon smiled. “I know one woman who doesn’t agree with you.”

Silence followed this statement as glances made the rounds again.

Mary reached over and patted his hand. “Luke’s getting out soon. Haley approached the warden and told him she would give Luke a job and a place to live, if the law saw fit to parole him early. They agreed.”

Leon smiled at her. “That’s good. He’s coming here, I take it?”

Mary’s eyes sparkled. “Yes. We’ll have a fresh start now, thanks to Haley. We’re even going to get married legitimate. He’s promised me his outlaw days are over.”

“Good for him. And congratulations, Mary. You deserve to be happy.”

Leon turned his attention to the older lady of the group. “How about you, Bess? Is there a new man in your future?”

Bess laughed. “Oh, good gracious, no. I had a good run with Wes, but I’m not interested in romance now. I’ve found a real nice place here, helping Haley with the women who stay with us. We even have children running around.”

“Children?”

“Of course.” Haley smiled, her eyes sparkling. “Any woman who needs a soft place to land shouldn’t have to worry about her child being taken from her. The main reason many women won’t leave an abusive husband is the fear that she will lose her children. Anyone coming onto this ranch with the intention of forcing a woman to leave, or to take a child away, will find themselves up against a barrage of rifles, and men who know how to use them.”

Leon chuckled despite his own heartache. “It sounds like just the thing. You’ll do good at this, Haley. You’ve come a long way.”

“Thanks to you and Jack. Not to mention a no-good father who finally had the good grace to die.”

“Oh, Haley,” Bess admonished her. “I know that man didn’t do you any favors while he was alive, but you really shouldn’t speak of him that way.”

Haley snorted. “I really shouldn’t speak of him at all. It only gets my ire up. So, enough said on that.

Three days later, Leon stood leaning against the post on the front porch. He wore everything warm that fit him, as well as a heavy wool blanket snugly wrapped around his shoulders. The winter storm had come and

gone, leaving two feet of fresh snow behind it, and the men were busy clearing the yard and the road leading to the property.

The sun shone now, and even though there was no warmth to it, the rays felt good on his face and he allowed them to soak into his aching muscles. He marveled at the fact that he had made it here alive. He hadn't planned on coming here, and he couldn't remember actually arriving. One moment he was in excruciating pain, and the next, Haley, like an angel from heaven, gazed upon him and whispered soft assurances.

The smile on his face was genuine as he looked out upon the small herd of mares in their paddock, kicking up their heels and frolicking in the white powder. Fanny was in amongst them. She had settled nicely into her new home and showed not a sign of lameness.

I wonder if she still has that cough.

“Good afternoon.”

Leon jumped then cursed himself. Jack and Mukua were right: he was no good at watching his own back. And this wasn't even his back, the gentleman in question climbed the steps and came up beside him, unnoticed.

Leon turned on a smile. “Hello. Nice morning.”

“Hmm. I'm the foreman here.” He held out his hand. “Name's Brook Newton.”

Leon unraveled his hand from the folds of the blanket. “Josh Harden.”

“Uh huh. You were in pretty rough shape when we found you here last week. You feeling better now?”

“Getting there.”

“Hum hmm. Moving on soon?”

Leon's smile dropped a notch of warmth. “As soon as the way is clear.”

“Good.” Newton tipped his hat. “Mr. Harden.”

Leon watched the foreman as he walked away.

Well, at least he was nice about telling me to get gone. He sighed and went back to watching the horses. *I'm not in any hurry.*

Leon sat on the front porch when Haley joined him, bringing with her a tray laden with tea and biscuits.

She set the tray on the wicker table and brought another chair over. She poured the tea and sat to enjoy their newly acquired routine of an afternoon refreshment.

“We could sit inside. Even with the sun shining, it's chilly out here.”

Leon smiled though exhaustion still showed in his eyes. “I like it out here. The air is fresh. Somehow, it's cleansing.”

Haley accepted this. “Well, as long as you’re warm enough. I let Jack know you’re here. He was relieved.”

“Oh. Yeah, thank you. Did he say anything?”

“Only that he and Mukua had been worried. He hinted about what happened, but,” she shrugged, “it was a telegram. Not much he could say.”

“Yeah.”

Leon sipped his tea while he braced himself.

“Gabriella left me. She took Hannah and returned to San Francisco. She told me not to follow her.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Napoleon. And what of Ella? I assume she took the baby as well.”

Leon dropped his eyes and shook his head. “No.”

“Oh.”

“It was Carlyle. He set a trap, using my family as collateral.”

“Oh, that Carlyle. He just won’t give up, will he?”

“No, he won’t.”

“And that’s why Gabriella left?”

Leon again shook his head. “No. One of the junior detectives got gun-happy. He took a shot at me.” Leon stopped, his voice breaking. He sighed deeply and continued. He needed to get this out. “I was holding Ella. The bullet only grazed me, but . . .” His jaw locked up and he couldn’t continue.

Haley squeezed his arm. “Oh no. Not Ella.”

Leon nodded, then looked up to meet her gaze. “I watched my baby girl die in my arms.”

He lost it then, the tears rolling down his cheeks unabated.

“Oh, Napoleon. I am so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Leon nodded and, taking another deep breath, gulped down the tears as he wiped a sleeve across his eyes.

“That’s when Gabriella left. I don’t blame her for that, but she wouldn’t even let me say goodbye to Hannah. She just left and told me not to follow her. I was locked up. I couldn’t stop her. I pleaded with her to let me say goodbye to my daughter, but she turned her back on me. By the time I escaped, I knew she was gone. I procured a horse and just started riding. I had no real plan to come here. I had no plan at all. I just rode.”

“I’m glad you did come here. You can stay as long as you want.”

“I’m not sure your friends, Newton and Madison will be pleased about that. I get the feeling they’d rather I moved on.”

“Oh, puff. This is my place, and it’s meant to be a haven for those in trouble. You can stay until you feel you can face the world again.”

Leon sniffed. “Thank you, Haley.”

Leon stayed at the Second Chance Ranch for close to a month. Most of his days he spent reading or watching Fanny. All he wanted was to be left alone and, for the most part, his wish was granted. He missed his girls, all three of them, and the pain of that loss only got worse as the days dragged by. He wondered if he would ever feel whole again, and Fanny was the only silent witness to the many tears he cried.

With early spring now upon them, afternoon tea on the porch was more pleasant, as long as it wasn't raining. Leon still kept himself warmly bundled up, but he preferred being outdoors, watching the horses frolic. On one particularly warm day, he smiled with pleasure at the antics the horses got up to. Both he and Haley laughed at the fun they made for themselves, despite the mud and layers of ice covering the puddles.

Then, as was often the case after exertion, Fanny began to cough. It was a dry, heaving cough and it stopped her from her play, forcing her to stand quietly as the others continued to frolic.

"It's my fault," Leon mumbled as he watched the chestnut mare. "She was the best horse I ever had, and I broke her."

"She's slowly getting better." Haley sipped her tea as she sent a loving gaze to the paddock. "Lots of good grass and casual exercise is doing the trick. Mukua showed me some herbs to put in her grain to help that cough. She really is improving, Napoleon. You didn't break her."

"Maybe, maybe not. I hope she'll handle being a brood mare. With that cough, she might not be able to carry a foal."

Haley squeezed his arm. "You worry too much. I won't breed her until I know she can handle the strain of a pregnancy. You trust me, don't you?"

Leon cocked a brow in her direction. "Of course, I trust you. I would never have given her to you, if I didn't."

"Then why are we talking about it?"

Leon sighed, then smiled. "You're right. I apologize. I know she's safe in your hands."

"Good."

Brook Newton left the bunkhouse and walked across the yard to the barn. He stopped when he noticed the couple on the porch, and though they could not see his expression, his opinion of the situation was evident. Knowing he had little say over his boss's behavior, he shook his head and continued his trek, muttering unmentionables as he went.

"Poor Mr. Newton," Haley sighed. "He really doesn't approve of you."

"Hmm. And what of Mr. Madison? Jack figured you two would be getting hitched and, I must admit, he does hover."

“Oh yes, I know. He is a good man.”

“Well then?”

Haley bought some time by replenishing her teacup. “I don’t know.” She sent a quick glance to her companion. “I suppose I’m still hoping for something different.”

“Why? You’ve got your ranch, and he’s got his. Combining sounds like a good business opportunity to me.”

“And maybe I don’t want my marriage to be a business opportunity. The last thing I need is another man telling me what to do.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’ll ever let a man tell you what to do, unless it’s something you want to do anyway.”

Haley laughed. “I expect you’re right.”

“I’m thinking I’ll head home tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Haley frowned, surprised by this sudden announcement. “I thought you might stay a while longer.”

“I should get back. The trains are running on schedule again, and the pass up to the Elk should be open. I’ve been sitting around here at my leisure for long enough.”

Haley’s hand took hold of Leon’s wrist. “You’re not at your leisure. You suffered a terrible loss. You needed this time and more. Please stay a little longer.”

Leon looked at her, noticing how the evening light cast a glow upon her blonde hair. Her blue eyes smiled at him and he felt a sudden urging. This wasn’t the first time he had responded to Haley’s touch in this manner. He told himself it was because she was a friend, and he was in need of a female touch. But his attraction to her had increased as the days dragged by, and this worried him.

He frowned, breaking the contact.

“No, Haley. I shouldn’t stay any longer.”

Haley pouted. “But why not? No one here knows who you are. Well, other than Bess and Mary. Then, I suppose, Luke, when he gets here. But they won’t say anything. Luke is giving up his outlaw ways. No reason why you couldn’t do the same. We could make a life for ourselves here.”

Leon sighed. He was tired of this argument; he’d heard it too many times before. “Haley, you’re not thinking clearly. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Haley’s pout turned into a scowl. “What do you mean? I know exactly what I’m saying.”

“No, you don’t. Carlyle will not give up. Sooner or later, he will track me here. Or someone will come into town who knows me, and then I’d have to run. Again. It wouldn’t work, Haley. I don’t want to see you lose

everything you've worked so hard for." His voice softened to a whisper. "I wouldn't want to see you get hurt."

"Maybe that's a risk I'm willing to take."

"I'm not."

Haley folded her arms, her expression sullen. "Why is it that any man I care about, doesn't care about me?"

"That's not fair. Jack and I both care about you. But I can't be with you for the same reasons Jack couldn't."

"Yes, I know. You both prefer your outlawin' lifestyle over me."

"Jack would have married you, if you had agreed to stay at the Elk."

Haley rolled her eyes. "If he loved me, he would have left."

"And if you loved him, you would have stayed."

"Oh, you're impossible. I'm going to end up an old maid."

"I'm impossible?" Leon snorted, then waved his arm in the direction of the Lazy C Ranch. "You have a decent man who wants to make you his wife, and you think setting your sights on a pair of outlaws is the wisest choice."

"I know what I want."

Leon growled. "Enough. I'm going to retire. I have an early start in the morning."

He stood and walked into the house, heading for his room.

Haley came in after him and, grabbing his arm, she pulled him around to face her.

"What are you so afraid of Napoleon?"

Leon's eyes flashed. "What am I afraid of? Haven't you been paying attention? I just lost my baby daughter! Her tiny body torn apart and bleeding out in my arms. How can you ask me what I am afraid of?" He grabbed her by the arms and shook her. "Carlyle will not stop! Don't you understand that? Next time it might be you I watch bleed to death. I won't take that chance, don't you understand?"

Haley began to cry during this chewing out. She clutched his arms, trying to stop him from shaking her.

"Napoleon, stop. Please!"

He did stop then, staring down into her eyes awash with tears. Suddenly he did love her, and he felt shame for his mistreatment. He noticed her lips quivering as her breasts brushed against him with every sobbing intake of breath.

"Haley."

Then he was kissing her, hard and hungry. He grabbed the back of her head and held her there as his kisses attacked her mouth.

Haley's breath caught in her throat with the sudden flare of passion. Her arms encircled him, as their bodies blended in the dimming light of the chilly evening.

Their eyes met across the breakfast table.

When Haley heard his footsteps, she smiled, her eyes alight with pleasure. But as soon as she saw him, she knew she had lost.

Leon set his saddlebags and jacket onto the floor by the wall and came over to sit at the table. Pancakes and sausage were already set out, but Leon ignored them. He reached for the coffee carafe.

"You're still leaving?" Haley asked. "Even after last night?"

"Yes. Especially after last night."

"But nothing happened."

"Thank goodness."

Haley dropped her eyes. "Do you now regret that kiss?"

"Yes." He hesitated, then reached over to squeeze her hand. "No."

Haley met his gaze and smiled. "You're a good man, Napoleon. If you ever change your mind, you know where I am."

Leon shook his head. "You have a better man dancing attendance upon you. A man who can give you a family and a secure home. I can never promise you that. Forget about me, Haley. Forget about Jack. Stay away from us; you'll only get hurt."

"I promise to stay away, but I will never forget you and Jack." She smiled. "And Mukua."

"Well, I suppose that's a fair trade, because I doubt none of us are going to forget you, either."

Her smile widened. "Now that that's settled, have some breakfast. When I told Jiang you might be leaving today, she made you her specialty to help you on your way."

Leon laughed. "Can't wait to get rid of me, eh?"

"Something like that. I still wish you weren't leaving so soon."

Leon was about to protest, but Haley stopped him with a touch.

"I don't mean to stay permanently. You're still weak from your ordeal. I know you'll be taking the train most of the way, but it's still quite a ride up to the Elk from Rawlins. Not to mention, Carlyle may still be looking for you."

"I know. I'll probably stop in Medicine Bow rather than Rawlins. Taggard will have heard what happened. I don't think he'll hinder me." He stopped talking then and stared at the coffee cup in his hand. "He was right, again. He was so right. When am I going to start listening to him?"

“Napoleon, come sit. Have some breakfast.” She took his hand and encouraged him to sit at the table. “Get something in your stomach besides coffee, for goodness sake.”

He smiled and allowed himself to be persuaded. “Yeah, okay.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE HELL TO PAY

Elk Mountain March 1879

Leon rode into the yard at a casual gait. It was a relief to finally be home, but he dreaded having to face the sympathy of his family and friends. It appeared though, as he pulled up at the barn, that his family and friends felt the same way, as the yard was deserted.

He sighed as he dismounted, then started when he turned to come face to face with Mukua.

“Damn it, Ata-i. I wish you’d stop doing that.”

“Can I not greet *Napai’aishe* upon his return from a long journey?”

Leon sighed, regretting his reprimand. “I’m sorry. It is good to see you.”

“Hmm. I’ll tend to your horse then come up to the cabin.” He squinted against the afternoon sun, scanning the yard. “It seems the others are afraid of your moods. They see how you greet me before they come out to greet you.”

Leon glanced at the evacuated land. “Jack too?”

“No. He waits for you in the cabin. He did not want everyone looking on. Besides, it’s cold out here.”

Leon nodded. “Yeah. Thanks. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Mukua nodded and, taking the horse’s reins, he led the tired gelding into the barn.

Leon turned to face the cabin. He steadied himself, though his body wanted to run and hide somewhere. Taking a deep breath, he started walking.

Jack sat at the table, two shot glasses of whiskey in attendance.

Leon closed the door behind him and then stood, his eyes everywhere but on his nephew.

“C’mon, Leon. Sit down, have a drink.”

Leon nodded and came forward.

Jack watched him, seeing the darkness in his eyes.

“How ya doin’?”

Leon shrugged as he sat. “How am I supposed to be doing?”

“I dunno. I ain’t never, well, it was bad enough losin’ our folks and siblings the way we did. But, damn, Leon, I couldn’t believe when I heard. I’m surprised ya didn’t find Carlyle and throttle ‘im in his sleep.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t his fault. He almost killed the fella who did it. He promised me justice would be served.”

Jack snorted. “Justice. Since when has justice ever come our way? Mark my words: that kid is gonna get off. Maybe a slap on the wrist but that’s it. Nobody cares about an outlaw’s illegitimate get. It don’t matter how cute she was or how much she was—” Jack’s voice caught, and he coughed to hide it. “Well, it just don’t matter.”

Hearing Jack fighting his emotions, Leon lost his battle. His throat burned and he felt the tears as they blurred his eyes.

“Jack.” He sobbed. “My baby girl . . .”

Jack kind of lost it then, too. He felt tears roll down his cheeks as he reached out a hand to his best friend. “I know, Leon. Oh, god.”

Leon sniffed, trying to gain control. “It wasn’t Carlyle’s fault, you know. He’s trying to make it right.”

Jack shook his head and wiped a sleeve across his face. “He’s the one who planned that bushwhack. He deliberately used your family to trap you. I don’t care who pulled the trigger, this is his fault.”

Leon sighed and swallowed his tears. They fell back into silence.

Jack already had it in for Carlyle after the way the detective had treated Leon during his interrogation. Now this.

A quick knock announced Mukua’s arrival. He entered the cabin without waiting for an invitation and joined the younger men at the table. He frowned at the two sets of red-rimmed eyes.

“Hey, Preacher,” Jack greeted him as he made another attempt to wipe away the tears. “You want a whiskey?”

Mukua nodded. “Hmm. I think, today, yes.”

Jack coughed and sniffed, then got up and retrieved a third glass. He filled it and slid it across the table.

Mukua took a healthy gulp then placed a comforting hand on his nephew’s shoulder.

“It is not a good thing to hold onto the dead. You are tired tonight, but tomorrow night, we will build a fire and conduct the ceremony so you can release her to the spirit world. She is ready to reside with *Nat-soo-gant*, my father, your grandfather, and *Huittsuu-a*, my sister, your mother. She will be welcomed there. She will be loved.”

Leon gasped as the tears threatened again. “She was loved here, Ata-i.”

“Yes, I know. But we have no power over what the spirits decide. You will see her again, when your time comes. Now, we will celebrate her life, then let her go. It is our way.”

Leon's head sank. He was not ready for this, but he did not say so. He would do as Mukua said and participate in the ceremony, but in his heart, he could not let Ella go. Not yet.

Two weeks later, Jack and Lobo returned from scouting out a bank for their next hit. Lobo headed straight for the bunkhouse, but Jack headed for the cabin, a newspaper in his hands.

Banging through the door, he slapped the open paper down on top of the plans Leon was working on.

"Hey," Leon snapped at him. "I was in the middle of that."

"Tough," Jack grouched then repeatedly jabbed his finger at an article in the paper. "Look at this. What did I tell ya?"

Leon chewed his lip and looked at the article Jack pointed at.

WELLS FARGO DETECTIVE CLEARED OF CHARGES

Detective Harold Dicks has been found not guilty in the death of a child during an arrest.

Outlaw Napoleon Nash had been walking with his family when the detectives attempted an arrest upon his person. The outlaw resisted and shots were fired.

Sadly, the youngest illegitimate child of Nash and his lover, Gabriella Tanguay was shot and killed during the altercation.

Napoleon Nash was arrested at this time, but regrettably escaped custody and is again at large.

Mrs. Tanguay was held for questioning but later released. She and her older illegitimate daughter, Hannah, returned home to San Francisco.

The death of their youngest daughter, Ella has been proven to be accidental.

Leon picked up the paper and stared at the article as though he could make the words change their meaning.

"How could you have expected anything different?" Jack yelled. "The law always protects its own. They put the blame on you, didn't they? Resisting arrest. You tell me, with your family around you, did you resist arrest?"

Leon silently shook his head.

“No! I didn’t think so. You wouldn’t a put ‘em at risk like that. They’re telling lies ta cover their own guilt. How can you say that Carlyle ain’t ta blame? I bet he was behind this all along.”

Leon’s body tensed. An anger rose in him from the depth of his heart. Taking the paper in both hands, he ripped it to shreds as he yelled out his rage. Then scrunching it into a ball, he threw the offending newsprint against the wall.

Jack stepped back. Knowing that now Leon’s thin layer of forgiveness had been torn apart, there was going to be hell to pay.

Leon bared his teeth, as he turned black eyes to his nephew.

“I’m going to make Wells Fargo bleed. We are going to hit every stagecoach, every payroll, every safe that comes through this county. Carlyle is gonna wish he’d never set his sights on me.”

Jack nodded, nostrils flared with anger. “Now you’re talkin’.”

Mukua watched from the bunkhouse door as his Leon trudged across the yard toward the barn. He walked with his head down and shoulders slumped as though it was the chill of winter he struggled against. His hands dug into the pockets of his ragged coat, and the collar was turned up to ward off any unwanted solicitations.

“Gee.” Malachi stepped up beside the Preacher, glad of an excuse for some fresh air after a winter of the closed-in bunkhouse. “He sure ain’t been too sociable since he got back.”

“No,” Mukua agreed. “He still walks in shadow.”

“What do ya mean? There ain’t no sun ta day.”

“Hey, c’mon fellas,” Rex grumbled from beside the wood stove. “Close the dang door, will ya? Just cause it’s spring don’t mean we gotta help melt the snow.”

Malachi grinned and glanced back at the younger man. “Yeah, okay. How’s the coffee doin’?”

Malachi returned to the rank innards of the bunkhouse, but Mukua took his coat from the peg, and, grabbing his hat, gave the frazzled chicken feather a caress before donning it. He closed the door behind him and walked through the slippery mud to the barn.

Stepping inside, the enclosure smelled like hay and horses, which was a preferable aroma to the one in the bunkhouse. It wasn’t quite as chilly in here either, with the horses preferring to stay indoors rather than stand, fetlock deep, in the cold mud of the paddock.

Mukua walked down the aisle between the stalls and the open storage space. He didn’t need to see his nephew to know where he had gone. As

he got closer to Chester's stall, he could hear faint humming as Leon rubbed his horse's neck and murmured endearments.

Chester raised his head and acknowledged the bringer of food.

"You still walk in darkness, *Napai' aische*. Why do you not let her go?"

Leon jumped, then sighed.

"It's only been six months. What do you expect?"

"We performed the ceremony to let her spirit run free. But she cannot truly go until you allow it."

"I'm not ready yet, Ata-i."

"Hmm. I understand. You feel responsible."

Leon focused on straightening Chester's mane. "I was her father. I was supposed to protect her. Instead, I . . . I got her killed."

"You did not pull the trigger."

"But I still caused it." Leon turned and stared into the dark, wise eyes that watched him. "I should have taken the offer of a pardon. Gabriella wanted me to, but me and my stubbornness, I couldn't see it. I pressured her to come live here, to bring the children so I could see them more. It was stupid. It was arrogant. Even you said it was a bad idea. I should have listened. You have every right to call me a fool."

Mukua turned his back and disappeared into his small room next to the feed area.

Leon sighed again. He gave Chester a final pat then followed.

He entered the cozy room just as Mukua lit the tinder inside the small pot-bellied stove.

A soft crackling sound accompanied a flicker of flame before Mukua shut the stove door and straightened. He nodded his head to the small table, indicating that Leon take a seat, then took down a bottle of whiskey from an upper shelf.

"No man can know what is in the heart of another. I only gave my opinion; it was up to you to take it or not."

"Exactly. It was my fault."

Mukua poured the whiskeys and sat down in the second chair. He sighed. "I did not mean it that way. Come, we'll drink." He opened a drawer and withdrew a long pipe and a pouch of crushed dried leaves. "Smoke with me. It will warm you and help you relax."

Leon hesitated. Sometimes Mukua's pipe weed tasted awfully bitter.

Mukua smiled. "This is good weed. I bought it in Bear Creek last fall."

"Oh." Leon smiled and relaxed. "Okay."

He sat and sipped the whiskey while Mukua stuffed the pipe.

Then the old Indian reached over, nudged open the stove door and snatching out a brand, lit the pipe before closing the door again and

leaning back in his chair. He puffed on it to make sure it was ready, then handed the pipe to his nephew.

Leon accepted it and drew in a short sample. He smiled. The weed had a sweet taste to it, which was usually not the case with Mukua's concoctions.

He drew in another, longer draft. "Yeah, it's good."

"Hmm." Mukua accepted the pipe back and helped himself. "You were not stupid or arrogant for wanting your family near you. It is only when looking back on it that you feel this way. Your woman did not have to come here, but she did, and that was her choice. It is not wrong to want a family."

Leon hung his head as he sipped the whiskey. He held the glass up and gazed upon the amber liquid.

"I've been drinking too much lately."

"No, you do not drink too much. More than you usually do, but still not too much."

Leon took the offered pipe and indulged in another long inhalation. He coughed, then sighed as his body lightened. Mukua was right about the weed, too; he did feel more relaxed.

"You will hold your child with you, I can see that now. But do not hold her too tightly. If we cling to those who have passed, then we cannot move forward. Let her be your wings, not your hobbles."

Leon nodded but remained silent.

Mukua took the pipe back. "The weather will be good again soon. Then we can get back to work. You will feel better then. Ever since you were a boy, you could not remain idle. You always had to be doing something. Once you are busy again, you will return to yourself."

Leon received the pipe and drew in another lungful. He nodded at Mukua's words as he finished his whiskey.

The bottle was offered, and another round poured.

And there they sat, talking, drinking and smoking, until darkness made its way into Elk Mountain.

Jack appeared in their midst, accompanied by hopeful whinnies from the local residents.

"I figured I'd find you two in here. What are ya doin'?"

Leon grinned at him; his eyes woozy. "Just sharing a pipe and talking. Come join us."

"Oh. Yeah. I shoulda come out sooner."

"Your loss. I hope the rest of the gang don't show up. There isn't enough to go around."

Mukua stood. "You sit and have a drink. It's time I fed the horses."

"Oh." Leon was disappointed. "You'll be back, won't you?"

“Yes. By then the pipe will need replenishing. If you like, I will tell you stories from our people. Perhaps you will get comfort from them.”

Jack sat and took a turn with the pipe. He liked it when Mukua included him in the stories and family traditions, even though Jack was not of his blood. The bond between Leon and Mukua was special, even though Leon often acted as though he resented the old Indian’s interference. But Jack knew that that’s all it was: an act. Jack accepted this, but he still appreciated it when he was invited to join in on a family tradition.

And thus, the evening passed, until, enabled by the imbibing of weed and alcohol, eyes dropped and mouths yawned. The three men retired to their respective beds.

Leon had already been up for an hour and had the coffee on when Jack dragged himself from his room.

He yawned and scratched his disheveled head, then stood and gazed at his partner through bleary eyes.

“How do ya do it?”

Leon looked up from his paperwork. “What?”

“We drink and smoke half the night away, and you’re as chipper as a barn swallow on a summer mornin’.”

“Oh.” Leon shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe it’s a family trait.” He frowned as he noted Jack’s demeanor. “You don’t look so good.”

“My head’s poundin’. It weren’t the whiskey so it musta been your uncle’s pipe weed. It tasted good enough, but what the hell is in it?”

Again, Leon shrugged. “I dunno. There’s coffee on the stove. Maybe that will help your headache.”

Jack turned weary eyes to the warm stove. “Yeah.” He poured himself a cup, then sat at the table where Leon worked on his plans. “What are ya doin’?”

“Getting the final details of our next job worked out. We don’t usually hit stagecoaches, especially passenger ones, so Wells Fargo won’t be expecting it. The strong box they’re carrying will be the biggest hit so far.”

“They may not be expectin’ it, but you can bet they’ll still be ready. They always got an agent ridin’ shotgun when there’s a strongbox on board.”

“True,” he smiled at Jack. “But I have that figured out.”

Jack frowned; he didn’t like it when Leon smiled at him that way. “Yeah? How?”

Leon’s smile grew.

May 1879

“All right, folks. The northbound stage is ready for boarding.”

“It’s about time,” Mrs. Strictlen declared as she accepted her husband’s arm to assist in rising from the bench. “If my nether regions are going to be numb from sitting on hard wood, I might as well be going somewhere.”

Jack rolled his eyes and glanced at Rex.

He simply smirked. There always had to be one complainer in the group.

Mrs. Simco arched an eyebrow. “That is why I always bring a pillow with me when I travel. Perhaps you should consider doing the same.”

“How vulgar,” Mrs. Strictlen sniffed. “With the prices we pay for our tickets, the stage company should supply pillows. I’m not going to give in to their stingy ways by bringing my own.”

“I do believe they offer blankets, my dear,” Mr. Strictlen grumbled, already tired of his wife’s complaining. “You could fold one of those to sit on.”

“If it’s cold enough for them to offer blankets, then I expect I will want to use it for its intended purpose.”

“Yes, my dear.”

While the others were occupied with the debate, Rex slipped out ahead of the group and was the first to get settled inside the Wells Fargo coach. He took the backward facing window seat before anyone could challenge him and there he stayed.

Both Mr. Strictlen and Mr. Simco wisely stayed out of further discussion and escorted their wives to the waiting coach.

“Oh.” Mrs. Strictlen’s brow aimed for the top of her forehead. “How rude. The ladies should be offered the first choice of seating. I happen to require a window seat.”

Rex smiled and tipped his hat. “Yes, ma’am. As it happens, so do I. But since there are four windows and only two ladies, it seems we can all be accommodated.”

Mrs. Strictlen expanded as she prepared for a response, but her husband popped the balloon.

“Never mind, Matilda. The gentleman is right; there’s plenty of room for everyone. I will sit next to him and you can have this window seat. You prefer riding backward anyway.”

“I know that, but it’s the thought that—”

“Hurry it along, please,” the driver stated. “We have a schedule to keep and the roads are still muddy.”

This comment wasn't aimed at anyone in particular, but Mrs. Strictlen pursed her lips and stood in a huff as she waited for her husband to get into the coach.

The driver offered his hand to assist her, but she deliberately ignored him and instead, accepted her husband's hand from inside to help her ascend.

As Mr. Simco assisted his wife, Jack hung back and discreetly assessed the two Wells Fargo employees. Both wore high boots and long rain slickers, bulked up with sweaters to ward off the chilly weather, which would be especially windy sitting up there in the drivers' seat. Yet, the layers of clothing did not conceal the presence of firearms.

The driver wore a holster under his coat, but Jack figured he had a rifle secured within reach up on top. His partner wore a double holster rigging and, true to his title, carried a shotgun. There was a sizable payroll secured in a lockbox under the driver's seat, and they were making sure no thieving outlaw got their hands on it.

The Simcos got settled and Jack pulled himself up and sat in the remaining window seat, facing forward. He ignored Rex and Rex ignored him. On this trip, at least for now, they didn't know each other.

The road was indeed thick with mud, but the six-horse team had no trouble keeping the coach up to speed. Indeed, they knew the route so well that the ladies were inclined to grab at handles or windowsills as the coach lurched and slid around slippery corners.

Gloved hands pulled coats snugly around throats to keep out the wind as it swirled around inside the vehicle, causing everyone to shiver. Then the rain started up again and sheets of it blew in on the wind, drenching those sitting by the open windows.

“Enough of this,” Mrs. Strictlen declared, and she raised her hands to the ties on the heavy curtains and fiddled with the knot. “It's time to bring these down, such as they are, and secure them against the weather. There's no reason for us to get wet.” She glared at Jack who had the misfortune of sitting directly across and facing her. “Close the curtain, young man.”

Jack smiled and tipped his hat. “Sorry, ma'am. Ah, ya see, I tend ta get a bit queasy inside a moving vehicle. But as long as I can see outside and keep the air comin' in, I'll be fine.”

“Oh, good heavens. Well, at least the wind and rain are blowing in your direction and not mine.” She looked to her right and glared at Rex.

“Young man, close your window.”

Rex didn't even bother to smile but sent her a sharp glance. “No thank you, ma'am. I'm fine. Besides, I want to keep an eye out for outlaws coming up behind us. The Elk Mountain Gang is real active in this area.”

“Oh pooh. I see you two gentlemen are well armed, as are the two men up top. I hardly think the Elk Mountain Gang is going to attack us.”

Jack and Rex risked a quick smile exchanged.

“I don't know about that, ma'am,” Jack said. “That gang is known for doin' the unexpected.”

“Do you really think they might attack us?” Mrs. Simco asked as she tightened the grip on her coat collar. “Wells Fargo is supposed to be the safest coach line in the country.”

Jack smiled at her as the coach bounced over a rock and then slid around another turn in the road. “I wouldn't worry about it, ma'am. They don't steal from the passengers. They'd only be after what's up top.”

“Yes, but still,” Mrs. Simco looked out her still open window at the heavy rain, “I don't care for the idea of having to get out in this.”

“And I'm sure the outlaws feel the same way,” Mr. Simco patted his wife's hand. “They're likely staying nice and dry inside their hideout on a day like this.”

“I don't know about that,” Mr. Strictlen said. “I've heard of that gang hitting a train during a snow blizzard. If they had plans of hitting this coach, I doubt rain would stop them. Besides, Napoleon Nash has been hitting Wells Fargo hard after what happened this past winter.”

“Well, what did he expect?” Mrs. Strictlen puffed herself up. “Keeping a family in Gillette like that?” She snorted. “Did he really think no one would notice? And they say he's smart. Humph. He doesn't seem all that smart to me.”

“That was so sad,” Mrs. Simco sighed. “That poor mother, seeing her baby die like that. I can't imagine.”

“It serves her right.” Mrs. Strictlen warmed to her topic. “Two illegitimate children, and with an outlaw, no less. They couldn't even have the decency to get married. I say God did that child a service, taking her from this life while she was still innocent and not aware of the black mark upon her.”

Jack's lip curled. His blue eyes turned cold as his anger rose.

Seeing that his wife was on thinner ice than what covered the puddles outside, Mr. Strictlen harrumphed, thereby diverting disaster.

“I do believe those blankets are stored under the seats. Let's say we break them out, eh?”

Jack's icy orbs flicked to the husband, and in so doing, he caught the look of warning Rex sent to him. He forced himself to calm down. The job

at hand was more important than this blithering old vulture and her cruel comments.

“Yeah,” he said, “that’s a good idea.”

The men leaned down and pulled blankets out from the cubby holes under the seats and handed them around.

The ladies gladly accepted them.

Mrs. Simco shuffled in her seat so she could wrap one blanket around her shoulders and have another covering her lap and legs.

“Oh yes, this is so much better. We should have done this ages ago.”

“It does help to block the wind, since some of us won’t cover their windows.” Mrs. Strictlen sent pointed looks to the other passengers. “At least we can ride now in some comfort.”

The husbands also wrapped themselves in blankets but took note that the two gentlemen seated by the open windows did not join them.

“Are you not chilled, sir?” Mr. Strictlen asked Rex. “The wind does have quite a bite to it.”

“I’m fine. I’m used to this kind of weather.”

“Oh yes? Well, suit yourself.” He glanced at Jack. “And you? There are enough blankets to go around.”

“Ah, no thank you, Mr. Strictlen. Queasiness, you know. If I get too warm, well, ya might all end up preferring the outdoors.”

By early afternoon, the wind and rain had eased, but the chilly temperatures still made the blankets a welcome accessory.

Jack glanced out the window, looking ahead. Even through his heavy coat, he was cold, and he hoped the coach would make it to the desired location soon. The gloves did little to keep his hands warm, and he needed his fingers flexible when the time came to use them.

He glanced at Rex and noticed him blowing on his fingers and tucking them into his armpits to keep the chill away.

Another glance out the window and Jack recognized the landmarks. He sent another glance to Rex and tweaked an eyebrow.

Rex returned a discreet nod and knew it was time.

When things started to happen, they happened fast.

A curse from the driver’s seat was followed by the coach lurching to one side as the brakes were applied.

“Whoa! God dammit. Settle now!”

The coach rocked as the team slid to a halt. The coach, its wheels locked but still sliding in the mud, pushed into the center shaft, and the wheeler horses scrambled to get out of the way. The lead team had no

choice but to stop as fallen trees blocked the road, and they turned to one side to avoid being run into by the middle team banging into their hind ends.

The coach jackknifed and tipped to the right, causing the ladies inside to scream in dismay, and everyone grabbed for a handhold on anything that would steady them.

But the coach righted itself, and banging down onto its left wheels, it rocked a few times on its suspension, then settled.

Jack and Rex moved as one. As soon as the coach halted, each man was on his feet and scrambling out the doors.

Mr. Strictlen grabbed Jack's sleeve. "Where are you going? It must be outlaws. You're much safer staying in here."

"Just gonna lend a hand," Jack said, as he snatched his arm away. "You folks stay in here, outta the way."

"But—"

Jack disappeared out the door and climbed up toward the driver's seat.

On the other side of the coach, all that was left of Rex was the empty seat and the opened door, banging in the breeze.

"What's going on?" Mr. Simco clutched his derringer. "If we're being robbed, I think we should help protect the coach."

"Oh my god!" Mrs. Strictlen clutched her blanket around herself. "Are we being robbed? But I have all my rings, and this broach."

At the same time, Mrs. Simco grabbed her husband's arm. "No! Don't go out there. It's not up to us to protect the payroll. That's what the driver and guard are for. Just stay here."

"But those other two fellas went out to help."

"I don't care! You stay put."

Jack climbed up the side of the coach and came level with the guard just as that man was aiming his shotgun, trying to find a target.

Jack pressed his peacemaker muzzle into the man's temple. "I think you best drop that. Now!"

The guard's eyes snapped to Jack and found himself staring down the muzzle of the Colt .45. He raised his hands and tossed the shotgun.

"Good. Now, them other two shooters under your coat."

The guard complied.

At the same time, Rex came up beside the driver and treated him much the same way.

"Okay," Rex said. "Secure your team and get down."

The driver locked the brakes, wrapped the lines around the handle and, making sure he kept his hands in sight, climbed down off the coach.

Rex jumped down beside him. He took the man by the arm and pushed him toward the back of the coach so they could walk around to the other side. He heard Jack whistle and knew this was the signal to the gang that the coach was secured.

By the time Rex joined Jack and the guard, men on horseback had appeared out of the foggy woods and were dismounting.

“You kinda cut that short,” Jack said. “Ya couldn’t a given the team a bit more time ta stop? We almost went over.”

Leon glanced at the disheveled team, as they bunched up between the coach and the felled tree. “This is the only place along here narrow enough, and you know it. Stop complaining. At least you two got to sit inside a nice dry coach. We’ve been freezing our butts off out here.”

“Yeah,” Gus complained. “I’m soaked through. This payday better be worth it.”

The guard stood shivering with his hands raised, but he still managed to glare at the apparent leader. “You must be Nash. You’re pushin’ your luck. Wells Fargo is fed up with you and your band of misfits. You keep on hitting their payrolls, and you’re gonna be dead by the end of summer. They’ve put their best man on it. You don’t stand a chance.”

“Is that so?” Leon stepped up to the guard, waving his Remington under the man’s nose. “I’ve already had two run-ins with their best man, and he hasn’t held onto me yet. In fact,” and Leon grabbed the front of the guard’s wet slicker, “this is payback due, and he knows it.”

Mukua stepped out of the mist and put a hand on his nephew. “You going to waste time with this? I could have stayed home by the fire and smoked my pipe instead of being out here in the mud and rain.”

Leon smiled at Mukua. “You’re right.” He looked at the guard again. “You tell Carlyle, this is just the beginning.”

Everyone’s attention was diverted by the complaining passengers as they were herded out of the dry coach by Lobo.

“How dare you,” Mrs. Strictlen huffed. “This mud is going to ruin my leather boots. Oh, and look at the hem of my dress: it’s filthy. Mr. Hume is going to hear about this, I tell you!”

“Quiet, my dear. Just let the gentlemen get what they’re after, so we can all leave.”

“That’s right!” Gus shouted down from the driver’s seat. “Let’s just get what we came for and get outta this damn weather. Watch out!” He wrestled the strongbox onto the edge of the footrest, then pushed it over.

The box landed with a squelch and a splash of muddy water that soaked Mrs. Strictlen.

“Oh! You nasty man. You did that on purpose.”

The only response from Gus was a crooked smile. Malachi laughed.

The driver smirked. “What are ya gonna do now, Nash? That strongbox is too big for you ta carry on a horse, and the lock is the best Navarre has put out. Ya didn’t really think this through, did ya?”

Leon hardly gave the man a glance. Instead, he motioned to Murdoch. “Help me.”

Murdoch came forward and between the two of them, they hoisted the iron box onto the floor of the stagecoach.

Leon pushed it around until the front faced him, and he had a clear view of the lock.

With a smirk, he pulled off his gloves, took the lockpicking set out of an inner pocket and set to work. Within two minutes of gentle probing, the lock clicked open.

“Dammit!” the driver stamped his foot. “They told us that was the best lock they make. What a bunch a cheap, no good . . .”

Leon grinned, his dimples dancing through the cold mist. “As long as it’s not a timer lock, I can open anything they throw at me with just these simple little tools. Now, the timer locks, they take a little more finessing, but, as I’m sure you know, I have those figured out, too.”

The guard glared at Nash. “They’re gonna get you, Nash. You can’t keep on like this. Mr. Hume and Mr. Navarre ain’t gonna let ya. Besides that, I got you now. I know what you look like, and I’m not gonna forget. No sir, not you or your gunslinger boyfriend.”

Jack smirked at this comment, but Leon wasn’t quite so forgiving.

Spinning away from the safe box, the young gang leader grabbed the guard and pushed him up against the coach.

“That was rude, Mister . . .?” Leon pushed into the man, their eyes boring into each other.

The guard was tempted to spit in Leon’s face, but he knew better than to push his luck that far. He sent the stream of saliva out to the side, then bared his teeth at his accoster. “Mr. Jiles. And you best remember that name, sonny, cause I sure as hell ain’t gonna be forgettin’ you.”

“Well, Mr. Jiles, you need to watch your mouth when you’re talking about something you know nothing about.”

“Or what?” Jiles smirked as Leon tensed to deliver a punch, then backed off. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. You’re too soft, Nash. I’m gonna track you down and squash you like a—”

Leon’s right arm pulled back and he landed a jackhammer punch to Jiles’s jaw.

The back of the guard’s head hit the coach, and he slid down and squelched into the mud.

Gasps of concern came from the ladies present, but Leon ignored them. Once his adversary was down, he returned his attention to the safe box.

Murdoch helped Leon maneuver the box out onto the ground again, and Leon cracked open the lid.

He chuckled. "Oh, that's pretty."

"Whooooee, look 'it all that money!" Malachi clapped his hands. "That was worth gettin' wet fer."

"Sure was." Leon took out a pouch and opened the draw strings. He smiled as he tightened it closed again. He spied Gus stepping down off the coach and tossed the pouch to him. "Here. You two take off."

"Sure thing." Gus took the bag and nearly dropped it, surprised by its weight. "Yeah, and about time, too." He motioned to Malachi. "C'mon. Time ta go home."

"Yeah."

"Hey!"

Malachi turned back just as Leon tossed another pouch to him.

The little outlaw grabbed it, but being taken by surprise, the weight of the pouch pushed him off balance, and he stumbled backward to end up on his rump in the mud.

Gus grabbed him by the collar. "Quit foolin' around."

"Wull, I didn't mean to. I just—"

"C'mon."

The two outlaws climbed over the fallen tree and disappeared to where Hank held the horses. Within minutes, the galloping hooves were heard as they splashed away on their route home.

Meanwhile, Leon took out more heavily laden pouches.

Charlie plunked down six sets of saddlebags, and Leon stuffed each set with one pouch and a bundle of bank notes, then stood up and handed one bag to Mukua.

"Here, you fellas take off. We'll see you later."

"Hmm." Mukua took one set of saddlebags, and he and Charlie followed Gus and Malachi.

"Okay folks!" Jack said. "We're done here. Good luck." He squatted beside the guard and slapped his face. "Hey, wake up."

Jiles opened his eyes and glared at him.

Jack smiled. "You better know one thing for sure. Nash ain't soft. We got our rules is all. Otherwise, you'd be dead now. So, this is your lucky day."

Jiles remained silent and simply glared at the gunman.

Jack patted him on the knee and stood up. "I figure with all four of you men pitchin' in, you'll get this road cleared in an hour or so. Have a nice day. Oh, and don't bother tryin' ta use them guns. Our buddy did a good job of stuffin' 'em full a mud. I'd hate ta see 'em backfire on ya. Ladies, gentlemen."

Jack tipped his hat and, ignoring the dagged looks and angry muttering, the three remaining outlaws disappeared into the rain-soaked woods.

Approaching the horses, Leon handed a set of bags each to Rex and Hank.

“There you go, fellas. Get going.”

“Yessir. See ya back at the Elk.”

“Yup. Oh, and Rex? Good job.”

Rex grinned. “All in a day’s work.”

Hank handed the reins of Midnight and Chester to their respective riders, then he and Rex trotted off in a different direction from the others.

Leon secured the final set of bags behind the cante. He grinned at Jack as they settled into the wet saddles.

“Good job, Jack. That could not have gone better.”

“Yup. We won’t get away with that move too many times though. Wells Fargo will be checkin’ their passenger lists after this. Yer gonna have ta come up with a new plan if we’re gonna keep hittin’ them. And I gotta say, you didn’t make no friends here today.”

“Me? Ha. You’re the one who put a gun to his head.”

“Yeah, but yer the one he’s gonna remember. And not in a nice way. We’re gonna have ta walk careful.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have no end of tricks up my sleeve.”

Jack laughed. “I have no doubt. C’mon, it’s startin’ ta rain again.”

The guard and driver stood in front of Carlyle’s desk, each fiddling with their hats as they faced the detective.

Carlyle was steaming.

“You let two outlaws get onto that coach? What the hell were you thinking?”

The guard set his jaw, determined not to let this weaselly man intimidate him.

“They might be known by name, well, at least Kiefer is, but I have no idea who that other fella was. And even Kiefer, I didn’t know ‘im on sight.”

“No?” Carlyle growled as his lip curled. “Isn’t it your job to know? You apparently recognized Nash easily enough.”

“I simply guessed it was Nash, given the circumstances. We all know the descriptions on them two could be anybody. Hell, Mr. Simco coulda passed for Kiefer. And Bruce here,” he jutted a thumb at the driver, “could be the spittin’ image a Nash.”

“A good detective goes on more than just the descriptions. You look for attitude, stance. Are the guns tired down? Are they payin’ more attention to detail than an average, run of the mill, passenger? Little things like that tell ya what a man is all about.”

“I ain’t a detective. Wells Fargo hired me ta ride shotgun, and that’s what I do.”

“And apparently you don’t even do that job well.” He turned his attention to the driver. “And you, oh never mind. The drivers aren’t usually hired for their observation skills.”

Bruce gulped. “No sir.”

“But I bet both of ya will recognize Nash and Kiefer next time, won’t ya? If there is a next time.”

The driver frowned, wondering if that was a threat.

Jiles’s tone lowered with his anger. “I’ll recognize ‘em.”

Bruce nodded. “Yeah.”

“And what about the others? Were they the usual ruffians?”

“Ah, they didn’t use no names, so I can’t say for sure.” Bruce thought about it. “I saw an old injun. I figured that was the renegade, Mukua.”

“The older fella with the handlebar mustache was likely Gus Shaffer.” Jiles said. “He was grouching enough ta be him. And the little fella was likely Malachi Cobb.”

“Uh huh.” Carlyle looked from one to the other, then sighed. “And the other man in the coach?” He glared at the driver. “You saw him up close and personal. What did he look like?”

“Oh, ah, well. He was young. His eyes were kinda well, I dunno, they coulda been blue, or maybe gray. I don’t think they were green. Or maybe they were brown. Ah, it’s his hair I noticed. It was real blonde. Ya don’t see that often, usually that color tends ta turn mousy. But his was real light. Long and stringy, kinda. He was always brushin’ it aside, especially since it was wet.”

“Okay.” Carlyle jotted down the information. “That’s something, at least. What about the others?”

“Nothin’ stood out about ‘em,” Bruce shrugged. “It was rainin’ and misty. Kinda hard ta see details.”

Carlyle sighed. “Fine. Did they say anything that might help figure their next move? Nash especially. Anything?”

“Well, yeah,” Jiles smirked. “Nash made a point of sayin’ that his recent run of robberies is payback due. Meanin’ Wells Fargo generally, and you, in particular. It seems he don’t much appreciate you fellas murderin’ his daughter.”

Bruce held his breath, certain that this insubordinate comment was going to bring hell’s wrath down upon them.

But the words had the opposite effect.

Carlyle sighed and sat back. “Yeah. Dammit.”

His black eyes took on a distant look, as his thoughts returned to that unfortunate event. If there was anything he regretted in his hunt for Nash, the death of the outlaw’s daughter was it. It was bad enough that an innocent life was snuffed out by the reckless behavior of his subordinate, but he knew, in that instant, that if Nash escaped him again, there would be retribution. This recent string of blatant attacks against Wells Fargo did not surprise him.

He was lost in his own thoughts only for an instant. Then the beady eyes turned to daggers again, and he leaned forward.

“Anything else? Any mention of a go between? Some place they might lay over before heading back to their lair? Any other companies they’re thinking to add to their list?”

“No, they didn’t say nothin’,” Jiles told him. “It does seem ta me though, that they hit the Navarre holdings on a regular basis.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Carlyle waved it away. “That’s not new. Ever since Nash took over Elk Mountain, he focuses on that company. They and Yale are the best out there. I think his ego won’t let him go for anything less.”

“Yeah, but he don’t go after Yale all that often. Only if they’ve got somethin’ worth his time. Like, well, like Wells Fargo. But Navarre, he’ll hit them regular. Almost like he’s got somethin’ against ‘em.”

“Hmm. Yale only does safes, but Navarre is strong in everything Nash is interested in. Railroads, banking, payrolls. It’s not surprising he’d focus on them, is it? He’s only hitting the stagecoaches now because they’re run by Wells Fargo. He never used to touch them. But he’s got an ax to grind with us now. But by God, we’ve got an ax to grind with him. Denver has not been forgotten.”

“Yeah, but it still seems ta me—”

“Maybe you should leave the detecting work to the detectives. Good day, gentlemen.”

“At least we got outta that with our jobs intact,” Bruce wiped his brow and plunked his hat back where it belonged.

Jiles was on a slow burn. “That bastard. He knows damn well those descriptions don’t give us enough to go on. But that doesn’t matter now, does it? We’ve both seen them. If they’re gonna be stupid enough to let us see their faces, then they deserve what’s comin’. As long as I’m riding shotgun for Wells Fargo, I’ll be keeping my eyes peeled for those two.”

Bruce's lip twitched as his brief relief dwindled away. "I don't get paid well enough ta go up against them fellas. Those payrolls ain't my responsibility, and goin' up against The Kansas Kid ain't the best way into retirement."

Jiles stopped and glared at his associate. "You mean to tell me, if you saw them two again, you'd ignore them?"

"You bet. Especially since I work for Wells Fargo, if I stopped them from robbin' the coach, I wouldn't see none a that reward. It'd be considered in the line a duty. And if I got shot tryin' ta stop 'em, I'd be out of a job. Who pays the bills then, huh? No sir. You accepted the job of ridin' shotgun, so that's fine, you have at it. But you can count me out."

"You sniveling coward. You'd just let them rob us again?"

"It ain't cowardice, it's common sense. I got a wife and five kids. They come first."

"Well fine." Jiles stomped away. "At least I know who ain't got my back."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO THE TRAIN WRECK

June 1879

“C’mon, Leon. I’ll race ya!”

“Woo hoo!”

Leon slapped Chester with his hat and took off after Midnight’s black rump.

The horses galloped headlong across the brush, both caught up in the excitement of the race. They needed no encouragement from their riders as they stretched out their necks and pounded the hard ground with furious hoof beats.

Chester fought to gain ground on the powerful Midnight, and inch by inch, he was doing it. Then Jack glanced over his shoulder and saw the challenge coming up behind him. He slapped Midnight with his hat and yelled at the gelding to give a bit more.

Midnight flattened his ears and dug into a new gear. His hooves pounded the ground and, with nostrils flared, he lengthened the distance between himself and his stable mate.

Leon yelled and booted Chester to give more speed, but the chestnut gelding was giving all he had, and it wasn’t enough.

Finally, they reached the creek, and Jack slowed his horse down in order to cross it safely. Water splashed as Midnight scrambled across the rocky bottom and lunged up the other side. His nostrils flared and his eyes widened with adrenaline as Jack halted to wait for his partner.

“What are you stopping for?” Leon pushed Chester up the bank to stop beside his partner. “I was catching up.”

“No ya weren’t. You were just barely holdin’ on.”

“Ha! Another ten strides and we’d have had you.”

“Uh huh.” Jack grinned and gave Leon a slap on the arm. “You just don’t like losin’.”

“Who does? Come on, I’ll race you to the top.”

“Nope.”

“Come on. A rematch.”

“Nope. I ain’t gonna wear my horse out just on a whim. What if we run into a posse before we get home?”

“Oh, come on. What are the chances?”

“Pretty good, I’d say.” Jack turned Midnight to the slope and started up it. “That stagecoach woulda gotten to Rock Creek about half an hour ago. The posse will head right for Bear Crap Trail, and that’s where we’re

headed, so I suggest we keep movin' at a steady pace, but don't wear out the horses. We just might need 'em."

Leon sighed as he followed Jack up the slope. "Yes, I suppose you're right. But if I'd been riding Fanny, you wouldn't have stood a chance."

"I dunno about that. Midnight's mighty fast."

"Sure, on the flat. But going uphill, we would have left you in our dust."

"Only cause Midnight's a gentleman and lets the lady go first."

"More like he's a rogue and likes the look of her tail."

"Now yer gettin' insultin'." Jack gave his gelding a pat. "It don't matter anyway, since he'd a been in the lead, just like this time."

"Ha! You keep telling yourself—"

Splinters from the rock under Chester's feet jumped up and stung him just as the rifle shot sounded from behind them.

Chester reared then lunged forward.

The outlaws ceased bantering and, without a backward glance, powered into a gallop to put distance between themselves and the law.

Spring rolled into summer, and the Elk Mountain Gang kept busy. Not only did Leon have them hitting their usual targets, but once a month, he organized an extra run, focusing on anything that Wells Fargo set up as an offering.

Things were going well. Some grumbled about the overtime but come time to divvy up the spoils, and the complaining changed to smiles and good times. Bear Creek was happy, as the closest town to the hideout, most of the fellas went there to spend their money, so business was good for everyone. Leon spent a lot of the summer planning and organizing jobs, but when he did allow himself a break, he usually spent it with Brenda.

Jack didn't think anything of this at first. Even though Leon didn't normally visit the brothel often, everyone deserved a break, and if he wanted to vent his energy doing something that came naturally, well good on him. But as the behavior continued, Jack did become concerned, and he wondered if his uncle was simply replacing his lost love with another convenient woman.

Well, so what if he is? Ain't that what a whore is for?

But one summer morning, Jack poured his coffee and turned to watch Leon as he scrutinized the bank plans laid out on the table. He couldn't help but notice the circles of exhaustion under the brown eyes.

"Been burnin' the candle at both ends?"

Leon looked up from the paperwork and frowned. "What?"

"What time did you get back last night?"

Leon took a drink from his coffee cup and grimaced. "Ugh. Sometimes I can drink cold coffee, but not this morning."

He came over to the counter, dumped the remnants into the sink and poured himself a fresh cup.

Jack sighed. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"I didn't hear ya come home last night."

"What are you? My keeper?"

"No, I ain't your keeper. But you know it's dangerous travellin' on these mountain trails at night. I figured you'd spend the night in Bear Creek rather than risk that."

"Too much work to do. There's the train job coming up, and then the big job in Denver next month. I can't be wasting time."

"Then maybe you shoulda headed home while it was still light out."

Leon sighed and, with a stubborn set to his jaw, returned to his paperwork.

Jack stood for a moment, debating the wisdom of pushing this conversation.

"I'm just sayin', is all. No whore is worth breaking your neck over. I don't care who you're pretendin' she is."

Leon banged the pencil onto the table and glared at his friend.

"What the hell does that mean? I'm stuck in here all day, working out these plans. Brenda is a nice distraction, and that's it. Don't be reading more into this than there is."

"Fine." Jack finished his coffee and headed for the open front door. "Just be careful. Yer plan of revenge won't go far ifn ya fall off a cliff."

And with that, he left.

Leon watched him through the front window as he trotted down the steps and headed for the barn. He was likely going for a morning ride and though Leon usually joined him, this morning, his mood was such that he just wanted to be left alone.

Ten minutes later, his plans were disrupted again when he heard Jack calling him from outside. He glanced out the window and groaned. There was Jack, standing in front of the barn with both Midnight and Chester tacked up for a ride.

He growled as he headed for the front porch.

"What are you doing? I've got work to do."

"Tough." Jack busied himself, tightening the girth on both saddles. "We always go for a mornin' ride when we ain't got a job ta hit. Chester don't wanna be left behind, and Midnight don't wanna go alone. C'mon."

Leon ground his teeth. An inner debate raged between standing his ground or giving in to common sense.

Jack mounted Midnight and rode over to the porch, leading Chester with him.

“C’mon, Leon, let’s go. It’ll help clear your head. It always does.”

Leon was about to let his stubbornness win, but then he caught the pricked ears and hopeful expression from Chester as he stood patiently waiting for his rider to join them.

That did it. His resolve withered and a smile tugged at his dimple.

“Yeah, all right. Let me get my boots on.”

Leon smiled for real when the morning sun worked its usual magic on his mood. It was good to get out for a ride before the day got busy.

Jack nudged Midnight to catch up with Chester.

“What do ya think of Rex’s information?”

“He’s right. It would be worth hitting.”

“Yeah, but it would be risky. There’s no safe place ta set up a barricade along that stretch.”

“We’ve boarded moving trains before. I know it’s been a while, but it’s all in the timing.”

“Not everything. A galloping horse can trip on the ties, throwing itself and its rider under the wheels. A man can miss his grip and fall. Besides, we agreed not ta do that anymore: it’s too dangerous.”

Leon grinned. “Yeah, but this haul will be worth it. Besides, it’ll be fun. Building a barricade for trains and now coaches is boring. It’s time for some excitement in this job again.”

“Uh huh. What did Rex say was on board?”

“Thirty thousand, Wells Fargo transfer. And a Navarre safe. It couldn’t be more perfect.”

“Except that its dangerous.”

“Come on, Jack.” Leon slapped him on the arm. “Where’s your sense of adventure? It’ll be fun.”

Jack laughed. “Yeah, okay. At least there ain’t nobody carrying a shotgun on board.”

Jack hung onto the hand railing on the outside of the smoke-belching, rocking and plunging locomotive, and glanced toward the cab just in time to see the business end of a shotgun poking out from the window. He

barely had time to curse when both barrels exploded in his direction. Fortunately for him, the wild beast they all rode caused the aim to be off and the pellets scattered past him.

Jack cursed again. He hurried his pace, knowing he had to get into the cab before the trainman had time to reload. The bucking beast nearly threw him when he grabbed for the door, but his agility saved him, and he was able to grab onto the rail and swing himself inside.

He almost laughed with relief when he spotted the fireman sitting on the floor of the rocking cab, so inebriated with alcohol that he could barely see straight.

The man struggled to round up the shotgun shells that rolled back and forth around him, but never quite within reach. The shotgun lay, broken in half in preparation for loading, across his lap. He cursed when Jack swung into the cab and seeing the Colt .45 Peacemaker staring him in the face only served to intensify his efforts.

Jack glanced at the engineer who stood by the controls. He had one hand on the throttle and the other held the half empty whiskey bottle. His eyes were wide as saucers, and he stood frozen to the spot as though too afraid to do anything.

Jack snatched the empty shotgun from the fireman then turned his attention and gun to the engineer.

“Stop the train. Now.”

“But it’s not a scheduled stop. I’ll have ta explain my reasons to the boss—”

Jack tightened his bead on the engineer, and that man gulped.

“Ah, yeah. Okay. Hold on.”

Jack braced himself for the shift, and since the fireman was already on the floor, he didn’t have to worry.

The engineer eased off on the throttle, then applied the air brakes. The engine’s rocking shifted into high gear as the air pressure released and sparks flew from the wheels, and the brakes struggled to bring the heavy train to a halt.

The engine came to a stop, and the occupants could hear and feel the thump, thump, thump of all the cars behind them braking in succession and bucking from their heavy forward motion being blocked. Finally, the whole train stood immobile.

“Good.” Jack waved his gun toward the exit. “Now, get off.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. C’mon Fred, on your feet.”

Fred struggled to push himself up, and with George’s help, he managed it. Getting off the train was a different matter.

Jack shook his head as he jumped to the ground.

“Sheesh. I know you fellas sometimes drink on the job, but ain’t that kinda overdoin’ it?”

“Some of us can’t help it,” George defended their choices. “The damn railroad has us working seven days a week, sometimes twenty hours at a stretch. I can’t count how many times we slept in the caboose rather than waste time goin’ home to our own beds. Then we get fellas like you, makin’ our jobs even harder. It ain’t fair I tell ya.”

“Twenty hours a day?” Jack whistled. “Yeah, no wonder ya drink.”

“That’s what I’m sayin’.”

Lobo rode up then, leading the Kid’s horse. He dismounted and handed the reins over.

Jack took them and prepared to mount.

“Everything go as planned?”

“Far as I can tell,” Lobo said. “Rex got into the caboose all right, and Murdoch and Charlie jumped on near the passenger car. I expect everybody else is gettin’ the civilians off as we speak.”

“Okay, sounds good.” Jack mounted and turned Midnight toward the tail end of the train. “We’ll let ya know when we’re done.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Lobo pulled his gun and growled at the two trainmen.

Fred sobered up fast.

Jack slowed down as he approached the passengers that were gathered in a group beside the train. Something was wrong. Instead of the usual complaining about the inconvenience, there was a subdued silence blanketing the group.

Malachi and Charlie were with them, keeping an eye on things, but even they appeared anxious.

Then Jack’s heart hit his throat when he noticed not only Gus and Hank on hands and knees, looking under the car, but a couple of the male passengers were also checking the undercarriage.

Jack pulled rein beside his men.

“What’s happened? Did somebody . . . ?”

Charlie looked up at him, his face ashen, and Jack knew the answer.

“Oh crap. Who was it?” But process of elimination already answered the question for him. “Murdoch?”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah. I got onto the landing of the passenger car all right, but Murdoch, he, ah, he missed his mark. He ended up grabbin’ hold of the ladder on that freight car instead. He seemed okay, but then the train braked, and he, well, he. Goddammit. One minute I was lookin’ at ‘im,

and the next, he was gone. I was hopin' he fell to the side, but I don't see 'im."

"Oh crap." Jack watched the men on the ground as they worked their way down the train, checking the undercarriage of each car.

He glanced at the last freight car, and only seeing Chester and Buckwheat standing there, he assumed that Leon was inside working his magic on the safe, and Mukua had stepped inside with him. They were likely unaware of the situation.

"What do ya want us ta do?" Malachi asked. He'd never had to deal with something like this before.

"Best get the passengers back on board. They don't need ta see this."

"Yeah, sure thing, Kid."

Jack trotted Midnight up to the searchers. "Any sign of 'im?"

Gus straightened. "If we'd found 'im, why would we still be lookin'?"

"Just askin', Gus. Dammit. Why do ya have ta always be so snarky?"

"Chances are, I just lost one a my best men, and all because the little-boy-genius decided he wanted to tackle a movin' train. I think I got a right ta be snarky."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. Hank, go up to the engine and let them know what happened. We might be a bit delayed gettin' outta here."

Hank nodded, relieved to be taken off the grisly duty. He was just as concerned as everyone else, but he didn't wanna see his friend all broke up underneath the train.

Jack continued to the last freight car.

The two horses raised their ears as Midnight approached, and Mukua looked out.

Jack pulled rein.

"How's it goin'?"

"It is the usual. He will get it opened."

Leon's irritated voice came from inside the car. "As long as everybody will stop talking."

Jack peered in and saw Leon in his usual position, sitting cross-legged with an ear pressed against the safe door near the locking mechanism.

"Just askin'. I'll leave ya to it."

Mukua glanced toward the passenger car. "What is going on?"

"Ah, somebody just dropped somethin'. I'll tell ya later."

Mukua nodded and went back to watching Leon.

Jack carried on to the rear of the train.

The conductor and brakeman stood on the ground, while Rex was up on the step of the landing. All the men watched the commotion at the passenger car.

“What’s happened?” Rex asked, his expression worried. “Did someone go over?”

“Yeah. Murdoch. We can’t find ‘im.”

“Crap.” The conductor spit. “Do you have any idea what a mess that makes on the wheels?”

Rex and Jack stared at the conductor, not quite believing their ears.

“Sorry ta inconvenience ya.” Rex gave the man a kick which sprawled him onto the ground. “Dammit.”

“Where’s the flagman?” Jack scanned the tracks behind them. “Oh, there he is.”

“Yeah,” Rex shrugged. “He insisted on goin’ back ta flag down any trains that might be comin’. He’s all worried about us gettin’ run into from behind. I told him there ain’t no more trains on this run today, but he wouldn’t hear it.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll be back.”

Jack pushed Midnight into a hand gallop and came up upon the flagman.

“Hey. Since you’re out here anyway, keep an eye open. I think we mighta lost a man under the train. Ifn he didn’t get hung up and dragged, he might be out here.”

The flagman hooted. “Ya mean what’s left of ‘im might be out here. Damn amateurs. Serves ya right.”

“Watch your mouth. Just keep an eye out for ‘im.”

Jack wheeled Midnight and headed back. He didn’t stop at the caboose or the freight car but carried on to the passenger car.

Gus stood up, his face suddenly pale. “I found ‘im.”

Jack dismounted. “Is he still alive?”

“Unfortunately, yeah.”

“Aw, jesus.” He braced himself, then squatted and peered under the car. “Murdoch?”

The sound that came back to him was harsh, labored breathing, and the shape that met his eyes didn’t even look like a man. Jack was relieved that it was dark under there so he didn’t have to see the gory details.

He looked up at Gus. “Can we pull ‘im out from under there?”

Gus shook his head. “I tried. He started screamin’. Well, as best he could anyway. We’re gonna have ta roll the train off ‘im and hope he ain’t attached.”

Jack sighed and ducked down again. “Hang in there, Murdoch. We’ll get ya out.”

A yell went up from the freight car and Mukua waved at them. The safe was open.

Jack straightened. "I guess I better let Leon know about this. I didn't wanna tell 'im earlier and break his focus. Dammit."

"Yeah, can't have that."

Jack ignored the snark from Gus and headed back to the freight car.

Twenty minutes later, Jack and Lobo sat their horses outside the engine, while the engineer and fireman prepared to move the train.

"Take it slow," Jack said. "And if I tell ya ta stop, you stop."

"You don't need ta tell me my job, sonny. I've been runnin' trains since before you were a spark in your papa's eye. I've had ta roll trains offa fellas too many damn times, but at least I know how ta do it."

"Yeah, sorry. I'm just worried about my friend, is all."

A yell came up from the accident scene, and a man waved at them.

"Okay, ease her off."

Some of the hardier passengers along with everyone from the caboose had joined the outlaws at the scene.

The passengers simply stood around to watch, with none of them inclined to get down and help.

The flagman, giving up concerns about another train in the area, stood on hand to assist where he could. All other hands gazed under the car as the wheels crept into a roll.

Murdoch emitted a gurgled scream as the train dragged him.

The flagman yelled and waved as though the men at the engine might have trouble seeing him. "Stop! Stop!"

Even with the slow speed, the car didn't stop instantly, and the cars following banged into the rear, causing the wheels to jump forward.

"Oh, God help me." Murdoch pleaded in a strangled whisper. "Get me outta here."

"We're workin' on it," Charlie gave reassurance. "We just don't wanna hurt ya no more."

"Oh, God."

Leon and Gus crawled under the train to see where Murdoch was hung up.

"Here," Gus said. "His leg is jammed up against the undercarriage, and it's trapped in there." In the confined space, he squirmed to get his hand onto a pant leg and give it a tug.

Murdoch squirmed. "No. Stop, stop." He gagged and coughed.

Leon saw blood spatter down his chin. “We have to get you lose. It’s the only way we’ll get you out.”

“No. Just shoot me. Please, just shoot me.”

Leon put a hand on his shoulder then pulled it back when he felt the jagged end of a broken bone. He tried to keep his voice positive. “We’re not going to shoot you. We’ll get you out.”

“No.” The plea was barely audible. “Please, just shoot me.”

Gus and Leon exchanged looks; neither of their expressions showed hope.

“Try again,” Leon said.

Gus set his jaw. He took a stronger hold of the pant leg and gave it a pull.

Murdoch sputtered; spitting blood then passed out.

“Thank goodness.” Leon swallowed the bile in his throat as he and Gus wiggled back out from under. “Okay, try it again.”

The flagman gave the signal and again, the wheels inched into motion.

“Yeah, he’s clear. Keep her rollin’.”

Leon and Gus sat on the gravel bed away from the car, but as close to Murdoch as they could to make sure he didn’t get hung up again. The conductor and brakeman kept an eye on the undercarriages of the cars coming up and would give warning if they saw anything hanging down that might cause a problem.

Finally, the caboose rolled by them, and Murdoch was in the clear.

The outlaws and passengers stood in shocked silence. It was hard to believe that the mess of skin, blood and broken bones had once been an adult man. Some of the men turned away and vomited, while others simply walked back to the passenger car, unable to deal with the gruesome sight.

Only the trainmen were unaffected.

The conductor put a hand upon the broken chest. “Damn, he’s still breathin’.”

“Wull, that’s a good thing, ain’t it?” Malachi was the eternal optimist.

The conductor shook his head. “He ain’t gonna survive this, and if he wakes up, he’ll be in agony. It’ll likely be a slow death. It’d be a kindness ta shoot ‘im, here and now.”

“We ain’t gonna murder one of our own men,” Gus sputtered. “What the hell!”

“It ain’t murder. Like I said, it’d be a kindness.”

Protests abounded from the outlaws, some even threatening violence.

Until Leon stopped it.

“Quiet down! As much as I agree with Gus, I can see what these fellas are saying. It might be the kindest thing.” He glanced at the crippled mass.

“Even if he does survive this, he’ll be a wreck and in pain the rest of his life. How many of us would want that for ourselves?”

The men quieted, and sheepish looks were sent Murdoch’s way. A couple of them coughed and others shuffled their feet. Nobody wanted to make that call.

“We cannot kill him,” Mukua spoke up for the first time.

All eyes turned to him and his wisdom.

“This is the path Murdoch has chosen for himself. It would be a dishonor to his spirit to end the journey before its time.”

The brakeman snorted. “Fer Christ’s sake, you damn injuns are a bloodthirsty lot. You like seein’ men sufferin’, don’t ya? Yeah, I fought in the Indian wars. You’re all a bunch a savages.”

Eyes shot daggers at the trainman while angry muttering grew into threats.

Mukua raised his hand and silenced them. “Savagery is always part of war and both sides are equally at fault. I do not like to see a man suffer, especially when he is a friend. But his spirit will suffer more in the land of his fathers, if he is denied his right to die as he will.”

The group from the engine arrived at the scene, and even Lobo had to look away from the mess on the tracks.

Jack locked eyes with Leon. “He’s dead, right? Please tell me he’s dead.”

Leon shook his head, his eyes close to tears.”

Jack’s throat tightened. “Aww, damn.”

“What are we gonna do?” Charlie asked. “We gotta get goin’ before this train is missed. Can we make a travois in time? I don’t think that body is gonna drape over a horse.”

“We’ll take ‘im,” the conductor offered. “The caboose is right here. We’ll make ‘im as comfortable as possible and get him into the next town. That’s about ten miles from here.”

“What? Just hand ‘im over to the law?” Gus argued. “That ain’t right.”

The conductor rolled his eyes. “Have you jackasses not been listenin’? There ain’t nothin’ left ta hand over to the law. He ain’t gonna live. All a doctor will do for ‘im is pump him full a morphine ta make his passin’ a little easier. The best you can hope for your friend is that he don’t never wake up.”

Silence settled over the group until Leon sighed, then nodded.

“Yeah, that sounds like the best plan. Thank you. I’ll give you some money to cover the cost for the doctor.”

The conductor snorted. “That’s ironic. But suits me. It ain’t my money you’re stealin’, and if ya give me enough for the doc, then I ain’t stealin’ it

either. Besides, you fellas treat folks pretty decent. If ya won't kill this fella, then it's the best choice. We'll get 'im into town."

"Okay. Gus, Charlie and Rex, you fellas were closest to him. Give me a hand getting him into the caboose."

The three men stepped forward, then each man took a limb and started to lift him. As a unit they gasped and set Murdoch back down again. The sound of crackling bones from inside the bloody mass stopped them short.

Charlie turned away and threw up.

"Crap." Gus swallowed. "How the hell is it that he's still breathin'?"

Nobody had an answer for him.

"Come on," Leon said. "Let's just get this done."

The outlaws sat their horses, saddlebags stuffed with loot, as they watched the train pull away.

Nobody moved, nobody said anything. They all held their hats in their hands.

Then Mukua began his death chant. He would have done this over the body of their fallen comrade, but they were running out of time.

The gang turned away, and, as usual, split up into smaller groups and headed for home.

Jack and Leon hung back, waiting for Mukua to finish the abbreviated send off, then they turned as one and left the area.

Two days later

Charlie came around to the back of the bunkhouse to find that most of the gang members were already assembled around the fire pit. The pit was cold and empty as no large game had been brought in lately, but this was still a popular place for the fellas to gather when the bunkhouse was too hot for comfort.

Most of the men sat on logs or makeshift chairs, drinking beer or coffee that had been set to perk on a small fire. Long faces were the norm, so Charlie swallowed the tightness in his throat. He knew what was coming.

"What's up?" he still had to ask.

Sad eyes turned to him, but one set had a tinge of anger to them.

"Hank just got back from Wilcox," Gus dumped his cold coffee and reached for the pot. "Murdoch's dead."

“Oh.” Charlie sat down and poured himself a coffee. “Well, it ain’t like we weren’t expectin’ it.”

“Yeah, we were expectin’ it,” Gus sniped. “That ain’t the problem. The problem is why it happened in the first place.”

“It were an accident,” Malachi spoke up in defense of his boss. “It coulda happened ta any of us.”

Gus sent his partner a hard look.

Malachi ducked his head. “Wull, it was.”

“Yeah.” Rex seconded. “It could have happened to any of us. It coulda been Hank.”

“It was an accident that coulda been avoided,” Gus glared at the group. “When was the last time this gang hit a moving train?”

“Well . . .”

Nobody looked at anyone else. Some replenished their coffee while others drank their beer.

“Yeah.” Gus nodded. “The last time we jumped a moving train was when Cortez was in charge. The one thing Nash promised us was that we wouldn’t be doin’ that no more because it was too dangerous.” The last part was accentuated by a finger jabbing toward the fire pit. “Now, because he’s got a bee up his butt, he’s puttin’ all of us at risk. Which of us is gonna be next, huh? How many of us are gonna get killed because of his beef with Wells Fargo, huh?”

“But we are makin’ good money with him as boss,” Hank said. “Maybe the risk is worth it. If I could save some, maybe I could buy myself a small spread in a couple a years.”

Gus laughed. “You’ve been sayin’ that ever since I’ve known ya. You ain’t saved a penny yet.”

“Yeah, well,” Hank shrugged, “the next big job he has planned could bring in enough that I don’t have ta scrimp and save. My take alone will buy me a way outta this life.”

“Well, I tell ya, that big job ain’t gonna happen. The little-boy-genius is gettin’ above his means on that one.”

“You oughta stop callin’ ‘im that, Gus.”

Gus glared at Malachi. “Why?”

“Wull, he ain’t a little boy. He’s the same age as me, and I’m a man.”

Gus laughed. “Okay, pipsqueak, if you say so. But I’m tellin’ ya straight. More of us is gonna get killed because of him, and I’m gonna make sure it ain’t me.” He turned to Mukua, who had been silent throughout this meeting. “What about you, Preacher? You gonna go runnin’ to our glorious leader and tell ‘im what we’ve been discussin’ here?”

Mukua drew on his pipe and slowly released the smoke before he answered. "Men should speak freely at these meetings, therefore, I do not pass on what is discussed. Unless you wish it."

Gus snorted. "Yeah, well, why not. Maybe he oughta know what we all think."

"From what I have heard, it is only you who thinks this." Mukua looked around at the other men. "Everyone else is happy with the increased wages."

Gus sent a withering glare to the other men seated around the fire.

Some refilled their coffee, others took a gulp of beer, but none met his eye.

Gus snarled and spit. "Fine." He stood and dumped the last of his coffee onto the fire. "If that's the way ya all feel, have yer nice fat paydays. But I'm tellin' ya, this gang would be a whole lot better off if Nash and Kiefer rode on out and never came back."

Jack came up the steps and set a beer cup onto the railing in front of Leon's chair.

"Where is everybody?" he asked as he sat down beside him. "Preacher ain't even in the barn."

"Town meeting." Leon nodded toward the bunkhouse. "They're all around the back firepit, talking about us."

"Oh."

Jack savored his mouthful of beer, then sat back and rested his feet up on the railing.

Leon did the same. "I wish we had some cigars."

Jack frowned. "I wish ya hadn't said nothin. Now I want one, too."

"Maybe next trip into town."

"Hmm."

Movement coming around the bunkhouse caught their attention.

"There's Gus," Leon noted. "Meeting must be over."

Gus stopped and noted the two men sitting on the porch.

Leon waved at him.

Gus shook his head and, snarling, stomped into the bunkhouse.

Jack scratched his chin. "I take it the meeting didn't go well for Gus."

"He does seem to be on his own."

Both men sighed as they contemplated their third in command.

"Do you think he's going to be trouble?" Leon asked.

"Could be. He'll take any reason ta snipe at you, but I figure, he figures he's got good reason now. He liked Murdoch."

“We all did,” Leon said. “Murdoch was a likable guy.”

“Yeah. Why couldn’t it a been Lobo?”

Leon snorted. “Lobo’s too mean to die under a train. He probably would have derailed it.”

“Ha. Yah.”

More men sauntered around the bunkhouse and rambled off on different errands, though none joined Gus inside.

Mukua spotted the partners on the porch and came their way.

“Hey, Preacher,” Jack greeted him and pulled up a chair. “Join us.”

“For a minute, yes.”

“What’s up?” Leon asked. “What was the meeting about? Or do you not want to say?”

“Gus wants me to tell you.” Mukua settled into the chair, still puffing on his pipe. “Most of the men are pleased with the way things are going, though the death of Murdoch weighs heavy. Gus feels it was your fault, that you put the men at too much risk. He is concerned about the big job he knows you are planning for the end of the season.”

Leon cocked a brow. “He knows about it?”

“No, not the details, only that you are planning something big, and it worries him.”

“Oh. Good.”

Mukua sighed. “He is worried about his men. He sees danger ahead where the others do not. This frustrates him.”

“I always look out for the men. You know that.”

“You have in the past, yes. But lately, your eyes are clouded. Perhaps you need to consider this.”

“But—”

Mukua stood. “I think I will go for a ride. Buckwheat is restless.”

And with that, he left.

Leon sat in stunned silence, watching the Shoshone stride across the yard. Finally, he looked at Jack.

“Do you think my eyes are clouded?”

Jack shrugged. “They still look brown ta me.”

Leon huffed. “You know what I mean.”

Jack chuckled. “Yeah, I know. And I think Preacher-man has a point.”

“You do?”

“Let’s face it, Leon, the Wells Fargo Clearing House is a fortress. Chances of us gettin’ in, breakin’ into the vault and gettin’ out again, without losin’ any men, is pretty dismal.”

“But it’s never been done before.”

“Maybe that oughta tell ya somethin’.”

“That didn’t stop us from cracking the timer lock in Denver. That had never been done before either.”

“Yeah, true. But that bank didn’t have the security that the Clearing House will have. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re waitin’ for ya ta make your move there. We could be walkin’ into a trap.”

“So, you’re saying I should forget about it.”

“Well, maybe postpone it. We’ve been hittin’ hard, and things are hot right now. Just last week, the rewards on us went up another two grand. That’s more’n any other outlaw in the territory.”

Leon grinned and puffed up with pride. “Yeah.”

“Not ta mention, Hume has given Carlyle permission ta shoot us on sight, reward payable dead or alive.”

Leon’s grin dropped into a frown. “Yeah. I suspect the Navarre Holdings had something to do with that, too.”

“Most likely,” Jack agreed. “You’ve been a thorn in their side longer than Hume’s. Besides, with the Navarres it’s personal. They’ve likely joined with Wells Fargo to bring ya down.”

Leon smirked. “The Navarres don’t even know who I am, other than an outlaw that’s hurting them. Is it my fault they make the best target?”

“Yeah, you keep on tellin’ yourself that, but I ain’t buyin’ it. They know who ya are, and they ain’t takin’ kindly to the reminder.”

Leon remained silent and focused on Mukua heading out on Buckwheat for his ride.

Jack knew there was no point in continuing along that line, so he returned to the previous subject. “As much as I’d like ta get Carlyle’s neck between my hands for what he done to you and to Ella, I’m thinkin’ we need ta ease off a bit. It’s been a crazy summer, Leon. You wanted ta make Wells Fargo feel your wrath, and ya did. The men are tired, and the law’s gettin’ mad. I can’t shake the feelin’ that if we hit the Clearing House this season, it could be the end of this gang. One way or another, it’d be over for us.”

Leon nodded as he brought his attention back to Jack. “So, you think we should close off the season now?”

“Hell, no. We still got time. Just come up with a few more jobs closer ta home. Let Wells Fargo come ta us, rather than us walkin’ right into their backyard.”

Leon’s sigh dripped of disappointment. “I’ll think about it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

JUSTICE

September 1879

The gang stayed busy all that summer.

All through that season of 1879, Wyoming felt the wrath of the Elk Mountain Gang. Often, Leon would plan two or three hits at the same time, throwing confusion and panic into the air. As they had often done in the past, after a job, they now split into groups beforehand and brought havoc to every town they targeted.

Throughout this time, Leon did not forget about Detective Harold Dicks and had every intention of exacting justice upon him. Jack wanted to strangle him with his bare hands, but Leon knew better. Hitting Wells Fargo through their money bags was one thing, but murder was stepping over the line.

Besides, Leon was working on a better plan. He knew Dicks was a hothead so he would be an easy man to set up and lead down a winding trail that would become darker and more condemning with each turn. He'd get Dicks so bogged down in his own quagmire that he'd start making mistakes in his desperation to get out. Dicks would destroy himself, and that's all Leon cared about.

But someone else beat him to the punch.

Taking a break in Bear Creek, the partners spent their time in the social club, eating, drinking and playing Blackjack. Poker was usually the entertainment for fellas passing time here, but they all knew Leon's abilities, so none were inclined to let him into a game. So, Blackjack it was.

They'd just finished a second helping of elk stew and were nursing a third shot of whiskey, when Mike, the barkeep, telegrapher, postmaster, shoptender and mayor, plunked a newspaper onto their table.

"Now that you fellas are all fed and rested, there's an article in this paper ya might be interested in. It's a few days old, but news is news. Third page."

"Oh." Leon pulled the paper to him. "Thanks, Mike."

"Hmm." Mike walked away to leave them in private.

The partners exchanged a frown.

"What's it say?"

Leon shrugged. "I haven't found it yet."

Jack brought his chair over to sit beside Leon so he could read the article, too.

Leon settled on the third page and scanned the print. It didn't take long to find the small article tucked away in the corner. He folded the paper over a couple of times and both men focused on the news.

DETECTIVE'S UNTIMELY DEATH RULED A SUICIDE

Wells Fargo Detective Harold Dicks was found dead in his bed on Saturday morning.

Though foul play was suspected, Detective Frank Carlyle soon put this suspicion to rest.

"Detective Dick's untimely demise has been ruled as suicide," Detective Carlyle stated yesterday at the hearing. "He had been depressed of late, unable to come to terms with the accidental shooting and death of an infant during an arrest attempt last winter.

"Though Detective Dicks was cleared of any wrongdoing, it seems his own feelings of guilt have brought him to this unfortunate end."

However, when this reporter interviewed Mr. Freeman, the landlord where Detective Dicks had resided for several years, a different view presented itself.

"If Detective Dicks had been suffering from depression, that's news to me," stated Mr. Freeman. "He felt no remorse concerning the shooting of the bastard child of an outlaw. In fact, he considered the capture of that outlaw the highlight of his career. The fact that Nash later escaped custody did not tarnish his own sense of accomplishment.

"I don't know how it was done," Mr. Freeman continued, "but I lay dollars to donuts this was murder. And I'd also be willing to bet that Nash had something to do with it. The way the Elk Mountain Gang has been hitting everyone since last summer, I'd say that outlaw is out for revenge."

When this reporter disclosed Mr. Freeman's opinion to Detective Carlyle, that gentleman was not dissuaded from his opinion.

"I understand Mr. Freeman's sorrow and anger at the loss of his friend and long-time tenant, but that does not change the facts," Detective Carlyle stated. "Nash is well known for his non-violent views, and I doubt that even the unfortunate death of his daughter would push him to commit murder.

"Detective Dick's cause of death has been ruled as a suicide, and that is the end of it."

The outlaws sat silently as they re-read the article. Then, as one, they sighed and sat back to absorb the information.

Mike arrived and replenished their whiskey glasses then left them alone.

“What do ya think?” Jack asked. “Is it likely that Dicks took his own life?”

“Nope.” Leon’s answer came without hesitation. “He was too full of himself. I expect Mr. Freeman’s view of the situation is more accurate. Other than he blames me for it.”

“So, ya think somebody did murder him?”

“Oh yeah.” Leon downed his whiskey.

“I dunno, Leon. I think Carlyle’s smarter than that. If it were murder, he’d know it.”

“Yup. Carlyle promised me justice for Ella’s death, and this is the only way he could do it.”

“What? So, you think Carlyle killed one of his own men?”

“Oh no. No. Even Carlyle wouldn’t go that far. But he knows who did murder him, and he’s not saying anything. He’s covering it up. I guess he figures justice has been served.”

“Well, I guess it ain’t too far of a stretch ta figure Dicks has enemies. It takes guts and a hard heart though, ta murder a man in his sleep.”

“Mmm hm.”

“Who do ya think done it?”

“I don’t think. I know who did it. And so does Carlyle.”

Jack sat back and sighed as the answer came to him unbidden.

“Gabriella.”

Leon’s smile was sardonic. “Yeah.”

“Damn. I wonder how.”

“There are plenty of ways. She could have slipped something into his cup of tea or dressed herself as an upstairs gal and poisoned his beer. Who knows? It doesn’t surprise me though.”

“Yeah? Well, I still ain’t so quick ta give up on Carlyle. He’s just as much ta blame—”

“Let it go, Jack.”

“What do ya mean, let it go? How can you let him get away with this?”

“He’s not to blame, Jack. I told you that. You didn’t see what happened. Carlyle would have killed Dicks right there if the others hadn’t pulled him off. You didn’t see his face. He was furious. Even Gabriella knew who to go after. She heard Carlyle promise justice and now, he’s delivering it by keeping quiet. My beef isn’t with Carlyle, it’s with Wells Fargo.”

“They go together.”

Leon twitched an evil smile. “We sure are getting under his skin, and we’re not done yet. We’re going to keep hitting Wells Fargo until the weather shuts us down. We’re going to finish up this season with a bang that’s going to shake even the governor’s mansion.” His smile dropped and his eyes drifted. “Then, maybe, I can allow Ella to rest.”

“Just like that? Yer gonna forget about her? Never mention her again, as though she didn’t exist? Just like you did with—”

“No!” Leon turned agonized eyes to his nephew. “No, I can never forget Ella. I’ll carry the hurt of her loss with me for the rest of my life. I could never forget her.”

“Yeah, well.” Seeing the pain in Leon’s eyes, Jack backed off. “If ya figure the debt has been paid, then I suppose. But don’t expect me ta be all chummy with Carlyle. He’s still got plenty ta make up for.”

Leon smiled through his sadness, knowing what Jack referred to.

“Yeah. I’m not too quick to forget about that little social gathering either.”

“Yeah.”

Returning to the Elk was a bone-chilling process. The day started out pleasant enough, but as the partners climbed higher into the hills, a bitter wind picked up, bringing with it sleet that felt colder than any snow. By the time they rode into the yard, snow mixed with freezing rain fell from the skies, and both the men and the horses were damp and shivering.

“Howdy,” Malachi greeted them from under cover. “We figured it was you.”

“Howdy, Ky. Where’s Preacher?”

“Aww, he’s in the bunkhouse heating up some water. Says he’s gonna make a warm mash for yer horses. He told me ta dry ‘em off and give ‘em hay fer now. He even got blankets laid out fer me ta put on ‘em. Sheesh, I ain’t never heard a that. Puttin’ blankets on a horse.”

“Yeah?” Jack dismounted, his movements slow and stiff. “Well, if they feel anything like I do, they’re gonna need a warm mash and blankets. They’re still wearin’ their summer coats.” He sucked his teeth as his feet touched ground. “Damn. My feet are so cold, it hurts just ta stand on ‘em.”

Leon flexed his feet to get the blood flowing again. “Where is Gus?” he asked through his shivering.

“In the cabin, buildin’ up the fire fer ya. Might even be heatin’ up some food too.”

Leon frowned. “Why? He’s been mad at me all season. What’s he up to?”

Malachi shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe he wants ta talk."

"Yeah, maybe."

Jack didn't care what the reason was. He shivered as icy water trickled down his neck. "Oh, that does sound invitin'. All I gotta do now is get my feet walkin' in that direction."

"This sleet is getting worse." Leon handed Chester's reins over to Malachi. "Best get these horses under cover and tended to."

"Sure." He took Midnight's reins as well and led the wet and shivering horses into the barn.

Leon and Jack turned and looked at the wet expanse between themselves and the cabin door.

"I'm thinkin' we shoulda dismounted right at the steps and let Malachi lead the horses back here."

Leon nodded. "It seems we were a bit hasty."

They stood for a moment longer, the sleet tapping against their hats and dripping from the brims.

"Well, the door's not going to come to us."

"Yeah."

They started the final stage of their journey, slushing through the partially formed ice and pools of frigid water. Their feet were already so wet and cold that they didn't even bother trying to skirt around the puddles. There was no point anyway; the whole yard was awash, and the best they could do was to encourage their aching feet to move as fast as their cold limbs would allow.

Finally, they reached the steps and, each one taking hold of a handrail, they limped their way up to the porch.

"Hey, close the damn door!" Gus snarked from where he stood by the stove. "I didn't stoke the fire up extra hot just so's it could heat up the outdoors."

The two travelers stood in the open doorway, the first wave of warmth hitting them like a smoldering blanket.

Gus's remark broke them from their trance.

"Oh, yeah." Leon shut the door behind them. "Thanks, Gus."

"Yeah. Get them wet clothes off. By the time ya get changed, this stew oughta be ready."

Both men simply nodded. Peeling off their wet coats, they hung them on the hooks, followed by misshapen hats. Next came the boots then limp socks. With bare feet red from cold, each man hobbled to his respective bedroom to change into something more habitable.

Gus set down bowls of elk stew and a whiskey bottle, and the three men tucked into the meal.

“So, Gus,” Leon mumbled over a mouthful. “As much as we appreciate the meal all ready for us when we got home, I can’t help think there is an ulterior motive.”

Gus wiped stew out of his mustache. “A what?”

“A reason why you did it, other than out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Oh. Yeah well. Okay.”

Leon and Jack exchanged a look over the table.

“What’s on your mind, Gus?”

“Oh, well,” Gus coughed. “Well, I just wanna know what you got planned. The season’s comin’ to an end, and the other fellas got the feelin’ you was savin’ the best till last. Me, I’m thinkin’ you’re gonna hang us all out ta dry just ta get one more jab at Wells Fargo. Now, I’ve been goin’ along with ya all summer, cause that’s what the fellas wanted, but I didn’t like it. You’re runnin’ roughshod, Nash. You keep on like this, and you’re gonna get us all killed. It’s time you stood down.”

Nash nearly choked on his stew. “Stood down? You mean like hand leadership over to you?”

“Yeah. Dammit. It shoulda been mine in the first place. I may not have your brains—” Leon snorted and Gus’s lip curled in irritation, “but I sure as hell will look after my men a lot better n you have.”

Leon sat up straight, a frown crossing his features.

“Are you saying I don’t care about these men? That’s not fair and you know it.”

“Do I? It was bad enough losin’ Wes and Ed the way we did, but Murdoch—”

Leon’s hand slapped the table, causing the utensils to clatter.

“Are you still hanging onto that? Murdoch was a good man, we know that, and we were all sickened by what happened to him. But that’s the risk we take.”

“No. It’s the risk you take, and we’ve been fool enough ta follow ya.”

“Are you saying all the men feel this way, or just you?”

Gus jabbed the table with his finger. “I’m sayin’ it ain’t right, the risks you’re askin’ us ta take all on account a your personal vendetta.”

The damp chill on Leon evaporated. “I wanna know, Gus. Do all the men feel this way, or just you?”

Gus’s bluster dropped a notch. “They don’t wanna come right out and say it.”

“Or, maybe, they just don’t agree with you.”

“Okay, fine. But we still got the right ta know what you got planned and just how dangerous is it gonna be?”

“All right. I was planning to hit the Wells Fargo Clearing House in Denver.”

“What!” Gus’s voice rose with his stress. “Are you outta your mind?”

“That’s what I said,” Jack piped in.

Leon sent Jack a snarl, but then backed down. “I don’t think it’s going to happen now, anyway. Looks like we might be in for an early winter and travelling that far afield may not be a good idea.”

“Thank goodness for bad weather,” Gus snarked. “You’d get us all killed goin’ after that stronghold.”

“That’s what I said,” Jack repeated. “Best to let Wells Fargo come to us, rather than us stickin’ our necks out right in their own backyard.”

Leon sighed. “Jack, you’re not helping.”

“He sure as hell is,” Gus put in. “He’s the only one of the two of you talkin’ sense.”

“All right, fine.” Leon gave it up. “We’ll save the Clearing House for another time. There is a big transfer going to Rawlins next week. Not as good a payoff as Denver, but—”

“A Wells Fargo transfer?”

“Well, yes.”

“Sheesh.” Gus shook his head. “I can understand wantin’ revenge, but you’re pushin’ our luck.”

“It’s an easy hit. We probably won’t even need the whole gang.”

Gus considered this option. “Yeah, well. Maybe.”

Leon sighed and stirred his stew. “Now my meal’s cold.”

The three men tucked into a second helping of stew when a knock on the door preceded another blast of chilly air.

“Close the door!”

Mukua smiled as he shut the door behind him. He shrugged out of his coat and joined the group at the table.

Gus was already up and dishing out another serving of steaming meat and vegetables.

“Figured you’d be showin’ up eventually.”

Leon poured another shot of whiskey into a waiting glass and slid it across to the Shoshone. He then raised a brow to Jack.

“Yeah,” Jack pushed his glass to center table. “I’ll have another.”

“Gus?”

“Sure. It’s goin’ down good today.”

Glasses were replenished and Gus rejoined the group, plunking the bowl down in front of Mukua.

“The horses settled in all right?” Leon asked.

“Would I be here if they weren’t?”

Leon sighed. “Just asking, Ata-i. The last few miles were hard on them.”

“Hmm. They are fine now.” Mukua took a mouthful of stew. “Did you find what you sought?”

Leon and Jack exchanged a quick glance.

“Yeah, I suppose. What do you mean?”

“Does attacking Wells Fargo help you to miss your family less?”

Leon groaned. He knew what was coming. “No.”

“Then you did not find what you sought. That is because you can only find it in here.” And he tapped Leon’s chest.

“Maybe. But it still felt good.”

“Hmm.”

Jack dipped bread into his stew. “Did ya hear what happened to Dicks?”

“Who’s Dicks?” Gus ventured to ask.

“He’s the detective who,” Jack snapped a glance to Leon, “well, he was involved with the shooting.”

“Ya mean the bastard who killed Ella?”

Jack looked at Gus like he was an idiot.

Leon didn’t say anything. He ate his stew.

Gus shrugged at the daggers Jack sent him. “What?”

“Perhaps my *nefju* does not want to speak of it.”

“Who the hell is . . . what? Neph . . . ew?”

“Yes, Gus,” Leon spoke. “He’s the bastard who killed Ella.”

“Yeah, okay. What about ‘im?”

“He is dead,” Mukua sipped his whiskey. “It is said he took his own life, but this is not true. Another took it from him.”

Jack and Leon gazed at Mukua, each man frowning.

Jack broke the silence. “How did you know that?”

“It came to me in a vision.”

Leon sighed. He wished Mukua would not speak like this in front of the men. It caused them to doubt his sanity.

“What?” Gus nearly choked on his stew. “Are you crazy?”

Leon rolled his eyes.

Mukua shrugged. “Believe what you wish, but this is what I saw. Is it not true?”

“Yeah.” Leon cocked a brow at Gus. “That’s what happened.”

“Sheesh.” Gus poured himself another shot. “How the hell did he know that?”

“I dunno. But Dicks died in his bed, and Carlyle has ruled it as a suicide even though I know he knows it wasn’t. I figure it was Gabriella.”

“Oh yeah? Well good on her. Serves the bastard right.”

Leon smiled at his companions and raised his glass. “To Gabriella. She broke my heart, but damn, what a woman.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR THE LAST JOB

September 1879

Rex leaned against the porch railing of the hotel, pretending to read a paper. He tucked his long strands of white/blond hair behind his ears to dissuade the wind from flapping them in front of his eyes. He needed to keep a look-out; the armored, Wells Fargo coach was due at the bank anytime, and it was Rex's job to let the gang know when it arrived.

He frowned as wind caught the paper and caused the pages to fight against his grip. Finally, he gave it up as a lost cause and folded the paper under his arm. Needing to find something else to do, he took out a pre-rolled smoke and placed it between his lips. Striking a match, he cupped his hand around it and brought it to the fag to light it. But before it got half-way there, a small gust of wind blew the flickering flame out.

Rex sighed. He pulled out another match and tried again. This time, he brought the match close to the fag before striking it and managed to get it lit before the flame disappeared in a puff of smoke. He drew on it a couple of times to encourage the flicker to take hold, then inhaled for real. He closed his eyes as the flavorful vapors invaded his lungs then released it with a long, drawn-out sigh.

He frowned again as his long hair whipped against his face, and he brushed it away to tuck it back behind his ears.

Then his heart leaped when he spied the Wells Fargo coach already pulled up and parked in front of the bank.

Taking one more draw off his smoke, he dropped it to the boardwalk, squashed it out with his toe and headed to the livery.

Jiles stepped out of the bank, carrying the now empty strongbox back to the coach. He stepped around to the back door of the armored vehicle just in time for a flicker of white to catch his eye.

He did a doubletake, then gazed at the door to the livery as though staring at it would make things clear. He hadn't had a good look at the young blond outlaw who'd helped hold up the passenger stage, as he'd been far more focused on Nash. But he remembered the driver's description of him: long, straggly, white/blond hair that kept falling into the outlaw's eyes.

Is that who he'd just seen disappear into the livery? Would the gang dare to hit a bank here in Rawlins? This was a big town, with a newly

elected sheriff who claimed to know Nash and Kiefer on sight. On the other hand, it wasn't Nash or Kiefer checking out the bank. Indeed, those two were nowhere to be seen. And could he even be sure he had seen someone go into the livery, and if so, what were the chances it was the same man?

"C'mon, Jiles. Let's get goin'. We got a schedule to keep ya know."

Jiles set the empty strongbox on the floor of the coach and pushed it in. One of the two armed guards sitting on the bench inside the coach grabbed it and pulled in into its rightful place.

"Yeah." Jiles glanced at the livery again. This niggled at him, and he'd learned to pay attention to his niggles. "Liston, Bart, why don't you ride up on top with Konachy and head for our next stop? I need to check something out here. If it's nothing, I'll rent a horse and catch up."

"Oh." Bart scratched his sideburn. "Well, okay, if ya think it's that important."

"I do."

"Okay."

Bart nodded to his companion and exited the coach.

"Good luck. We'll see ya later."

The two men parted company. Bart climbed up top to ride shotgun while Jiles returned to the bank.

"Sheriff Morrison?"

The town sheriff had just finished overseeing the security of the large transfer. He chatted with the bank manager until he was interrupted by the Wells Fargo man.

"I thought I heard your coach pull out. You miss it or something?"

"I stayed behind on purpose. I think this bank is about to get robbed."

The manager's eyes popped. "What? But these funds just got here. How could anybody know about it?"

Jiles shrugged. "I dunno. But I think I saw a member of the Elk Mountain Gang out by the livery. He may have been watching us."

"Goddam that bunch." Morrison bared his teeth as though ready to bite. "I swear, Napoleon Nash is setting himself up for a fall." He turned on the agent. "All this grief we've been getting from that gang is your fault."

Jiles's brows shot up. "My fault?"

"Yeah. It was one of your men who killed his daughter. What the hell were you guys thinking?"

Jiles tapped his own chest. "I had nothin' to do with that. Hell, I didn't even know Dicks. You wanna stick that on somebody, then stick it on Carlyle. He was the one in charge of that fiasco. Look, I came in here to

give ya fair warning. I coulda just rode on out with the coach and let you deal with it. If you don't want my help, fine. I'll be goin'."

"Oh, just hang on." Morrison came down off his burn. "You say you recognized one of his men. Which one?"

"I don't know 'im by name, but he was with Nash when they robbed the passenger coach last month. I got a pretty good look at a couple of them fellas."

"So, what did he look like?" Morrison's burn was on the rise again. Sometimes dealing with idiots was more than he could bear.

Jiles's jaw set. Morrison had an edge to him that the Wells Fargo man found condescending. He felt inclined to walk out and leave the sheriff to his own devices. But he didn't.

"Average height, young. White/blond hair, long and stringy. Sorry, but I don't know his eye color; we didn't get that personal."

"That sounds like Rex Templeton." Morrison squinted as he visualized this description. "Nash often uses him as their little spy because nobody knew what he looked like. I guess that's changed. Chances are, Templeton was in town checking us out. He'll likely ride back to Elk Mountain and report to his boss, then they'll make plans. I expect we have a couple of days before they make their move."

"I can't say that I agree, Sheriff. Nash keeps himself well informed. He knew we had a special payroll on that passenger coach, and I'm willing to bet he knew exactly when this funds transfer was going to happen. Templeton was probably just waiting for us to get out of his way."

The manager remained silent through this exchange but finally he couldn't stay quiet any longer. "Sheriff, it's your job to protect this bank and its contents. We have a top of the line safe in here, but Napoleon Nash could open it, no doubt about it. You have to place a guard in here, day and night."

Morrison turned his bulk to the much smaller manager.

"You thinking you're gonna tell me my job?"

"Oh. Well, no, of course not. But you can understand my concern."

"And if preventing the robbery of your bank was all I wanted, then you'd have a good point."

"Well, then you'll place a guard here?"

"No."

"But—"

"Because I want that gang to rob this bank."

"But—"

"I wanna catch that bastard in the act. Let them think it's safe to come in here. We'll trap them like rats in a cage." He turned back to Jiles. "You want in on this?"

“You bet.”

“Fine. We’ll leave here all friendly like. Maybe take a stroll to my office. Then I’ll set my deputies up to watch this bank, front and back. And we’ll wait.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” came a baritone voice behind them. “Too bad you won’t have time to put it in place.”

The three men spun to face the intruders and were met by the dimpled smile of Napoleon Nash.

His grin broadened. “Hi.”

The two tellers behind the counter thought to hide, but Gus aimed his rifle in their direction. They raised their hands, not wishing to die for somebody else’s money.

Behind Gus, Rex locked the front door just in case some ill-timed customer decided to pay a visit.

Malachi and Lobo kept their rifles aimed at the tellers, while Gus walked around behind the counter to clear away any weapons and money that happened to be stashed back there.

Jack came forward, his Colt Peacemaker aimed at the lawman and his associates.

“Now why don’t you fellas just take yer weapons and slide them on over this way. Sheriff, you first. Good. Mr. Jiles. Nice ta see ya again. Slide your rifle on over here. Good. Now your revolver. Fine. Mr. Bank Manager?”

The manager’s hands were up and shaking. “No, no, I don’t carry a gun.”

“Uh huh. Open up your coat. Let’s see.”

The manager undid the buttons on his jacket and his waistcoat to prove he was telling the truth.

Jack was satisfied. “Fine. Now go back behind the counter there, and let my friend tie ya up. No worries though, we won’t take long.”

The three men moved that way, but Morrison and Jiles were both steaming. Neither of them could believe how they had so easily been taken in.

“What’s the matter, Sheriff?” Leon asked. “Aren’t you going to tell me how I’m not going to get away with this?”

Morrison glared at him. “No point telling you what you already know. You might get away with this heist, but your days are numbered. I’m going to see to it.”

“Well,” Leon smiled again. “There’s two men here who have each sworn a personal vendetta against me. What should I do with them, Jack?”

“You should stop foolin’ around and get down ta business.”

“Ah, my partner: he has no sense of humor.”

“C’mon, Nash,” Gus snarled as he herded the last three behind the counter. “Get on with it.”

Leon frowned and shook his head. “Nobody appreciates me.” Then he eyed the safe, and the smile returned to his face. He went to it and caressed its shiny surface. “Hello my love. May I have this dance?”

Jack sighed.

Twenty minutes later, the safe sat open and naked while Leon and Jack divvied up the stash into four saddlebags, then tossed them to their associates.

“That worked perfect,” Jack tossed a set of bags over his shoulder. “Ya got the amount of powder down just right. If anybody heard that, they’ll likely think it was just a horse fartin’.”

Leon chuckled. He loved it when everything went as planned.

Then the front door jiggled.

All heads pivoted to it.

“Hello!” came a lady’s voice from outside. “Aren’t you still open?” She knocked on the wood, then jiggled the handle again. “Hello?”

Morrison yelled from behind the counter. “The bank’s being robbed. Get my deputies!”

Gus swung around and whacked the sheriff with his rifle butt.

Morrison fell back, his nose bleeding, but he was still conscious. He kicked out a leg and tripped Gus, causing the outlaw to fall to the floor.

“Dammit!” Gus scrambled to his feet and raised the rifle for another hit, when Leon stopped him.

“Let’s go!”

Gus settled for sending the sheriff a nasty snarl, then turned and ran for the back door where Hank and Charlie held the horses.

“Dammit!”

Morrison and Jiles struggled to their feet.

The sheriff ran to the front door, and turning his back on it, he fumbled around with the lock until his fingers grasped it and turned the knob. He pulled the door open and stepped onto the boardwalk.

“C’mon! Hurry up!”

Two of his deputies were already on the run. One stopped to untie his boss, while the other entered the bank to assist the others.

“Get after them!” Morrison yelled at his subordinate.

“Where’d they go? I don’t see anybody.”

“They went out the back, you idiot. Get after them!”

“Wull . . .”

The deputy stepped back into the street, looking both ways but not seeing anything amiss.

Jiles ran outside, carrying his weapons, and he too, scoured the roadway.

The deputy straightened and pointed. “There! There they are.”

Jiles, looking the opposite direction, did the same; pointing to the other end of the street. “There they go.”

“Dammit.” Morrison threw down the leather strips that had tied him. “They’ve split up. Grab a horse, any horse. Let’s ride!”

The available horses, already aware that something was up, were wide-eyed and blowing even before the strangers ran at them. Snorting, they pulled back against their tethers and tried to avoid getting volunteered for the job.

They were out of luck though, as the four lawmen controlled their chosen animal and jumped aboard.

“Jiles, you and Henry go after those ones. Chuck, you’re with me. Let’s get ‘em.”

“Yeah!”

“Woo hoo!” Leon shouted into the wind. “Nothing like a refreshing gallop in the morning air.”

Jack laughed. Midnight flicked an ear back at the joyous sound then concentrated on keeping pace with his companion.

“Good job, Leon. That was brilliant, gettin’ the drop on ‘em before they had time ta organize.”

Leon pulled rein and turned to scan their backtrack.

“Yeah. They set themselves up nicely, didn’t they?”

“Yup.”

Jack, Hank and Charlie gathered in around their boss and all eyes looked back to the town.

Jack lifted himself in his stirrups and shaded his eyes from the sun despite already wearing a hat. “I don’t see nobody, but you can bet they’re comin’.”

Leon nodded, his eyes still sparkling from the adrenaline rush. “We’ll see if they last the distance. Most posses give up after a few hours.”

Hank coughed and spit the dirt from his throat. “I dunno. That Wells Fargo fella is pretty pissed at you.”

Leon raised his brows, placing a hand on his chest. “Me? The whole gang was part of that job.”

Hank grinned, showing a dark space where a tooth used to be. “Yeah, but that’s the thing about bein’ the leader, Nash. You get blamed for everything.”

“I like to think I get the credit for everything. Besides, maybe Mr. Jiles went after Gus.”

“Ha. Yeah, okay,” Charlie said. “But that sheriff didn’t look like a pushover, either. I think they’re in for the long ride.”

“Then we better get goin’,” Jack said. “I wanna get some distance between us and them before nightfall.” A gust of wind came up and pushed Jack’s hat from his head. He grabbed the stampede straps just in time and tightened them. “I sure hope this wind dies down, ‘cause you can bet we won’t be spendin’ the night in a warm bed.”

“You got that right.” Leon turned Chester away from town. “Let’s go.”

Night found the four outlaws huddled around a small fire, drinking coffee and gnawing on pemmican. The wind still blustered, bringing the night temperatures down, but Hank found a protected spot that kept most of the gusting away and allowed the risk of the fire.

“I wonder if they’ve given up,” Charlie mumbled around a mouthful of supper. “We ain’t seen no sign of ‘em.”

Hank swallowed. “I doubt it. They’re likely stayin’ in Encampment or somewhere. Nice, warm hotel room. Hot meal . . .”

Leon snorted. “What are you grumbling about? We just had a great payday. Not as good as the Clearing House, but—”

“Leon, give it a break.” Jack poured himself more coffee. “This was a good plan for our last job of the season. We’re more n set for the winter.”

“Yeah, but Hank wants to quit this life and buy himself a place. He can’t do that with his split from this.”

All eyes turned to Hank.

Hank squirmed. “Ah, no. That ain’t no more n talk. I wouldn’t know what ta do with that kinda life. I figure, if I ain’t been savin’ for it, it ain’t that important.”

Everybody nodded agreement.

“Well,” Leon sighed and dumped the dregs from his cup. “Probably time we called it a night. I’ll take first watch. Hank can take second, Charlie third, and Jack can take the last. Try and get some sleep. We’re halfway home, boys. Tomorrow night, we’ll be celebrating.”

“Yeah.” Hank and Charlie tapped cups.

“Wake up, fellas.” Jack kicked a couple of booted feet. “I’m surprised ya didn’t notice the coffee brewin’.”

“I noticed it,” came Leon’s mumble from under his coat, “I simply didn’t see the point of moving until it was ready.”

“Well, it’s ready. C’mon Hank, Charlie. Get up.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re movin’.” Hank stretched and yawned. He sat up but kept his coat and bedroll wrapped around him. “Dang, it almost feels like winter comin’.”

Charlie accepted a cup of steaming coffee from Jack. “That’s cause it is comin’, you fool. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Elk already has snow.”

Leon went over to the small fire and poured himself a cup. He dug out four pieces of pemmican and handed them around.

“Quick breakfast, fellas. Have the horses been fed?”

“Yup.” Jack bit off a piece of meat and chased it down with coffee. “I got them grained while the coffee was perking. All’s quiet out there if anybody’s interested.”

“I didn’t figure you’d be sitting here making coffee, if it weren’t.” Leon scratched his morning stubble. “Damn it’s cold.”

Twenty minutes later, the four men were on their way again.

Two hours into the day, the sun warmed the brush and the wind had died down. The travelling companions were in good spirits.

Hank glanced over his shoulder for the umpteenth time. “I don’t think they’re followin’ us. There’s no point for a sheriff ta come this far out of his district. He likely sent a telegram on ahead.” He chuckled. “Maybe he sent it ta Taggard.”

“I dunno.” Charlie pushed his gelding into a faster trot to keep up with the others. “I heard tell that the new sheriff in Rawlins don’t like ta lose. He just might push on inta Taggard’s area. I, for one, ain’t takin’ no chances.”

Leon helped Chester navigate an awkward area of trail. “I don’t even want to count on Taggard’s discretion these days. If that big sheriff from Rawlins has passed it over to Taggard, I expect he’ll come after us. And he knows all the ways into Elk Mountain.”

This was a sobering thought.

Nobody commented, but they pushed their horses to move out a bit faster.

Unlike Leon’s group, Gus knew they were being followed. They’d even sighted their pursuers through the spy glass when they’d taken a

moment to rest their horses. That night had been spent in cold misery, with nobody wanting to start a fire that would give away their location. The horses remained saddled, and nobody slept.

By midday, none were in a good mood. The outlaws pushed their tired horses up to the top of a steep hill and stopped them there just shy of the crest.

Gus dismounted and, taking the spy glass with him, scrambled up to the look out. He lay flat on his belly as he held the glass up to his eyes.

Rex crawled up beside him. "Can you see them?"

"Hang on." Gus scanned the landscape below them. He moved the glass to the right, then stopped and shifted it a couple of inches to the left. "Yup, there they are. No wait, there's just one of 'em." Gus scanned the scenery again. "Where the hell is the other one?"

"Which is it, the deputy or the Wells Fargo man?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, the sheriff, now he has his reputation, and he'll likely want to prove himself in his new job, so he might have a bit more incentive. That means his deputies are gonna have more incentive. The Wells Fargo man, not so much. He might be mad, but he's not gonna lose his job over this. The money was already in the hands of the bank when we took it. Could be he didn't like spendin' a night on the cold ground and went home."

"Hmm. You just might have a point. At least the sheriff went after Nash. Serves 'im right for takin' things this far. I tell ya, that arrogant little bastard is gonna be the death of us all."

Gus pushed himself away from the crest and headed back down to the horses.

Rex was right behind him. "Maybe. But ya gotta admit, he has good reason."

"Good reason, my ass. I don't know what the hell he was thinkin', bringing a wife and young'uns into this lifestyle. He was askin' for it. Now the man who killed his daughter is dead, so that oughta have been the end of it. But no, he's gotta keep pushin'. Damn that little upstart. I wish ta hell Cortez hadn't gone and got hisself kilt. Now he was a good leader."

"Well, I weren't running with Cortez, so I can't say." Rex mounted his horse and they waited for Gus to stash the spyglass in his saddlebag. "I'm making good money with Nash, so I ain't gonna complain."

Then, Rex coughed as though the wind got knocked out of him, and he fell forward against his horse's neck just as the rifle report assaulted their ears.

Rex's horse reared, dumping his rider to the ground, and he would have taken off running if Gus hadn't grabbed his reins.

"Dammit! Rex!"

Gus got the fleetest glimpse of Rex lying on his back, his unseeing eyes staring at the heavens as blood slowly spread out over the rocky dirt.

Then another shot echoed amongst the rocks, and Lobo's horse crumpled at the knees and went down.

Malachi's horse reared, but the outlaw stayed aboard. He grabbed Gus's horse as that animal panicked into him, bringing it to a halt.

"Let's go! Lobo, get on this one."

Lobo didn't wait for a second invitation. He ran to Malachi, grabbed hold of Gus's horses and leapt aboard.

Gus jumped onto Rex's horse and they took off.

More bullets followed them, and Lobo felt a hit to his left arm, but it was minor and only served to push the outlaws to hasten their gallop.

Leon's group kept to a steady lope, not wanting to wear the horses out in case a burst of speed was required.

They were less than an hour's easy ride from the Elk Mountain area, and then another hour riding through the winding trails and numerous gullies to eventually find themselves on one of the many tracks toward the hideout itself.

Leon glanced behind them yet again and there was no sign of any pursuit.

"Nobody. They probably all went after Gus. I hope they're okay."

"I dunno." Jack scanned the rocks ahead of them. "That don't sound right. They musta seen us split up."

Leon nodded. He knew Jack was right. "Maybe they lost our trail. It takes a good tracker to keep up with us. Most sheriffs don't make good trackers."

"Yeah."

"You don't sound convinced."

Then, off to their left, distant rifle reports bounced off the rocks around them. Every head swiveled that way and the horses were pulled up short.

"Damn." Charlie spit to the side. "Sounds like they found Gus."

Hank nodded. "Maybe we should go help 'em."

"No." Leon blocked his horse. "They're too far away. We'd never get there in time. C'mon, we'll head for Crazy Woman Junction. If we beat them there, we'll backtrack and check it out."

Then all plans were changed when they found themselves under attack.

More rifle reports, coming from behind the rocks above them sent dirt and rock chips flying. Without urging from their riders, every horse bunched under themselves and powered into a full gallop.

None of them needed urging; they knew where they were and how to get home. They also knew time was of the essence.

Hank and Charlie maneuvered in behind Leon, protecting their leader from the onslaught of bullets, and Charlie took a hit.

Still coming down from above them, the bullet sliced through Charlie's right shoulder then continued down and plowed a deep trough into his horse's neck. Both victims reacted to the shock, but neither faltered. The horse galloped on, keeping up with his herd-mates while Charlie clung to the saddle, determined to stay on board.

The group cleared the rocks and raced across open ground toward the gullies ahead, but one more lucky shot struck home before the pursuers came after them.

Jack's body jerked, and he dropped the reins as a bullet entered his side and exited out the front. His head swam and he lurched in the saddle, but Hank was up beside him and grabbed hold, preventing him from falling to the ground.

Leon glanced back to check for their pursuers and only then saw that Jack was in trouble. He started to haul on Chester, wanting him to stop.

Hank changed his mind. "No! I've got 'im. Keep goin'."

Another quick look, and Leon saw that Hank was true to his word. He had his horse running right up alongside Midnight, and his right hand clutched at Jack's coat sleeve, keeping him in the saddle.

Leon nodded and pushed Chester back to full speed. They had an edge on the lawmen, and if push came to shove, they'd stop and fight. It was four to two and even a stupid sheriff wouldn't buck those odds. One thing Leon had already figured out was that this sheriff was not stupid.

It seemed to take forever to reach the gullies, but once they did, they knew they were half-way safe. Leon led them unerringly through the twists and turns until they came through the other side. They galloped across the open field then disappeared into a stand of ponderosa pine and kept on going.

Reaching Crazy Woman Junction, they didn't stop. Turning onto Bear Crap Trail, the horses powered up the hill and headed for the look out.

Still not slowing down, Leon pulled his Remington and fired three shots into the air. One rifle shot sounded in response, and the outlaws knew they'd made it. One more glance behind and there was no sign of pursuit, but still, Leon didn't slow down. He had two wounded men in his group with no idea how serious the injuries were. He also knew there could be more wounded men coming in, if Gus and his party were lucky enough to escape their own ambush.

Leon galloped the group into the yard and headed straight for the leaders' cabin. He was vaguely aware of Mukua running from the barn, as he jumped down from Chester and ran to Jack. He got there just in time, as Hank lost his hold and Jack slid from the saddle. Leon grabbed him and eased him to the ground.

"Jack. Are you awake? Can you hear me?"

"Ya." Jack's voice was strained and consisted mostly of shallow gasps.

"Let me see." Leon unbuttoned Jack's coat to look at the wound. He went weak with relief. "It's not too bad."

"Ya ain't feelin' it from my end."

Leon twitched a smile. "It's in and out, Jack. Just through the flesh. You'll be okay." At least, this is what Leon said out loud. No bullet wound was risk free. Loss of blood and infection were only two of the things that could turn any injury life-threatening.

Then Mukua knelt beside him and placed a hand on Jack's arm. "You are lucky. You will be up and dancing with Brenda again in no time." He briefly turned his attention to Charlie. "How are you?"

Charlie stood, holding his arm. "I'm okay, Preacher. It's even stopped bleedin'. You tend ta Jack there, and I'll see ya in the bunkhouse."

"I'll get 'im cleaned up, Preacher," Hank offered, then glanced toward the bunkhouse and noticed a couple of the new hires hanging around outside the door, watching. "Hey! Get some hot water goin'."

One of the young men waved acknowledgement and both went inside.

"C'mon, Charlie. Let's get you sittin' down afore ya fall down."

"Yeah."

Mukua watched them go, then stood and put a hand on Leon's shoulder. "Help me get him into his room. I'll make some of my tea for both of them, and my salve. They will be okay. Where are the others?"

Leon stood and, together, they lifted Jack and headed into the cabin.

"I dunno." Leon turned worried eyes toward the entrance of the yard. "We heard rifle shots before we got hit. I hoped they would beat us here."

"Hmm."

Jack was barely conscious when they settled him on his bed.

Leon pulled off his boots while Mukua used a knife to cut away the blood-soaked jacket and shirts.

Ian, one of the recent new hires came in with bandages and hot water.

Mukua directed him to set the bowl and cloth onto the side table. He then took a pouch out of his inner pocket, opened it and mixed a handful

of ground up herbs and plants. The aroma that filled the room had a definite medicinal/earthy scent to it.

Ian stood at the foot of the bed, wondering what he should do.

“Will he be okay?”

Mukua dunked a cloth into the hot liquid and began to clean the blood away from the wound. “I will do my best.”

Ian chewed his lip. “Ahm, do you need anything else?”

“Yes.” Mukua reached into an inner pocket and took out a small pouch. “Get a cup of hot water from the stove and mix these herbs in it. Then bring it to me.”

“Oh. Yeah, okay. That sounds good.” Relieved at being given something to do, Ian took the pouch and retreated to the kitchen.

Leon took another cloth and soaked it in the bowl. “I don’t think Ian has ever tasted your teas.”

“Let us hope he never needs to.”

“Yeah.” Leon wrung out his cloth and sat down opposite Mukua and gently washed Jack’s forehead.

Jack’s eyes opened to slits, he groaned and his breathing continuing in short, shallow gasps.

“Hang on, Jack.” Leon whispered. “You’re home now. Mukua’s going to give you some tea.”

Jack groaned louder.

Mukua smiled. “He knows it will ease the pain and help him sleep.”

Leon nodded. “We need to clean his back, too.”

“Yes. Once he is settled, we will do that.”

Ian returned with the cup of tea and Mukua took it. He sniffed at the liquid and swirled it around to ensure its consistency.

Leon stood and, slipping his arm under Jack’s shoulders, gently eased him to sitting.

Jack’s head lolled to one side, but his eyes flickered, confirming his wakefulness.

“Here.” Mukua pushed the cup to Jack’s lips. “Drink this.”

Jack complied only because he had no choice. The first swallow caused him to snort and grimace, but Mukua was relentless and he got the liquid down his patient’s throat.

“Good. Lay him back down. We will give him a few minutes, then we can tend the wound in his back.”

Leon nodded and was about to re-moisten his cloth when two shots from the lookout caught their attention.

For a moment, Leon was torn; he didn’t want to leave Jack, but concern for the welfare of his other men tugged at him.

Mukua indicated the door. “Go. Ian and I will tend to Jack.”

Leon glanced at the young man still standing at the foot of the bed.

Ian paled slightly at the thought of helping to tend his larger-than-life hero, but then he smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I’ll help.”

“Okay.” Leon patted Jack’s arm. “Take it easy, partner. I won’t go far.”

But Jack had already drifted off and wasn’t even aware of his partner leaving.

Leon was down the steps and into the yard just as three riders galloped in and headed for the barn. He frowned, concern building with the knowledge that there should be four men with this group.

“Gus, what happened?”

Gus was off his horse before it fully stopped, and he came at Leon like a train at full throttle.

“You arrogant little bastard!”

“Wha—”

The punch to the side of his head surprised Leon more than it hurt, but he still staggered back and just barely kept his feet.

“Gus, what are you—?”

Then Gus’s snarling face was in his, and Leon felt his collar being grabbed and he was violently shaken.

“You bastard,” Gus yelled in his face. “Rex is dead, and it’s your fault!”

“Wh . . . what?” Leon was so shocked he didn’t even raise a defense.

Gus pulled back and landed another blow to the other side of Leon’s head then followed it with a punch to his midriff.

Leon went down and felt a kick hit his ribcage. His brain whirled with the devastating news, but as Gus continued to rain curses and blows upon him, he realized he’d better do something or he wasn’t going to walk away from this.

He rolled away from the blows and scrambled to his feet.

Gus growled and came at him again.

Leon held up a hand. “No, wait! Gus—” He scrambled backward to avoid the larger man, knowing the reason for the onslaught and not wanting to hit back.

Malachi and Lobo tried to grab Gus, but Gus ripped away from them and came at their leader again.

Another punch to his ribs sent Leon sprawling against the paddock fence.

Gus was on him, grabbing his coat and shaking him.

“You bastard!”

“Gus.” Leon barely got the word out, he was being shaken so roughly. “How? How is this my fault?”

“You and your damned vendetta!” Gus was so mad, Leon felt spit hit his face. “Ya just had ta push it, didn’t ya?”

“But it was a simple job. You can’t blame me—”

Gus roared and punched Leon in the head again.

Leon went down, but Gus grabbed him and hauled him back to his feet.

“It was that Wells Fargo agent,” Gus yelled. “The one you pissed off with your damned arrogance and flippant threats. They were on our trail right from the start. They never let up. He was out for blood and he got it. It shoulda been your blood, not Rex’s. You killed ‘im sure as shootin’ ‘im yourself!”

Leon didn’t answer. He couldn’t answer. He felt the responsibility and pain of Rex’s death far more than Gus could have imagined. He was wrung out and didn’t want to fight.

But he didn’t have a choice, because Gus hauled off and hit him again. He found himself against the paddock fence once more and decided he’d had enough. He waited for Gus to come at him and, ducking the punch he knew was coming, he came up fast and hard, catching Gus a stunning blow under the chin.

Gus staggered backward, his eyes wide with surprise. Then that surprise was replaced with a crazy rage and, with a loud bellow, he ducked and came on again like a mad bull.

Leon stepped aside and Gus ploughed head first into the fence post.

He dropped to the ground with a groan.

Leon stood still, looking down at the man. He struggled to catch his breath as the full impact of Gus’s words hit him.

He looked back at the other two men.

Malachi looked scared, worried that Leon was going to kill his buddy.

Lobo simply stood there holding his wounded arm. He generally liked a good fight, especially one that had Nash on the receiving end, but even he felt the pain over their lost gang member.

Gus groaned and stirred.

Leon’s attention went back to him and he prepared for another attack as the resilient man dragged himself to his feet.

The adversaries stared at each other, both of them covered in mud mixed with a splattering of blood.

“Well,” Leon panted, “what now?”

Gus wiped blood from his nose. “This ain’t over. You got a reckoning comin’.”

“No, Gus, this is over. You’ve said your piece. You’ve been on my case from the beginning, and I’m sick of it. Losing Rex is a blow, for sure.

He was a good man, the best. Dammit.” Leon coughed and spit blood to the side. “But if it wasn’t this lighting your fuse, it would be something else. If you can’t accept me as boss, then maybe you should leave.”

Gus barked a laugh. “Me leave? I was runnin’ this gang with Cortez long before you and your gunfighter nephew showed up. I say you leave. You’re gonna keep on raising the stakes until every member of this gang winds up dead. First it was Wes and Ed, then Murdoch, now Rex. Not to mention your own daughter. You’re poison, Nash.”

Leon stood silently, feeling hurt right down to his core. He looked around the yard and noted that every member who could stand was watching this confrontation. He also noted that no one came to his defense. Rex had been a popular and productive member of the gang and Leon knew, that to some degree, Gus was right: this was his fault.

He looked at the leader’s cabin and saw Mukua standing on the porch.

He turned back to Gus and jabbed a shaky finger at him. “I’m not going anywhere.” Then he turned, took a step and staggered. He caught himself, took a deep breath, straightened up, pushed his shoulders back and walked to his uncle.

Ian bit his lip, not sure what he should do.

Standing in the doorway of the cabin, he watched Napoleon Nash, his face a bloody mixture of hurt and anger, stride toward him.

Ian felt like he was witnessing something he hadn’t yet earned the right to be a part of, and the last thing he wanted was to intrude on his leader at such a time. But there was nowhere for him to go that wouldn’t put him in that man’s path. Opting for his only escape, he returned to Jack’s room and pretended to do something useful.

Leon came inside, went to the kitchen cabinets and took down the bottle of whiskey. He didn’t bother with a glass, but popped the cork and took a long swig.

“It is not true, *Napai’ aishé*, what Gus has said. Everyone chooses their own path, even the time and manner of their passing to the spirit world.”

Leon turned to face the Indian, but he could not meet the wise, old eyes. He leaned back against the counter and took another swig. The alcohol burned on its way down, but it did not relieve the tightness of his throat.

The two men remained silent as Leon fought his hurt.

He took another long swig of whiskey and wiped a sleeve across his eyes. He stared at the floor. He blinked and let out a deep sigh.

“I want to believe what you say, *Ata-i*, but I don’t know how. I thought I was the best leader this gang has ever had because I brought in good money for everyone. But I have not kept my men safe. I have led them into dangerous situations all for my own glory, and that is not what a good leader does. I have failed at everything. I could not even be a good husband or father. I could not even keep my own child safe.

“Rex was a good man, and a friend. I still can’t quite believe . . . And now Jack. Again. I have come close to losing him so many times. And usually, it’s because he’s protecting me. Even he knows I can’t look after myself; my mind is always in the clouds. You have said it, yourself. I spend too much time inside my own head. If I can’t even do that much, how can I expect to keep others safe? Maybe I should leave and let Gus take over. It’s what he’s always wanted.”

“Hmm. You are tired and hurt. Much has happened today to confuse your mind. I need to check on the injured horses now and make sure Malachi did as he should. Join me in the barn, and we will smoke on this matter. Jack is sleeping, and Ian is with him to keep an eye on things. He is actually hiding from you, but he still serves a purpose.”

Leon frowned as he glanced toward Jack’s bedroom. “He’s hiding from me? Why?”

Mukua smiled. “He is in awe of you and Jack. And now, after what has happened today, he feels he is intruding, that he has not been with the gang long enough to be party to such matters.”

Leon slumped. He didn’t feel worthy of anyone’s admiration.

“Come,” Mukua continued. “Let us smoke and talk. Bring the bottle with you so that I may enjoy a drink as well.”

Leon nodded and pushed himself off the counter. “Okay.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE CHANGE OF HEART

November 1879

Leon came up the porch steps and knocked the snow off his boots before entering the cabin. He stepped inside to the welcoming warmth and shed his coat and hat. He also pulled off his boots and brought them over to set in front of the fire to dry out.

Jack sat in the armchair, the blanket from his bed wrapped snugly around him in a warm cocoon. He was still pale and the blueish tinge under his eyes stubbornly refused to leave.

Leon smiled at him. "How you feeling? You hungry?"

"No. I had some soup earlier. There's still some on the stove if you want any."

"Oh." Leon went to the stove and dished himself out a healthy serving. He also ripped off a chunk of bread from the loaf on the counter, then sat at the table to eat.

Jack sipped his hot tea. "The horses all right?"

"Yup. Midnight enjoyed getting out with us for a ride. He and Chester seem to be good buddies."

"Hmm."

Leon stopped eating and glanced at Jack.

"You'll be riding him again soon enough."

"Soon enough woulda been two weeks ago. Why do it have ta take so long ta recover from bullet wounds?"

Leon chuckled. "I think there's something about a hole clean through your torso and all that blood loss that slows down the healing process. You should relax. It's winter. It's not like we have anywhere to go."

"Yeah, I suppose. How's Gus? He still mad at ya?"

"No more than usual. I have been thinking about what he said though, about Rex and the other fellas we've lost."

Jack frowned. "You ain't thinkin' he's right, are ya?"

"Not that it's my fault, no." Leon chewed his soup-soaked bread while his brain worked over-time.

Jack sighed. It didn't take much for him to know that Leon had something on his mind.

"What, Leon? What ya been thinkin'?"

"Well, that maybe it is time I left Elk Mountain."

Beat of silence.

"What? Ya wanna leave?"

Leon caught the hint of panic in Jack's tone and sent him a quick smile of reassurance.

"Not this instant. And maybe not at all. I'm just thinking about it."

"But why ya even thinkin' it? We got us a good place here."

"Yeah. But, maybe Taggard's right. Maybe Gus is right, too. I don't mean about it being my fault, but about this life we lead. That maybe the only way it's going to end is with us dead or in prison. We've lost four good men, two of them this season. We lost a couple more because they decided they wanted something different, maybe something better."

"But we can't leave as easy as them fellas did. Nobody knew about them, so they could start a new life. But us? I dunno, Leon."

"I know. That's why I've just been thinking about it. But I figure, come spring, maybe I'll take a ride down to Medicine Bow and have a talk with Taggard."

"Ya mean about that pardon stuff?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"For one, we've done a lot more damage since the governor first offered us that. What makes ya think he'll give it to us now?"

Leon shrugged. "I dunno. It's a risk. I go talk to Taggard, and he could simply arrest me. He said he would if he ever saw me again. You, too. Still, I think it might be worth asking." He gazed into his bowl as though the answers to the universe floated in his soup. "Who knows? Maybe if I get my pardon, Gabriella will . . ." he shrugged, "you know. Maybe."

"Yeah. Maybe. I guess that's worth a try, huh?"

"Hmm."

Well, ya ain't doin' it alone. That offer was for both of us. If yer gonna go for it, I'll go with ya."

Leon grinned. "I was hopin' you'd say that."

"Yeah, a course. Ahh, have ya talked to Mukua about this yet?"

"No. He suspects, but I wanted to discuss it with you first."

"He ain't gonna be happy."

"Yeah."

The following morning, Leon returned from his ride and led the two horses into the barn. He always liked the sound of their shod hooves clomping on the wooden floor of the aisleway; for some reason, he felt comforted by it. Especially now, with snow and chilly temperatures, the inside of the barn occupied by horses, always seemed warm and inviting.

He came to Chester's stall first and, tossing the reins across the animal's neck, he directed the gelding into the enclosure. Chester went

willingly, knowing that much of his breakfast remained from before their ride. Leon continued down the aisle and turned Midnight loose into his stall, who also went straight to the hay waiting for him.

Leon closed the stall door, then returned to Chester.

“Hey, c’mon you glutton. Don’t you know better than to eat hay with the bit still in your mouth?”

He gave Chester a push on the shoulder and the gelding raised his head. Leon unbuckled the throat latch on the bridle and pulled the leather over the impatient ears. Chester opened his mouth and used his tongue to push the bit out, but hay had become tangled around the piece of metal, and it didn’t want to drop. Chester pulled his head back to escape the bit, but he also didn’t want to lose that mouthful of hay. He chomped down on it, entrapping the hay and the bit with his front teeth.

Leon chuckled. “You’re going to have to give up that piece of hay before you can get to the rest of it. Come on, let it go.”

Leon grabbed the strands of hay sticking out of the horse’s mouth and pulled them out, but Chester came after them, his lips smacking in an attempt to retrieve the tasty strands.

“Let go.” Leon grabbed the last strands and pulled, finally allowing the bit to come along with them.

Chester snorted, indignant that his human had stolen food right out of his mouth. But he forgave quickly and dropped his head to carry on eating the hay that was still piled in the corner.

Leon hung the bridle on a peg outside the stall, then returned to uncinch the saddle and remove it from the thickly coated back. He took it out and placed it on its own saddle rack, then returned to the stall to give his horse a quick grooming.

He was just finishing up when Mukua came into the barn, carrying a stack of chopped wood for his stove.

“It is a good day for a ride,” he said. “I will get Buckwheat out later before it snows again.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

Mukua continued on to his room in the back. He pushed open the door with his foot and placed the wood down on the floor beside the stove, ready for use.

Leon followed him. “Can we talk?”

“That is why you are here. I put coffee on to perk before I went out for wood. It should be ready now.”

He set two tin cups down on his table, grabbed a towel and took the coffee pot from the top of the stove. He motioned to Leon to sit as he filled the cups.

“Do you want any sugar in it this time?”

“No. I’ll take it black.”

“Hmm.” Mukua took a pinch of sugar from a small container and sprinkled it into his own coffee and gave it a stir. He tasted it, nodded with satisfaction then sat down.

“Too bad there is no milk left. We should have our own cow, that way we wouldn’t have to get milk and cream from Bear Creek.”

“Yeah, but we’d have to keep that cow in calf if we wanted any milk. And where are we going to find a bull?”

Mukua grinned. “Bear Creek.”

“And where would we keep this cow and calf? In here?”

Mukua shrugged, then stood up and went to the door in response to a quiet meowing. He opened the door and a gray tabby barn cat trotted in and went straight to a cozy blanket arranged conveniently next to the stove. She yawned, looked at Leon like an intruder in her domain, then curled up for her morning snooze after a night of catching mice.

Mukua shut the door and returned to the table. “We could always find room. We could extend the chicken coop or build an extra stall on the barn. That way the cow would have company.”

Leon smiled. “You do prefer animal company over people, don’t you?”

“I prefer cream in my coffee.”

Leon laughed. “Okay, *Ata-i*. Come spring we will consider getting a cow. Or maybe a goat.”

“Yes. A goat would be good. But this is not why you came to talk. You have been unhappy this winter, I know. The weight of your loss still hangs heavy on you.”

“I suppose. I’ve been thinking and, well, there’s no reason to decide anything yet. I have all winter for that, but it has been on my mind lately that, come spring, well. Ah, I might ride down to Medicine Bow and have a talk with Taggard.”

“Hmm. He will be surprised to see you.”

“Ha! Yeah, I expect so.”

“I do not think he is happy with you. A meeting may not go well.”

“I know. It is a risk.”

Mukua nodded. “Did he not say he would arrest you if he ever saw you again?”

“Well, yes. But I’m sure he didn’t mean that literally.”

Mukua cocked a brow at him.

Leon averted his eyes. “I mean, I’d be going there to talk with him, not rob his bank. I’m sure he’ll appreciate the difference.”

“I am not so sure. I doubt the offer of a pardon is still on the table. The reward on you is more than I have seen on any man, and it does not matter if you are alive or not.”

Leon couldn't help the prideful grin. "And yet, I'm still a free man. They can't catch me, *Ata-i*, and if they do, they can't hold me. I think the governor might just be willing to take any offer given to get me to stop making fools of them all."

"Or, he can simply have you killed. Problem solved."

Leon huffed. He knew this conversation was going to be difficult, but he hadn't realized how much so. He sighed and thought about a different tactic.

"I can't continue like this. I should have listened to Taggard ages ago. When I think of how much I lost because I didn't listen to him . . ."

Mukua reached for the coffee pot and replenished their cups. "Yes."

"Jack says he will come with me, and try for it, too."

"Of course. He will go where you go."

"All the more reason why I need to make some smarter choices." Leon watched the older man and noted the sadness in his eyes. "I could talk to Taggard again, about including you in this. You could come with us."

Mukua reached for his pipe and fixins'. "No. I am too old to change my ways. Besides, they say I murdered their government man and, I suppose, in their eyes, I did. I do not regret it, but there will be no pardon for me. But, for you and Jack, maybe. It could be a good thing."

"Yeah. I think so. At least it's worth talking to Taggard about it. Gus, at least, will be happy. He'll finally get to be leader."

"Hmm, Gus." Mukua frowned as he considered the cagey outlaw. "I'm not as agile as I once was. He may not want me to stay on here."

"What? You're the best healer this gang has ever had, for people and animals both. And the fellas like talking with you. They value your wisdom. Gus would be a fool to send you packing." Leon pursed his lips as a thought struck him. "Then again, Gus never was one for common sense."

Mukua waved the concern away. "Do not worry about this. Even with my little stove, the winters are getting harder every year. Perhaps I will go down to New Mexico and visit my distant relatives."

Leon laughed. "Yes, very distant."

"Sometimes they are the best."

December 1879

As winter took hold, and the one-year anniversary of Ella's death came and went, Jack wondered if Leon had forever let his daughter go.

Leon kept to himself on that anniversary, not even responding to Mukua's offer to talk. He disappeared into his room and remained there that whole day and night. When he finally emerged, he appeared refreshed. His mood was light and the sparkle returned to his eyes. He tucked into breakfast with a healthy appetite, then submerged himself in his plans for another successful season of thievery. His reasons being that if Taggard said no, they would need jobs to carry on business, and if he said yes, then Gus would need them.

Jack figured he did it simply to stay busy. Just because Leon didn't talk about something or someone, it didn't mean it wasn't in his thoughts. Jack had seen him do it before; he buried things that hurt too much. Is this what he had done with Ella? He knew it was the Shoshone way, to release the dead to the spirit world and then consider it rude to speak of them again. Had he pushed Ella so deeply into his soul it was as though she never existed?

But Gabriella and Hannah still lived. And yet, it seemed that wherever he had stored Ella away, he also stored his wife and surviving daughter. His one brief mention of a possible reconciliation was the last he spoke of them for many a year.

Spring 1880

Leon sat on his bed facing his book shelves. He couldn't pull himself away from his decade old collection. Math books, algebra, philosophy, religion along with classical and fictional stories from England and east of the Mississippi. He knew them all intimately and felt an aching in his heart at the thought of leaving them behind.

Gus will probably use them for tinder.

He sighed, racking his brains to come up with a solution.

Who can I give these to if I don't come back? Josey? Ha, no. Maybe I can donate them to the library in Cheyenne, if they have one. I suppose I could ask Taggard if he knows of anyone who could use them. If I don't come back here then obviously, we'll be on speaking terms. That is if he doesn't simply arrest me. Hmm. Well, I guess I have time to figure it out. Chances are I'll be back here anyway.

A knock on his door brought him out of his reverie.

"You about ready?"

Leon nodded though Jack couldn't see him. "Yeah, I'll be right out."

He stood, grabbed his saddlebags and left his bedroom.

"Oh, Gus. I didn't hear you come in."

“When I see signs of you two gettin’ ready for somethin’, I figure you’re tryin’ ta sneak out on us. Pull a little job on your own?”

Leon sneered at him. “What’s the matter? Don’t you trust me?”

Gus snorted. “No. Why should I?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Damn it, Gus, you’ve been cantankerous all winter. I mean, more n usual. Ain’t you over that disagreement yet?”

Gus didn’t answer, but turned a hard eye to Leon.

Leon ignored it. “Jack and I always head down the mountain in the spring, you know that. I want to check out the areas we’re going to hit this season. I figure, we’ll be gone about two weeks. When we get back, it’ll be time to organize the first job. By then, I expect to see this place up to snuff. There’s repairs need doing from the winter wear. Might as well get them done.”

“You don’t need ta tell me what needs ta get done around here.”

“Yeah, okay.” Leon emptied his coffee cup. “Just saying. We’ll see you when we get back.”

“Or maybe you can just not bother comin’ back at all.”

“Gus.” Jack stepped in. “Now I thought that was settled.”

Gus sent a smirk to the gunman. “That ain’t nowhere near settled.”

Leon turned on his gang manager. “Look, Gus, now’s not the time. We’ll discuss it when we get back, all right? For now, just get the fellas ready. I’ve got a busy season planned for us. Why don’t you just focus on that for now.”

The three men headed outside.

“Fine. For now.” Gus headed for the bunkhouse. “But when you get back, it’s gettin’ sorted, one way or another.”

“He don’t know how right he is,” Jack said as they walked across the yard.

“Yeah.”

As they approached the barn, Mukua walked out, leading Chester and Midnight.

“They both just finished breakfast, so don’t push them too hard.”

“I know, *Ata-i*, we’ll take it easy.”

Saddlebags were thrown over rumps and tied down.

Jack mounted, then seeing a look pass between Leon and Mukua, he eased Midnight away to give them some privacy.

Leon met Mukua’s eyes and smiled with unease. He didn’t like leaving the old Indian here.

Mukua put a hand on his shoulder and left it there.

“Get word to me, if you can. If I do not hear from you, I will think the worst.”

“Perhaps you will see the outcome in a vision and know, even before I do, what is happening.”

“Hmm, perhaps. But visions are unreliable and don’t always come when I want them to.”

“All right, *Ata-i*, I will send word if I’m able.”

“Good. Be careful, and listen to Jack. He is wiser than you, though you are getting better. I am proud of you for going after this, *Napai’aishe*. I will smoke on this and pray to the spirits to help guide you.”

“Thank you, *Ata-i*. I will miss our talks.”

“Hmm. Yes.”

Leon placed both his hands on his uncle’s shoulders, and the two men leaned forward to touch foreheads.

“Take care of yourself. Don’t let Gus push you around.”

“May your mother and grandfather walk beside you and keep you safe.”

A mutual pat on the shoulders, and the men separated.

Leon took one last look at his old friend, then turned and mounted his horse.

Mukua waved at Jack. “May your horses travel sure-footed and fast, and may your money never run out.”

Jack smiled and waved back. “Goodbye, Preacher-man. May your teas always be bitter, but your medicine sweet.”

Mukua laughed, which was rare for him.

Then the partners turned and trotted away from the yard, not knowing if they would ever return.

“Have ya come up with a plan yet?”

“A plan?”

“Yeah, about how we’re gonna talk ta Taggard without gettin’ our heads shot off.”

“Oh. Well. I figure if we wait until he’s at home, we can simply knock on his door. Guns drawn, of course.”

“Uh huh.”

“We won’t even give him the chance to get the drop on us, because we’ll get the drop on him first.”

“Okay.”

“Well, then we’ll tell him what we want. If he says no, we’ll leave. If he says yes . . .”

“Yeah? What do we do if he says yes?”

“Well.” Leon pursed his lips. “I haven’t quite got that figured out yet.”

“Great.” Jack gave Midnight a nudge to catch up. “Ya know, he could say yes just to get us off our guard. He could set us up real easy.”

“I know. But I don’t think he’ll do that. I’ve known Taggard a long time; he won’t turn on me. He’ll say yes or he’ll say no, and I’ll have to accept either one.” He sent his nephew a pointed look. “We’ll have to trust him, Jack. You knew that before we started out on this.”

“Yeah, I know. At the Elk, it seemed reasonable enough, but now that we’re gettin’ closer, I ain’t so sure.”

Leon brought Chester to a halt and Midnight stopped beside him.

“If you’re having second thoughts, you’d best say so now.”

Jack leaned on his saddle horn. “Dammit. I dunno, Leon. If I say I wanna turn back, will you come with me?”

“No.”

The two men sat their horses in silence.

Leon could see that Jack was torn.

He sighed.

“I can understand you not wanting to take the risk, Jack. But I’ve been hit hard. Too hard. I don’t think I could take another year like this one. Not to mention, Gus is pushing. He’s not going to stop, short of me kicking him out of the gang. But I can’t do that. He’s right, he’s been here longer than us. By rights, he should have had leadership after Cortez died.

“I’m tired, Jack. I pushed myself beyond the limit, all for revenge. And I took you and the gang over the edge with me. Losing Murdoch was bad enough, but Rex?” He sighed. “It was fun up until last year, then everything kind of went sideways. Taggard was right; it’s only going to get worse. I don’t want to die, and I sure don’t want to go to prison.”

“Yeah. Ya have a point there. But it seems ta me that we’re walkin’ straight toward prison. I don’t trust Taggard.”

Leon frowned, focusing on a solution.

“How about you head over to Rock Creek? I’ll go to Medicine Bow and talk to Taggard. That might be the best idea anyway. Then, if Taggard does turn on me, you can get me out. If he doesn’t, I’ll send word.”

Jack tightened his brow.

“You expect me ta let you ride into Medicine Bow without backup?”

“But you will be backing me up. Just from a distance.”

“Yeah, too far a distance. I don’t like it.”

“Well, what do you want to do? We can’t sit here all day.”

“You got that right, Nash. Get your hands where we can see ‘em!”

The partners locked startled gazes, then as one, their expressions turned to disbelief.

Four men with rifles at the ready emerged from the scenery. One of them was only too familiar.

Leon smiled as he raised his hands. “Howdy, Mr. Jiles. What brings you and your friends out this way?”

“You.” Jiles rode up to Nash and helped himself to the outlaw’s Remington. “It seems you forgot that we know about this route now. We’ve been camped out here for five days, just waiting for you to emerge from your rat hole. It’s a bonus to get both of ya. Howard, get his gun.”

Howard was already taking over Jack’s Peacemaker and scowled at Jiles for thinking he needed to be told.

Leon’s smile twitched, already noting discord within the group.

“Since you obviously overheard us talking, you already know we are on our way to Medicine Bow to see Sheriff Murphy. It’s awfully kind of you to offer to escort us.”

The four lawmen snorted.

“You’re not going to Medicine Bow, Nash. You’re on your way back to Rawlins. We got orders to bring you in alive if possible. The sheriff there is looking forward to a few hours with you in a cell. We’ll be sending word to Carlyle, too. You can’t imagine how this is gonna make his day.”

Leon’s smile slipped and he swallowed at the thought of ending up in Carlyle’s custody again.

Jiles smirked, seeing the outlaw’s façade weaken. Then he turned to Jack. “Carlyle didn’t say nothin’ about you, Kiefer. Keep that in mind if you’re planning on doing something stupid.”

“I never plan on doin’ anything stupid,” Jack said. “But I expect if ya wanted to, you’d a shot me just for breathin’. Ain’t that how you took out Rex Templeton? No warnin’ and in the back.”

Jiles shrugged. “Whatever works. Kitchum, Elliott, tie ‘em up. And make it tight.”

The two junior members of the posse moved in to do their duty as Leon sent Jack a warning not to push this man.

Jack didn’t appear in the mood to listen.

Two hours later Leon was still talking.

“It really would be much easier if you took us to Medicine Bow. It’s closer. Who knows what could happen between here and Rawlins, and it would save you fellas at least half a day.”

“Dammit, Nash. Shut up.” Jiles turned in his saddle and glared back at the outlaw leader. “I heard tell you like to talk, but I’m getting tired of listening to ya. One more word outta you and I’m gonna gag ya.”

“Oh well, if you put it that way. I’m just trying to make your job a little easier—”

“Shut up!”

Throughout Leon’s jabbering, Jack did his part by remaining silent and working on the leather thongs that bound him. Practice had taught both of them how to loosen the knots, bit by bit, without needing to move the hands or pull against the straps. It was slow, tedious work, and often left his wrists chafed, but it had gotten them out of more than one tight situation when ropes were used instead of cuffs. All it took was for Leon to find enough to say to distract and irritate their captors so they wouldn’t notice anything Jack might be up to.

When Leon realized he had pushed the lawmen as far as he could without repercussions, he rolled his eyes at Jack as though in jest of the agents. Jack shrugged his shoulders and nodded. Two simple, apparently innocent gestures that conveyed a full conversation between the partners.

Then Leon took his turn. Using the same technique, he had also been working the bonds as he talked, but knowing that eyes were on him, he had been cautious so he still had a ways to go.

Jack stepped up to help. “Ahh, fellas, ya know my partner has a point; Medicine Bow is a lot closer than Rawlins, and we do kinda prefer the sheriff there, too.”

“It don’t matter what you prefer, Kiefer. And I’m tired of hearin’ about it.”

“What? I ain’t said two words since we started.”

Jiles turned again and snarled at the gunman. “I’m tired a hearin’ from either one of ya. Don’t you never shut up?”

“All the time. Nash is the talker, not me. But ah, if we ain’t stoppin’ for lunch or anything, I could use the privacy of a tree right about now. Ya know what I mean?”

Howard smirked. “Maybe ya shouldn’t a drunk so much coffee.”

“I wouldn’t a if I’d known we were gonna run into you fellas.”

“Too bad,” Jiles called back. “We ain’t stoppin’ until we make camp for the night.”

Jack sighed. “I sure do hate to ruin this saddle.”

Leon smiled at his partner. “I’m sure Wells Fargo won’t mind reimbursing you. You know, to make up for all the inconvenience and embarrassment.”

Howard laughed. “You sure are long on imagination, Nash. Maybe you expect to be put up in the hotel for the night, too.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. That would be nice, thank you. Wouldn’t that be nice, Jack? You ready for a hot bath and a steak supper?”

“I’m ready if you are.”

“You two are a hoot,” Mitchum corkled. “Hot bath and a—Hey!”

Leon and Jack had inched their way up to ride alongside each of the young men who were leading the outlaw horses. As soon as both were in position, Jack stooped over and, grabbing the top of Mitchum’s boot, heaved up and toppled the man right out of the saddle.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Leon use the same tactic on Elliott and the two lawmen hit the ground hard and rolled down the shallow embankment. Jack had Midnight’s reins gathered before the two remaining lawmen could react and, with a yell, he booted the gelding forward, making for the safety of the trees.

Leon was right behind him but was just a smidgen of a second too late.

Howard reacted fast and, kicking his horse forward, he ploughed into Chester.

The chestnut scrambled to keep its feet, but a hind hoof tipped off the embankment, and he lost his balance. He reared and toppled, hitting the ground hard, then sliding to the bottom of the decline.

Leon was thrown clear, but he also rolled down the hill before coming to a hard stop at the bottom. Quick as a wink, he scrambled toward the rifle Elliott had dropped. He could hear a horse coming after him, but he didn’t change course. He grabbed the rifle just as the horse hit him from behind and send him sprawling.

Spitting dirt out of his mouth, he rolled onto his back and brought the rifle around with him. But then Howard was in his face. A kick from that man loosened Leon’s grip on the weapon, and he dropped it. In his desperation, he rolled over and tried to grab it again, but the butt from Howard’s rifle hit him across the jaw and knocked him flat onto his back again. Then a booted foot came down upon his wrist and dug in.

Leon gasped as his right wrist was crushed under the weight of the lawman. Then the business end of the rifle was in his face, and he knew he was done.

Howard spit, then snarled at his prisoner. “The only reason I don’t blow your brains out right here and now is because Carlyle wants you alive.” He smiled with wicked pleasure. “I expect by the time he’s done with you, you’ll be wishin’ I had shot ya.”

The crushing weight lifted from his wrist and Howard grabbed Leon by the shirt and pulled.

“Get on your feet.”

Leon struggled to stand as Howard hauled him up and shoved him toward the other two agents.

Mitchum and Elliot appeared both disheveled and embarrassed that they had been so easily un-horsed. The looks they sent to their remaining prisoner suggested that Leon could be in for a rough ride.

Mitchum got hold of Chester who, fortunately, looked none the worse for wear after his tumble down the embankment, and all of them made their way up to road level.

Leon felt dazed, and his head hurt. He tasted blood and could feel more of the liquid seeping from his nose. His hands and face had gravel burns; his right wrist throbbed and had no strength in it. He knew it wasn't broken but wasn't going to be of much use for a while.

"Christ," Howard cursed as he shoved Leon toward Elliott. "Tie 'im up again. And this time, tie his damned hands to the horn and his feet to the stirrups." Then he stepped forward and grabbing Leon by his shirt, gave him a shake. "And I don't wanna hear one more damn word come outta your mouth. You even so much as sneeze and I'll break your teeth." And he shook his rifle at Leon to prove his point.

Leon swallowed the blood he had intended to spit out.

They all turned at the approach of a horseman.

It was Jiles, and he was alone.

"Aw, damn it," Howard griped. "He got away?"

"For now." Jiles pulled rein and looked at the mess that was Leon. "Looks like you're gonna get your wish, Nash. Howard, you and Elliott get him into Medicine Bow. Mitchum, you come with me. I know I hit Kiefer so he ain't gonna be hard ta track. Once we get him, we'll meet you in town. Send a telegram to Carlyle, let im know we got his man. Sheriff Morrison is just gonna have ta wait his turn."

"Okay. Good luck."

Mitchum mounted his horse and joined Jiles on their manhunt.

Elliott gave Leon a push into Chester and indicated he better find a way to mount.

Dusk found the diminished posse dismounting in front of the Medicine Bow Sheriff's Office.

Taggard stepped out onto the boardwalk just as Howard got Leon untied from the saddle.

"Jesus Christ." Taggard stepped toward the prisoner. "What the hell did you do to 'im?"

Howard snarled as he grabbed Leon's bound hands and hauled him off the saddle.

Still unsteady after his ordeal, Leon staggered and went to his knees.

Howard pulled him up. "He and his partner made a run for it. He pulled a rifle on me, so as far as I'm concerned, he got what he deserved."

Taggard sighed, looking at the bruises on Leon's face. "Dammit." He glanced around as the younger agent joined them. "Where's Kiefer."

"He got away," Howard said. "But our boss, Agent Jiles, went after 'im. He won't get far."

"Uh huh. You fellas might be in for a disappointment. Well, c'mon, bring him inside."

Howard gave Leon a shove, causing the outlaw to trip on the edge of the boardwalk and stumble forward.

"Dammit!" Taggard'd had enough. "Stop pushin' 'im around." He took Leon by the arm, claiming custody, and led him into the office. "Ottis, go get the doc."

Taggard's over-sized deputy, Ottis Gilmore, pushed himself off the door jamb and eyed the new prisoner. "Doc'll be sittin' down ta supper right about now, Sheriff. Can't it wait?"

"No, it can't wait." Taggard's tone betrayed his mood. "Get him."

Ottis straightened and took notice. "Yessir, Sheriff. I'll be right back."

Taggard led Leon over to the first cell, untied his hands then locked him in.

Neither friend said a word to the other.

Taggard turned his back and joined the two agents who stood by his desk.

"What now? You just leavin' 'im here?"

"For now," Howard said. "I'll be sending a telegram to Detective Carlyle and waiting for an answer."

"Carlyle? What's he got to do with this? Nash will be moved to Cheyenne to stand trial. There's no need to call Carlyle in for that."

Howard puffed up at being questioned. "Well, Carlyle wants to have a few words with Nash once he's moved to Cheyenne. Don't worry, we'll transfer him over to the Cheyenne authorities once Carlyle gets through with him. What's left of 'im, that is."

"No, you ain't. I'll deliver Nash to Cheyenne myself before I'll let him fall into that man's custody again. Nash is my responsibility now, and I don't see any good reason for you fellas ta still be in my town after breakfast tomorrow."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Sheriff, but we're meeting Agent Jiles here once he has Kiefer in custody again. I expect he'll be along shortly." He glanced back at the occupied cell. "Then we'll all be leavin'."

Taggard snorted. "You are not taking Nash with you. This is my town and my jail." He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out the required paperwork. "Sign this, and that'll be the end of it."

Howard glanced at the top sheet and smiled. "I am not turning the prisoner over to your custody, Sheriff. That's the end of it."

“He’s in my jail, he’s in my custody, whether you like it or not.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Yes, we will. I don’t care if your man doesn’t get back here tonight. You two will leave my town tomorrow morning. Just the two of you. That’s all I’m gonna say about it.”

Howard smirked but nodded at Elliot. “Let’s go. I need a beer. Good night, Sheriff.”

The Wells Fargo agents left just as Ottis came in, the doctor on his heels.

Taggard’s expression changed from irritation to relief.

“Oh, hey Doc. Good to see you. Sorry to drag you away from your supper.”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say. What’s so danged important?”

Taggard nodded to the cell. “Check over the prisoner, make sure nothin’s broke.”

The Doc went to the cell and peered in.

Leon looked at him with sad eyes.

Doc sighed. “Oh Christ. Bring some soap and hot water. Get ‘im cleaned up.”

Ottis brought in two supper trays and set them on the desk in front of his boss.

“You sure he’s gonna eat? It’d be a shame ta waste it.”

“He’ll eat. Doc said he’s just bruised but not broken. You go on home, Ottis. I’ll cover the night shift.”

Ottis frowned. “You sure? You’ve been up all day. He don’t look like much of a threat ta me.”

“I need to be here tonight. I’ll be fine. I can always catch a few winks on the cot in the back.”

“Oh well, okay. If you’re sure.”

“Yup. I’ll send for you if I need you.”

“Fine. Goodnight.”

Ottis left the office, still grumbling about it not being a wise idea.

Taggard followed along behind. As soon as his deputy was gone, he locked the door and pulled the blinds. He went to the stove, poured a cup of coffee and picked up one of the dinner trays. The cell door hadn’t been locked again after the doc left, so Taggard simply nudged it open with his foot and approached Leon.

“Here. Eat something.”

Leon looked up at the tray and coffee cup. The aromas coming from both caused his stomach to grumbled.

“Thanks.”

When Taggard returned with his own coffee and supper, Leon was just placing his empty cup onto the floor.

Taggard frowned. “You want a re-fill?”

“No. Not yet anyway. It just went down real good.”

“Hmm.” Taggard sat on the opposite bunk. “So, what the hell, Leon. How did you let those yahoos get the drop on ya?”

“For one thing, their leader, Jiles isn’t a yahoo. He’s an experienced agent with a grudge.”

“Ha. What a surprise. You’ve earned a lot of those.”

“Hmm.” Leon swallowed his mouthful of meatloaf and gravy. “On top of that, Jack and I were in the middle of a discussion. You may not believe me, in view of how things have played out, but we were on our way here to see you.”

“See me? What for? I can’t protect you, Leon. I told you that.”

“I know. I know. But . . .” Leon hesitated, stirring the mashed potatoes with his fork. “It’s been a hell of a year, Taggard. I’ve lost some good people. People who mattered.”

Taggard’s gaze softened. “I know.”

“I should have listened to you. You were right all along. I’m hoping maybe the governor might see fit to consider that deal again.”

Taggard nearly choked on his carrots. “The deal? You mean the pardons? After the year you just put in?”

Leon sat up straight and met Taggard’s eyes. “I know it’s a long-shot. That’s what Jack and I were discussing when we got ambushed. He got cold feet about it. He doesn’t trust you. He figured you’d arrest us and be done with it. I suppose now it’s a moot point anyway.”

“Dammit, Leon, what the hell am I supposed to do with this? Are those yahoos really going to turn you over to Carlyle?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t doubt it for a minute. I guess Carlyle figured our little discussion wasn’t over yet.” He gazed into the far corner of the cell, his expression tired and worried. “He damn near killed me last time.”

“Yeah, I know. Look, I’ll do what I can to see you handed over to the proper authorities in Cheyenne. After that, I won’t have much say.”

“You could talk to the governor. I mean, we’ll be right there. Isn’t it worth a shot at least?”

Taggard set his dinner tray aside and leaned back against the bars. “Yeah, I suppose it is. Even with the increase in the reward, dead or alive, nobody can catch you. You’ll break away from this situation just like you

always do, and I already know that Jiles ain't gonna be bringing Jack in. Governor Hoyt might see this as an opportunity.”

Leon smiled through his weariness. “Yeah.”

Taggard heaved a sigh, then stood up. “You want that re-fill now?”

The dimples put in an appearance. “Yeah.” He handed Taggard the cup.

The sheriff went to the stove and poured out more coffee. This was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX LAW ABIDING CITIZENS

Taggard was startled out of sleep by the loud banging on the outside door. He groaned, then forced himself to get up. Feeling his way to the lamp on the side table, he lit the wick and exited the back room. Yawning, he stepped to the side of the door as more banging rattled the hinges.

“Who is it?”

“Agent Jiles from Wells Fargo. Open up.”

Taggard groaned. “Just a minute.”

He went to his desk and set the lamp down, then turned up the main lights in the office. He glanced into the cell to check on the prisoner, but he appeared to be asleep.

More banging on the door ticked him off. “Hang on, I’m coming.”

He opened the door and, not surprisingly, there was only one man standing on the threshold.

Jiles stepped inside, the weariness and frustration in his eyes telling their own story.

“Mr. Jiles. Having a bad night?”

Jiles growled at him. “Kiefer’s days are numbered. He’s lost without Nash. We’ll get him.”

“Uh huh. What can I do for you that couldn’t wait for a more reasonable hour?”

Jiles walked over to the cell and assured himself that the prisoner was still there.

He turned to face Taggard. “Just letting you know I’m in town. I expected to find you here, considering who you have in your jail. No need to worry. I’m gonna get a few hours shut-eye and then we’ll take him off your hands.”

“Like I told your man: Nash is in my custody now. I will be taking him to Cheyenne to ensure he is handed over to the proper authorities.”

Jiles smiled. “No paperwork was signed. Just because he’s in your jail doesn’t place him in your custody. Make sure he’s ready to travel by 8:00 am.”

Without waiting for acknowledgement, Jiles headed for the front door and left.

Taggard followed and locked it. He headed back to his desk, shaking his head and grumbling.

“Persistent, aren’t they?” came the gravelly voice from the cell.

“Uh huh. I’m gonna light the stove and get the coffee going. You want some?”

Leon swung his legs to the floor, keeping his blanket wrapped around himself. "Sure. I'm up now."

"Don't these men learn from past experience?" Taggard lit the prepared kindling and got the fire going. "With Jack still loose, there's no way they're going to get you to Cheyenne. What a bunch of idiots."

Another knock sounded on the front door, but this one was soft, almost tentative.

Taggard glared at it. "What now?"

He placed himself beside the door again and asked the inevitable. "Who is it?"

"It's Jack. C'mon, Taggard, let me in."

Taggard opened the door, did a quick scan of the boardwalk, then grabbed Jack's sleeve and pulled.

"C'mon, get in here before someone spots you."

"Yeah, that's the idea." Jack stepped inside and Taggard locked the door again.

"What are ya doing here? I thought you'd be hightailin' it for the Elk and makin' plans."

Jack glanced at Leon. "Didn't ya tell 'im?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Well, Taggard, I decided I'd rather trust you than Carlyle. If we're gonna do this, we're gonna do it together. Ain't that right, Leon?"

Leon grinned as he stepped up to the bars. "Yeah."

"Go join your partner," Taggard nodded toward the cell. "I'll bring the coffee in."

"Don't ya have ta unlock it first?"

"Nope. It's open."

"Oh."

Jack gave the cell door a nudge, not sure if he believed it, then smiled as the door squeaked open. He sat down beside Leon.

Leon gave him a look over. "Are you all right? Jiles said he hit you."

Jack snorted. "Not even close. He musta just been tryin' ta save face."

"Hmm, yeah."

Jack watched Taggard prepare the coffee. "Looks like he's already made up his mind."

"Yeah. He doesn't trust Carlyle any more than we do. He's still debating about what he's going to do once we get to Cheyenne though."

"Maybe me comin' in wasn't a good idea. It might have been safer to waylay ya on the road and head back to the Elk."

"No, no, you did the right thing." Leon glanced toward the stove and lowered his voice as Taggard approached them. "You coming in like this just might be what'll convince him to do this our way."

Taggard entered the cell, handed them their coffee and sat down opposite.

“It’s 3:00 am. If Jiles wants you ready by 8:00, I figure he’s planning on catching the 9:00 train to Cheyenne. But what he don’t know, is that there’s a freight comin’ through around 4:30. We’ll get the horses from the livery and be waitin’ for it. The train master will signal them to stop and we’ll get on board. It won’t be the most comfortable trip to Cheyenne. We’ll likely be ridin’ with the horses, but we’ll be long gone before those agents have their morning coffee.”

The partners smiled at each other.

“Thanks, Taggard. I knew we could count on you.”

“Uh huh.”

Cheyenne, Wyoming

Mid-morning found three disheveled individuals dragging themselves into the hotel lobby.

The clerk frowned. This was not a good start to the day.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Ah, we don’t usually check people in until the afternoon. Why don’t you visit the bathhouse and go have some breakfast?” He smiled, trying to be pleasant. “I’m sure we can accommodate you after that.”

Taggard came forward and stared the clerk straight in the eye.

“Are you tellin’ me ya don’t have two rooms available now? I can see a whole line a keys up there on your board.”

“Oh yes. Well, those rooms are being cleaned—” Taggard tugged his lapel over, revealing his sheriff’s badge. The clerk gulped. “Oh. Ah, yes. I’m sure we can find rooms for you. Would you like a bath sent up?”

“Two. One for each room.” Taggard looked back at his companions. “You fellas don’t mind sharin’, do you?”

He was met with two blank gazes.

“Oh.” Leon recovered first. “No, that’s fine.”

“Hmm.” Taggard scrutinized them, then turned to the clerk. “And laundry services.”

“Of course, sir. Would you like coffee and breakfast sent up?”

“As long as it’s fast. I’ll be heading out again after I get cleaned up.”

“Yes, of course.” The clerk pivoted the registration ledger around. “If all of you would just sign in.”

Taggard took the pen and scribbled his signature, then handed it to Leon.

Leon smiled as he stepped up, his brain whirling for a name to use.
Keep it simple.

He signed an alias, then handed the pen to Jack.

Jack stepped up, saw what Leon had written and frowned at him.

Leon shrugged. It was the best he could come up with on short notice.

Jack huffed and signed the book.

Taggard looked at the ledger and nearly choked.

“Peter Black and Mathew White?” Taggard asked as they headed up stairs. “You’re supposed ta have imagination. Couldn’t you do better than that?”

“You didn’t tell me we’d be signing in at the hotel,” Leon defended himself. “It’s the best I could come up with. It’ll work.”

“Hmm.”

Taggard stopped at his room and unlocked the door.

“As soon as we get cleaned up, I’ll join you for breakfast. Then I’ll be going to have a word with the governor. I want you two ta stay put, ya hear? No goin’ down to the saloon for beers and poker. No need to let the sheriff know you’re in town until we know what Hoyt is gonna do.”

Jack unlocked the door to their room. “I’m tired. Once I get somethin’ ta eat, I’m goin’ ta bed.”

Leon followed him. “Sounds like a plan. I didn’t get much sleep last night either.”

Two raps, followed by two more, followed by one, caused the partners to exchange a quick look, and Jack opened the door.

Taggard stepped in and gave both fellas a quick scrutiny.

“I suppose you’re looking as presentable as you can.”

“What do ya mean?” Jack puffed up. “We’re clean and shaven. What ain’t presentable?”

“Naw, you’re fine. You ready?”

The partners chewed a lip in unison.

Leon remained seated on the bed as he cast a look toward their mentor.

“You given any thought to what you’ll do if the governor says no?”

Taggard sighed. “Not really. We’re all taking a chance here. If this is a trap, it’s been set for all three of us. I could lose my job. But the Governor’s Office agreed to a truce so we could discuss this. We have to trust he’ll keep his word.”

Leon looked up at Jack. "You still ready to do this?"

Jack shrugged. "We've come this far. And Taggard's up to his neck in it now. If we back out and head home, he'd be in real trouble."

The partners looked at the sheriff.

"Well, that settles it." Leon pushed himself up from the bed. "We're committed now. Let's do this."

A knock on the door caused all men to frown.

"Who is it?" Taggard asked.

"The bellboy, sir," came the disconnected voice. "Your escort has arrived."

Leon frowned, mouthing the word *Escort*?

Taggard held up a placating hand and nodded. "Thank you. We'll be right down."

"What's this?" asked Jack, suddenly suspicious.

"It's all right," Taggard assured them. "The governor sent a coach to pick us up. This way we don't have to worry about running into Jiles or the sheriff."

"Oh." Jack relaxed. "Okay. I guess."

Taggard gave them each another quick inspection.

"All right. Let's go."

Governor Hoyt displayed exemplary manners by rising to greet the three men as they were escorted into his office. He even offered his hand for shaking.

"Sheriff Murphy. Good to see you again."

"Governor."

"And, which one are you?"

"Ah, Jack Kiefer, sir."

"Okay. So that makes you Napoleon Nash."

"Yes sir."

"Fine, fine. Have a seat, gentlemen."

Four plush armchairs were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the desk. They all sat, wondering who else would be joining them.

Leon and Jack exchanged a look, already feeling on edge.

Jack wished he'd thought to hide a derringer under his jacket, since all their weapons had been confiscated at the door. Now, there was nothing for it. But the hair on the back of his neck tingled, and he couldn't help but think there was a good reason.

Governor Hoyt sat with steepled fingers as he scrutinized the two outlaws.

“So,” he finally said, as he clasped his hands on the desk and leaned forward. “After the season you put in, now you’re interested in the offer I made? Why should I take you seriously?”

“Umm.” Jack was at a loss. He wasn’t even sure why they were here.

“Well,” Leon pushed himself forward, “because I’ve come to realize that Taggard was right and the path we’re on isn’t going to lead anywhere but death or prison. It’s a dead end. We both kind of have reason for wanting to better ourselves and make amends.”

Hoyt leaned back again, chin resting on clasped fingers. “Mmm hm. So, you go on a spree, hitting everything you can between Denver and Bozeman, taking out some of the biggest payrolls and money transfers that Navarre and Wells Fargo sent out, and now that you’ve taken your fill, you ask forgiveness?”

“Well, ah, no.” Leon shuffled. “I was out for revenge last year. Now I realize all I did was set myself and my gang up for hard times.” He lowered his eyes, true regret showing through. “We lost two good men last season, and Jack here nearly died. It was a wake-up call, sir. We want to start over.”

“Is that so? There’s a lot of people out there demanding blood: your blood. Why should I risk their wrath by giving you pardons?”

Leon and Jack exchanged looks.

Leon shrugged. “Well, maybe because I’ll just keep on hitting Navarre and Wells Fargo like I did last year. Now, your lawmen might take us out eventually, or maybe we’ll give it two or three more seasons, then head for Mexico. Your lawmen have a hard time catching us, Governor, and your jails have failed miserably at holding us. I’m not coming to you, on my knees, pleading for your mercy. I’m here to offer you a deal, the same deal you offered last year. You can take it or leave it.”

“Is that a threat, Mr. Nash?”

“No sir. Just straight up, telling you how it will be. Even if you arrest us right now, your jail won’t hold us.” He smiled, the twinkle in his eyes displaying his confidence. “You know that as well as I do, Governor, or you wouldn’t have agreed to see us.”

“I suppose you have a point, Mr. Nash. You are, indeed, an astute individual. Mr. Higgins!”

Instantly the office door opened and the governor’s assistant poked his head in. “Yes sir?”

“Coffee, all around.”

“Yes sir.”

Governor Hoyt turned his attention back to the men at his desk. “We have some things to discuss, gentlemen.”

“That’s the deal.” Governor Hoyt sat back, looking smug. “You work for me over the next couple of years, and if I’m pleased with your dedication, you will get your pardons.”

Leon frowned. “That sounds a bit one-sided to me. You can send us off into untold dangers, doing jobs you don’t want your official agents getting caught doing, and meanwhile, we’re still on the territory’s most wanted list. Dead or alive, I might add. How does this benefit us?”

Hoyt poured himself another cup of coffee. “It benefits you because it gives you the opportunity to show me your true intentions. You keep saying how good you are at avoiding arrest, so why would you have a problem with this arrangement? At least you’ll be working toward something positive.”

“That all depends on how dangerous the assignments are that you send us on. We’ve never worked undercover before.”

“Oh well, the first jobs I send you on won’t be too dangerous. Mostly delivering documents that can’t be trusted to the usual means.” He smiled with a glint to his eyes. “Thieves and all. You understand.”

“Hmm.” Leon smiled back with as much warmth. “Yes. Pesky varmints at that. So, what happens once you’re removed from office? No offence, Governor, but it seems to me that you fellas only hold your job for about two years at best. What if you’re gone in say, six months? Is the deal off?”

“No, no. I’ll make sure my successor is aware of our arrangement.”

“Ah. You’ll have a contract made up and we—”

“Oh, no, no, no.” Hoyt laughed. “There will be no paperwork on this. Are you mad? My opponents get hold of something like that, and I’ll be tarred and feathered. You’re just going to have to take my word on it. As I will take yours.”

Leon and Jack exchanged looks.

Jack snorted. “I’ve yet to meet a politician I could trust.”

Hoyt frowned. “And how many politicians have you met, Mr. Kiefer?”

“Enough ta know a set up when I see it.”

Hoyt’s frown deepened, a cloud building over his forehead.

Leon leaned forward to placate the situation.

“No now, just wait. My partner here has a point. You’re expecting us to simply take you at your word. If we do a good job for you, you, or your successor could simply keep stringing us along. You’d have it both ways; you found a way to stop us from stealing from your main supporters, but save your own hide by not granting us the pardons. In the meantime, you’d have us at your beck and call, handling all the dirty little jobs you

don't want to get mixed up in. With no pardons, we'll still be wanted. How does this deal benefit us?"

"As I said, Mr. Nash, you and your partner would be working toward something positive. If you do a good job for me, you'll get your pardons. Hell, I might even hire you as official agents. Isn't that something worth considering?"

Leon and Jack again exchanged looks. In unison, they folded their arms, crossed their legs and sat back, lips set in hard lines.

Taggard sighed. "Even if this isn't written out in a contract, I'm here to witness it. I'll make sure the Governor's Office doesn't renege on the arrangement. We can make it work."

"Indeed. Higgins!"

"Yes sir?"

"More coffee."

"Yes sir."

Hoyt smiled at the group. "Sheriff Murphy has given me an idea. I will assign him to be your official mentor. I'm sure, he of all people, will have your best interests at heart. I expect you fellas won't be staying around one place for too long. And, of course, you're free to take any small jobs to keep you flush, when I have no need of you. As long as they're legal, of course. If you keep in touch with Sheriff Murphy and keep him up to date on your whereabouts, I can use him as a go-between. When I need you, I'll let him know. If you have any questions for me, again, you can let him know and he'll contact me. How does that sound?"

The partners looked at Taggard.

Taggard sighed. He felt himself being pulled deeper and deeper into this arrangement.

The office door opened and Higgins arrived with another coffee carafe.

He replenished all the cups, but when he got to his boss, he set the carafe down and leaned in to give him a message.

"The other gentleman you are expecting has arrived."

"Oh, excellent. Send him in."

Higgins nodded and left.

"Now, I have a stipulation as well," Hoyt informed them. "Since Sheriff Murphy will be part of this to look out for your interests, I want a man in the loop to look out for mine. Small jobs, like delivering contracts and such, you can do on your own. But larger jobs, ones that might require a bit more finesse and secrecy, well, I want my man along with you. You'll be partners in a way, looking out for one another."

"You mean, spyin'," Jack said. "Makin' sure we stay legal. And this person will be right quick ta let you know if we stumble off the path. Ain't that more the truth?"

Hoyt smiled again. "Maybe we should simply say, he will be along to support you."

The office door opened again, and a tall, slim man, clad in black, stepped into the office.

The three other visitors were on their feet in an instant.

The agent narrowed his beady eyes as a snarl curled his lips. "What in blazes is going on? You two are supposed ta be in the local jail, and yet here you are hobnobbing with the governor." He glared at Hoyt. "What is this?"

Leon's hackles rose. "This is the man you want us to work with?" He turned on the governor, his face dark. "This man damn near killed me. There is no way—"

Taggard got between Leon and Hoyt, afraid that the whole deal was about to go up in smoke.

"Settle down. Let's hear him out."

"Hear him out?" Jack's blue eyes turned dark. "We can't trust this man. First chance he gets, he'll knife us in the back. And you want him ta be our watchdog?"

Carlyle stepped up to the desk. "These are the men you want me to work with undercover? This is crazy. Hezekiah Hoag is my partner, and that's the way it's stayin."

Hoyt stood up to placate the group. "Just hear me out. I need a man to keep an eye on you two, a man who will support my interests. Carlyle is it. You have your friend, Sheriff Murphy, who will support yours. It's the way it's going to be, gentlemen. Take it or leave it."

"And what if I want to leave it?" Carlyle asked, his black mustache bristling. "Hoag and I have been working ta bring these men down. Now you want me ta switch sides? Be their buddy? Fat chance of that happening."

"Oh, it's going to happen, Mr. Carlyle," Hoyt told him. "Or you'll find yourself stationed in Alaska. And you know darn well that Mr. Hoag is being reassigned to Kansas City. So, you are currently without a partner. Gentlemen, this is the deal. Take it or leave it."

Taggard settled his friends then turned to Hoyt. "I suggest we adjourn for the night. Why don't we all take some time to think about this and make a decision in the morning?"

Hoyt frowned. "What if you decide to simply disappear?"

"Then we'll disappear," Leon snapped. "If we're here in the morning, then we decided to accept your offer. If not . . ." He shrugged to end the sentence.

A strained silence settled over the room.

Finally, Hoyt nodded and stood up. "Fine. I fully expect to see you all back here at 9:00 a.m."

Carlyle glared at them. "And I'll be watching the hotel to make sure you stay put."

"No." Hoyt raised a restraining hand. "No, Mr. Carlyle. Give them the opportunity to leave if they so wish. I'd rather know now where we stand. Their days are numbered, and they know it. They wouldn't be here otherwise."

Leon was about to retaliate, but Taggard caught his arm and turned him toward the door.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Come on. Jack, let's go."

Jack had been glaring at the governor, but Taggard's words brought him out of it. With a snarl toward Carlyle, he turned and joined his friends to exit.

"This is crazy!" Jack paced the floor as they waited for supper to arrive at their rooms. "The last thing we need is Frank Carlyle hound-doggin' us everywhere we go."

Leon sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward with his hands clasped in front of him. His eyes held no emotion, but his mouth was a tight line of silence.

Taggard sat in the armchair by the window, an unopened bottle of whiskey on the table beside him.

"He won't be with you all the time. Just for the more discreet jobs." Taggard gazed at Jack, knowing his words weren't getting through. "It makes sense, the governor wanting someone to report back to him. You may not like it, but it's smart."

"You bet I don't like it." Jack growled, continuing to pace. "Anybody else would have been okay. Well, except for Hoag. Thank goodness he won't be around. But Frank Carlyle? Dammit, Taggard, you know what he did."

"Yeah. His job."

"Pushin' Leon ta the point of collapse and beyond? That's his job?"

"Getting information. Come on, Jack. You fellas gotta fence your jewelry and bonds somewhere. Even if it ain't the same fella we used when I ran with the gang, you're usin' somebody. Carlyle wanted that information. So yeah, he was doin' his job!"

Jack stopped pacing. He stood in the middle of the room, hands on hips and anger darkening his eyes.

“He killed Ella.” He snapped a glance at Leon, but his partner gave no reaction.

“No, he didn’t,” Taggard said. “And I’d say the man who was responsible has already paid the price, wouldn’t you?”

“Carlyle was in charge.” Jack jabbed his finger at Taggard as though it were his fault. “He used Leon’s family; he set the whole thing up. It was his fault!”

Taggard sighed and he leaned back, his fingers tapping against the glass bottle.

“Did I pick up the whiskey for nothing? Are ya gonna turn down this deal?”

Jack stood, looking at his boots. “I dunno. I just didn’t expect Carlyle ta be a part of it, that’s all.”

“None of us did. Not even Carlyle. But it’s the only deal you’re gonna get.” Taggard glanced at the silent partner. “What about it, Leon? Can you swallow your pride long enough ta see reason?”

For the first time during this conversation, Leon looked up and met Taggard’s eyes. “We could make it work.”

Jack growled.

Leon sent him a sad smile. “No, Jack. We can. Just because Carlyle’s around doesn’t mean he’ll have say over us. We can work around him and you know it. And like Taggard says, it’s the only deal we’re going to get.” His eyes glazed over as his thoughts went inward. “Besides, I don’t want to face Mukua and tell him we walked away from this just because of a minor inconvenience.”

“Minor inconvenience!” Jack was livid.

Leon stood and came over to the table. “That’s all he’ll be, Jack, an inconvenience. Ella wasn’t his fault, and he did his best to make amends.” He picked up the bottle of whiskey and smiled as he read the label. “Taggard’s outdone himself. Come on, Jack. What say we pop this thing and have a drink before supper gets here. It’d be a shame to waste top shelf.”

Jack harrumphed as he sat on the edge of his bed.

Leon turned his smile to Taggard as he twisted off the cork. “Do we have glasses?”

Two days later, Jack sat in the armchair, cleaning his Colt Peacemaker.

Leon was at the table, writing letters. He set down the pen and read over his handiwork.

“This oughta make Gus happy,” he said. “Elk Mountain is all his. If he’s smart, he’ll keep on the same fellas and maybe hire a few more. I even told him where I stored all those plans I made for this season. Still, I don’t know if he can read my writing.”

Jack snorted. “Can you read your writing?”

Leon frowned and focused on his scribbling. “Yeah. Well . . .”

“Uh huh.”

Leon pursed his lips. “Mukua can read it. I wrote him, too. Let him know what we decided to do.” He sighed, his tone dropping to a whisper. “I wonder if I’ll ever see him again.” He brushed that thought aside and perked up. “I asked him to find a home for my books. I expect Gus would just burn them. That man has no couth.”

“Ha. Now ya notice.”

A knock sounded on their door, and Leon was up with his Remington pointed toward the barrier. “Who’s there?”

An unmistakable, gravelly voice answered. “Carlyle.”

The partners exchanged glances. With Jack’s Colt in pieces, security was up to Leon.

Leon padded to the door, being sure to stay to one side. “Are you alone?”

“Yeah, I’m alone. Open the door.”

Leon looked back at Jack.

Jack gathered up the pieces of his gun and set them on the table. He then walked to the other side of the door and nodded.

Leon unlocked the door and snatched it open, his gun pointed straight and unwavering.

Carlyle smirked. “What ya plannin’ on doing, boy? Dissolve our little partnership before we even get started?”

Leon twirled his gun and slipped it back into its holster. “Just making sure you were alone.”

“I said I was, didn’t I? You better start trustin’ me, or this whole thing is gonna be a wash.”

Jack and Leon snorted in unison as Carlyle entered the room, closing the door behind him.

“I expected you boys would have left town with the sheriff.”

“Hoyt asked us to stick around,” Leon said. “Apparently, he has some papers he wants us to deliver to New Mexico. I expect it’s a test, but he’s paying us for it, so we’ll play along. We’ll be leaving in the morning.”

“Yeah, about time too,” Jack grumbled, as he sat at the table to reassemble his gun. “I’ve had enough of bein’ stuck in this room.”

Carlyle noted Jack’s activity and decided now was the best time to get a point across.

In one quick, fluid motion he stepped up to Leon, drew his handgun and wacked it across the outlaw's head.

Jack was on his feet and came at the detective, only to find himself nose to barrel with Carlyle's gun. Then the beady black eyes bore into him.

"Don't even think it, boy. Back off."

Leon had staggered back but kept his feet. He gazed at Carlyle, more in shock than pain, but still gingerly touched the growing bruise on his cheekbone.

"What the hell did you do that for?"

"Just making sure there are no misunderstandings," Carlyle growled. He glanced at Leon, then stepped out from between the partners, effectively covering them both with his Colt. "When you two are on your own, I don't give a damn how you conduct yourselves. But when you're with me, I'm in charge. You got that, Nash? You've got a cocky mouth and an attitude to go with it. I can see where you might think you're the boss. So, now you know. I won't put up with your insolence. You do what I say and we won't need to repeat the lesson."

Leon straightened, his cheek throbbing. "You could have just said so. Damn it."

"Sure, I coulda. But you wouldn't have taken that seriously. Now you do. Have a good trip to New Mexico. I'm sure I'll be seein' you soon enough."

Carlyle tipped his hat and, without holstering his gun, backed to the door and let himself out.

As soon as he was gone, the tension in the room evaporated.

"Damn," Jack grumbled, then came over to his partner. "Here, let me look at that."

Leon took his hand away from his cheek.

Jack clucked. "Yeah, you got a shiner comin' up, for sure. At least he didn't break the skin."

"Yeah. Grateful for small blessings."

"Ya still think this is a good idea? We could just carry on through ta Old Mexico once we get paid for this job."

Leon sighed. "Yeah, we could, but I don't think we will. We've made the turn, Jack. To back out now would feel like we failed."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. But I'll be keepin' my eye on Carlyle. That there ain't a man to be trusted."

Leon snorted then flinched. "Glad you're here to watch my back."

Epilogue

Two men sat their horses on the outskirts of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The early morning sun filled the landscape with brightness that included the promise of stifling heat to come.

Jack removed his hat and wiped his brow with a bandana.

“Phew. Good thing we got an early start. What time is it?”

Leon smiled at him. “We left town half an hour ago and it was 7:30 then. What time do you think it is?”

“Ha, funny.” Jack looked at him from under squinting brows as he replaced his hat. “So, which way we goin’? North or South?”

“Well, we got us a decent stake from that job. We can travel around a bit, relax. Maybe keep our eyes open for more work. Does that sound like a plan?”

“Sure,” Jack said. “But I don’t think you take my meanin’.”

“No, I take your meaning.”

“Okay, so what’s it gonna be?”

“Mexican bandito or law-abiding citizen?”

“Yeah.”

Leon grinned from dimple to dimple. “I tell ya, Kid, I kind of like the sound of a law-abiding citizen.”

“Ha, ha! I gotta say, old man, for once I kinda agree with ya.”

Nudging their horses awake, they pushed them into a ground-covering lope while the sun was still weak enough to allow for travel.

They headed north.

THE END