

The Fitton Chronicles

Fool's Gold

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by

Robert P. Fitton

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It was a time when liars were heroes and killers walked free. Jake McBride splashed cold water over his tired face and looked into the smudged men's room mirror. At twenty-seven years old he was about to lose his first case as District Attorney. The deranged legal system was favoring a man who had ruthlessly gunned down a young police officer. Judge MacKenzie had no choice other than enforcing the law and getting Butkis off on a technicality. The six-week trial had left McBride haggard. Circles ringed his blue, bloodshot eyes, and the dark beard stubble was embarrassing. He cupped his hands and doused his face again.

" Butkis is a damned killer, what kind of justice is that?"

" There is no justice here. "

Jake had seen no one inside the courthouse restroom. He shut off the tap and walked around the painted blue stalls. Next to the wall hoppers a darkened corridor leading to a hazy light source had formed within the tiles and chipped plaster. A bearded, rotund man in a vested brown tweed suit stood firmly at the corridor's edge and held a gold pocket watch in his pudgy hand.

" Who the hell are you?" The man produced a quixotic smile and his azure eyes gleamed. " And why is there a corridor in the men's room? "

" Why not? "

" I didn't see any corridor here. "

" Then you were not looking, sir. "

" I repeat my question: Who the hell are you?"

" I am Mr. Melbourne."

" O-kay." Jake laughed and shook his head. " I've finally cracked. Two and a half years, a perfect record... Now I lose my first case and I start hallucinating"

Melbourne's voice had a credible smoothness, laced with great emotion, " *I assure you, Jake, what you are seeing is real. I apologize if I have startled you. I know you're under tremendous pressure.*"

" How would you know anything about me? And how do you show up in the men's room? Come on..."

" You've gone through hell and Dunbar's family has gone through hell. Letting Butkis off isn't right."

Jake gestured toward the corridor. " MacKenzie has no choice."

" Not in this reality."

" He has no choice and Sam Turner knows it. Turner makes his living getting people out of tricky legal situations. And Butkis has the drug money to pay him... Listen, I have to get back upstairs and then I'm calling a shrink."

Melbourne tucked his watch into his vest pocket. He squinted and pressed his lips together before he spoke. " *I understand your misapprehension... I want to offer you a deal.*"

" Plea bargain, eh? Sure... Sure. Why not? "

" I've been watching you from the shadows of your life. I know the intensity of your commitment to the truth, your integrity and your quest for justice. What

will happen in MacKenzie's courtroom in the next half hour is not justice. I can assure you of that."

Jake's hand hit something solid, yet transparent, blocking the hallway.

"Have I lost my mind?"

"Not at all. You have to appreciate I cannot let you inside until you have accepted my terms. Please forgive my suddenness and my intrusiveness."

Jake smiled again and tightened his tie. "I'm getting out of here. I have to get back to court for the sentencing."

"I can arrange for you to bring Butkis to justice."

Jake faced Melbourne back in the corridor. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm an officer of the law not a vigilante."

"You're a man who wants justice. I have the ability to bring people into situations where, using their own abilities, they can seek the justice not offered in this life."

"I am losing my mind. Good-bye, Mr. Melbourne."

Jake spun on the slippery men's room floor and stormed past the white ceramic sinks. The corridor chatter and confusion overtook him when he opened the wire mesh door. The reporters waiting in the rotunda turned in unison and descended upon him. A plethora of microphones were stuck in his face.

"Jake, any chance the judge will change his mind.?"

"No comment."

"Do you think this is fair?" asked Cara Connolly from Channel Eight.

Jake looked back toward the men's room door. Melbourne's image was firmly implanted in his thoughts and his words bounced around his brain.

" No, Cara, I don't think this is fair."

" Can we quote you on that?" she asked, pencil in hand and ready to inscribe his words onto paper.

" After we're done upstairs." Jake veered left up the spiraling staircase to a rotunda with a mosaic floor. Around the rim, white marble Greek statues stood like guardians outside Hades and huge murals from American history led to the varnished courtroom doors. His chief investigator put out a cigarette and shook his disheveled gray hair as Jake approached. Jake looked into his angry dark eyes.

" Nothing we can do about it, Alby. "

" The guy is a low life scum, Jake. All I keep hearing is about *his* rights. What about Dunbar? Guy has a wife and kids. He just happened to answer the wrong dispatch."

Jake bit his lower lip. The sunlight pierced the open Venetian blinds and cut across the spacious courtroom. Judge MacKenzie's empty bench, bordered by huge, fluted white pillars, hovered over the shiny defense table twenty feet away. Butkis was not yet back in the room, but his leather clad girlfriend stretched out in the seats behind the defendant's table. Her long, perfectly formed legs extended toward Jake and the deep scent of Pizzazz perfume surrounded the area. She had the sly look of a cheap street-walking slut. " You lost the big one, Jakey."

Jake looked at her sheer silk blouse and leather skirt. " He'll be back in court. You know that, Pam. You best just stay away from him before you get yourself into any more trouble."

Some part of him regretted sleeping with her. Her mascara brushed green eyes cast a seductive lure Jake still found arousing and she spoke in a low direct voice . " You call me... Mr. District Attorney."

Alby pushed Jake along to the prosecutor's table and his young assistants, glum faced and silent, looked over to him. He pursed his lips and said nothing. Letting them down was another aspect of this travesty. The side door popped and the bailiffs brought Butkis into the courtroom. A wide smile covered his wide grubby face and his dark eyes focused on Jake. He puckered and sent a kiss in Jake's direction. A pewter cross earring swung from his ear above a clump of sinewy dark hair, dangling down his neck. Jake read his lips.

" You're a loser, McBride."

" Son of a bitch," Jake replied, continuing the silent dialogue.

Butkis tilted back his head and laughed. Even Sam Turner, his silver haired lawyer, a man about to launch a campaign for mayor, had a grin on his face. The chamber doors opened and everyone stood when the tall and lean Judge MacKenzie was announced. Jake heard the gavel but his mind was set on the Dunbar's autopsy photos. Dunbar had died in the line of duty. His wife and kids had already left the court. Jake looked over at Bart Bowers, the FBI agent involved in tracking Butkis' drug activities. Bowers grit his teeth, shook his bald head.

MacKenzie's constrained voice pronounced Butkis the victim because of an illegal search of evidence. Jake knew Ernie MacKenzie did not relish sending criminals back to the street. Bowers stood and marched like a military man from the courtroom. The judge's gray eyes moistened as the FBI agent exited the rear doors.

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Jake and Bowers had eleven witnesses and a cruiser surveillance camera. Yet, Butkis was free.

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Jake swung the racket and sent the little black ball careening off the wall. Jim Coltraine blasted it back. Jake cocked his arm quickly and missed. He closed his eyes. The anguish only intensified a week after Butkis' acquittal. His game was off. Coltraine picked up the ball and faced him. " You all right, Jake?"

" I'd like to say I'm all right." He looked into Coltraine's sharp brown eyes. " What do you do when somebody like Butkis is free after committing murder? I don't know what to compare it to. Would be like someone refused to pay the bill at your restaurant and it was sanctioned by the courts."

" Except it was murder." Coltraine squeezed the black ball with his left hand. " I think you have to let time take care of it."

" Time, come on... Problem is, I'm never going to get over this."

" You will." He dropped the ball onto the wood court. " What about Pam, she keep calling you?"

" Getting involved with her was a mistake. She swore she hadn't seen Butkis in months."

Coltraine stroked his heavy handlebar mustache. " Woman is poison. I wouldn't believe anything she says."

" You have no idea what that woman can do."

Coltraine nodded and raised his brows. He put his hand on Jake's shoulder. " You want another game?"

" I may hit the showers," said Jake and he rubbed his eyes.

" I'm going to get a little more exercise. I'll join you in a few minutes"

" Good. Let's stop by the restaurant later and have a drink."

" Sounds good to me." Coltraine bounced the ball and lobbed it forward.

" Don't worry, Jake. You'll straighten this thing out."

" We'll see..." He lowered his head and wandered out of the court. Along the cinder block ramp he pondered leaving New York for a few weeks. Maybe at some remote location he could clear his head and let the Butkis thing settle in his mind. He shoved the heavy door and headed for the bench in front of his locker. His cell phone buzzed inside the locker. After fumbling, he pulled open the metal door, but the phone stopped ringing. " Damn."

He plopped himself on the center concrete bench and sweat rolled down his cheeks. The phone rang again. He scooped it from his bag. " Jake McBride."

" Jake... Alby."

" What's the good news, Alby?"

" I don't have good news."

" Lay it on me."

" Butkis, he's on the run again. Jake, he..."

Jake squeezed the phone and started along the locker room benches.

" What the hell did he do now?"

" There's a kid over at City Hospital. A Robert J. Pauntok. Security guard. Shot in the gut. I don't think he's going to make it. Another drug deal." Jake fell back to the bench and rubbed his eyes again. " You there, Jake?"

" Yeah..."

" You want me to do anything?"

" Change the system. I don't believe this guy. He has no conscience. And he gets away with murder."

" Somebody's got to plug him, Jake. That's the only way."

" I'm hitting the showers, Alby. I'll call you."

He pushed the yellow button and held the phone in his hand. Trying to second guess what he could have done differently in the trial was useless. He set the phone back in the bag and was about to shed his clothes when he heard shower area rumble. Brightened steam swirled inside and leaked into the locker room.

" What's going on in there?" Some kid must have turned on all the showers. Jake stomped into the haze and clenched his fists. " Hey, one shower at a time."

Inside the fog Melbourne called out. " *Robert Pauntok just died at City Hospital, Jake.*"

" Oh, no. Not this guy again."

The mustard tiled shower wall spread apart and cut the fog. Down the same wood paneled corridor Mr. Melbourne, in a lighter vested suit, gold watch chain draped from his vest pocket, stepped to the edge. His smile was empathetic. " *I think you're looking for justice.*"

" And I think you're an aberration."

" *I am quite real and I offer changes in people's lives. I offer you justice, Jake.*"

" Okay," said Jake looking back toward the empty locker room. " I'll bite. How are you going to offer me justice?"

Melbourne motioned toward a spacious room, also wood paneled, with a large painting of a clown above a marble fireplace. *" I invite you to accompany me into the Nexus House. Under your own accord, of course."*

Jake smiled. " How can you produce a corridor from your house to a shower room wall?"

" Reasons are not as important as reality."

" What's that supposed to mean?"

" Jake, do you want bring Butkis to your own kind of justice?"

" How?" He shook his head. " This is bizarre."

" Yes, I know what you must be thinking. And I do apologize for my lack of hospitality. You see, I make it my business to seek out those who long for justice or need justice thrust upon them."

Jake moved closer through the fog until he was only a few feet away.

" How do you do that?"

" I bring people into a new existence as real as the world you live in now. If you accept my offer, you will experience the range of human emotions and consequences. You can love and hate... live and die."

" Then what? If I get the justice I seek?"

" You have a choice. You can stay where I put you or you may return to the world you live in now."

Jake stroked his chin. " I don't even think you're real."

" Butkis' killings are real."

" Am I committed if I walk inside?" asked Jake.

Melbourne shook his head and removed a finely wrapped cigar from his coat pocket. He struck a thin wooden match against a matchbox's abrasive strip and produced a flaring, orange flame. He lit the cigar. After a few puffs, once the tobacco glowed red, he exhaled a blue smoke stream. " *No, you are free to visit the Nexus House. No agreement is reached until you actually walk into your new existence.*"

Jake smiled and continuously shook his head. He moved his hand back through his sweaty hair. " You know, I just may do this..."

" *Your choice.*" Jake pushed his teeth together and nodded once. He walked through the fog and into a clear and dry corridor permeated with rich tobacco. Melbourne held the cigar in his left hand and extended his smooth right hand.

" *Welcome.*"

Flowery, raised red velvet wallpaper spread above the wood paneling into the larger room. Jake turned. A wall existed now between the showers and the corridor. " Where's the health club and Jim?"

" *Still there,*" said Melbourne, puffing. He motioned Jake toward the larger room. A long polished wood table, reflected a gold chandelier's sculptured glass bulbs.

" Will he be looking for me? How will he know-"

" *Jake.*" Melbourne put his hand on Jake's shoulder. " *I've taken care of all that.*"

" Interesting." Jake moved past Melbourne. His eyes were drawn to the odd painting of a clown with wide red lips and waxy white make-up, balancing on a unicycle and pedaling toward a high door marked in black letters, **ANYTHING**. In his

left hand was a wad of cash and his right hand was brilliant gold key. The tarnished brass tag on the bottom of the gold leaf frame had the painting's title etched into the metal.

ANYTHING GOES

" *I was always pleased with this painting.*" Melbourne's blue eyes exuded an overpowering passion. He was the kind of man Jake could respect both intellectually and spiritually. " *Has a certain surrealistic quality about it, wouldn't you say?*"

Above a roll top desk an oak Roman Numeral wall clock chimed on the hour. Jake faced the gentle rocking steel pendulum. He counted eight chimes.

" This is an interesting place. Forgive my impertinence Are you from another world? It is very difficult to absorb all this."

" *Realms exist all around us. You'd be surprised.* " A tall butler in a maroon uniform motioned two maids pushing a food cart to the table. They removed the silver top and spread smaller horsd' oeuvres trays across the table. " *Champagne?*"

The butler awaited his reply. " Sure."

Melbourne placed his cigar in a glass ashtray and motioned Jake to high back chairs as the butler set the crystal goblets on the table. He popped the cork of a large green moisture smattered bottle. Jake slowly sat down and the butler nudged his chair forward. Melbourne lifted the Champagne glass into the air.

" To your good fortune."

Jake pinched the stem and saw Melbourne's image through the bubbly gold Champagne. " To justice."

" Yes, of course." Jake pressed the glass to his lips and let the liquid tickle his mouth. He set the glass on the table as the maids offered him a spinach twirl pierced with a toothpick. *" I am quite impressed you saw fit to join me here. Many do not heed my call. Many stay away from new possibilities."*

" I'm still hesitant." He held the toothpick and munched on spinach.

" What exactly do you propose?"

"I can show you that once we are upstairs. Suffice to say, I can put you, Butkis, and other persons notable to this miscarriage of justice into a situation. You will have no knowledge of me or of your past life. You will accept the challenges the new situation offers."

" You mean nailing Butkis?"

" Yes. But only within the reality I give you. And I have to warn you. Your new situation will be as real as your life now. And your life and everyone's life can be at risk. When you're dead, you're dead."

Jake sipped some more Champagne. " I don't care if my life at risk. Not if it means getting a chance at Butkis." Melbourne nodded and lifted the cigar from the ashtray. He puffed as Jake leaned forward. " What about the other people?"

" I will only indicate they will be people you already know from your life now. But in your new existence they will have their own identities." He finished the Champagne and the butler stepped forward. " No more for me. Jake?"

" I'm all set." Holding the half filled Champagne glass in his hand, he gazed back to the health club wall. " I don't know how you're pulling off all this and I don't know what exactly you have in store for me."

" Then you're ready?"

" I am."

Melbourne brought the tobacco to an orange-red luminescence. " *Good, there comes a time when a man has to come to terms with himself. Stand up for those things he knows are right.*" He pushed his chair back, stood and walked around the table. The butler and maids stepped back as he extended his hand. Jake stood and grasped his hand. He wanted to smile but pursed his lips before he spoke. " I think this is going to be very interesting. You've given me a new confidence."

" Exactly my intention."

Melbourne balanced the cigar between his fingers and motioned him past the painting. The butler slowly nodded as Melbourne guided Jake to an antique elevator with a rounded gold dial above the polished brass doors. " *The Nexus House has three floors. We of course will be going to the fourth floor.*"

" Fourth floor?"

" Forgive my humor. The fourth floor, the realm of the imagination and chance."

The brass doors spread with machine smooth precision and Melbourne pulled back the inner gate. Clear sconces, set amidst more red velvet wallpaper, cast a crimson glow across the car. Jake stepped onto buffed black and white tiles and stood next to a leafy plant filling the corner. The same clown painting, in a

smaller form, hung in a gold frame on the side wall. Melbourne closed the gate, the outer doors clamped shut and he stood next to a manual brass lever. " *Would you like to operate the elevator, Jake?*"

" I don't even believe I'm here... Please go ahead."

Melbourne grinned, moved the lever forward, and the car hummed slowly upward. As if he were still in the service, Jake assumed an at ease position and crunched his hands against the corner plant. Several minutes passed before the car slowed and the doors opened to a much larger drawing room. Everything in the room was oversized. The wood paneled walls were as tall as the courthouse walls and a prodigious wood pendulum clock next to a white marble fireplace dwarfed the two men. A warm fire, hearth the size of a tunnel, with massive logs, blazed at full intensity.

" A little intimidating, Mr. Melbourne. And the same painting," said Jake, staring at the gold frame above the fireplace. He wandered under a spreading crystalline chandelier and stood under an equally large, gold framed mirror. Melbourne smoked the cigar behind him. " Where am I? I don't see myself."

" *You aren't here. You've passed from the substantive to the transcendent.*"

" How did we get to this existence?"

" *Perhaps the words of Lord Tennyson will help:*

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks

The long day wanes: The slow moon climbs: The deep

Moan round with many voices. Come my friends,

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world

Push off, and sitting well in order smite

*The surrounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars until I die*

" I assume this mirror means something,... What's beyond the mirror?"

" *Your destiny.*"

" Really?"

" *You walk through and you become Jake McBride, respected and revered in your town of Brinson, Nevada.*"

" What?"

" *The town marshal living in the world of the nineteenth century. A world of challenge in the great American West.*"

" Marshal?" Jake faced Melbourne and smiled. " So, that's it. The old west. Listen, how do I even know I can trust you?"

" *If you find my credibility suspect or you sense that my offer is disingenuous, I will bring you back to the health club now with, as they say, no hard feelings.*"

Jake laughed nervously and rubbed his mouth. " Hell, I don't know."

Melbourne moved closer and held his wrist. He spoke in a lower voice.

" *You only have one chance against Butkis, Jake. In this new world, whatever happens, happens. If Butkis dies, he dies. But the converse if true. You can die, too.*"

" When you're dead, you're dead."

"*Exactly.*"

" You're saying if Butkis is killed, he'll really be dead?"

" *Yes, sir. But you won't know anything of what he did to Dunbar or the young man who just died at City Hospital.*"

He raised his brows. " I want the son of a bitch dead."

Melbourne's eyes tightened and he nodded slowly. He rubbed his thumb against his forefinger. " You'll have that opportunity." A confined hallway formed inside the massive mirror. Bouncy piano music spread outward and glasses clinked within a loud buzz of conversation. A broad shouldered bartender, clad in a white shirt and apron, his hair parted in the middle, mixed a rusty drink for a dingy man with steel gray hair and a wide brimmed dusty hat. " Is that the old west?"

" The Arroyo Saloon. Are you ready?"

" Yeah... Let's do it."

Melbourne gripped his hand and kept the cigar in his mouth as he spoke.

" *Good luck, Jake. Remember, when you're dead, you're dead.*"

" Interesting." Jake smiled and reached into the dank air behind the mirror. The afternoon light covered the group of soiled, dust-covered cowhands packed along the wood bar. As if he were about to dive into cold water he jumped into the hall. When he turned to speak with Melbourne he faced a solid, rough sawed, wood planked wall. " Melbourne... "

A smile brushed his face as he paused and turned. Another life awaited him ahead. As his boots clicked against the wooden floor and his spurs jingled, Jake McBride strutted down the hall and into the bar. The loud saloon sounds, the dried beer and the pungent drift of cow punchers in need of baths reminded him the scene was real. Dozens of gritty, drunk, animated patrons surrounded chipped and

stained pine tables, scattered below a stretch of bright, frosted front windows. Rows of colored liquor bottles lined the bar mirror. He saw the reflections of long haired, unshaven cow hands plopped down the long waxed bar. O'Malley, a little man in a white shirt and red striped vest, his hair thinning, banged the piano keys near the unoccupied stage's maroon curtain.

Two half-louver doors flipped open at the entrance and a gray bearded man in fringed buckskin shuffled inside. The sun drenched dirt street burned Jake's eyes. In the cracked mirror he saw himself toting a long barreled, pearl handled Colt, tucked in a new leather holster. He wore a brown vest, pinned with a dented tin marshal's badge. From the top of his wide brimmed hat to the dust sprinkled leather of his boots, he appeared taller than his six foot two inch frame. His face was chiseled, angular at the nose and chin. He had buried blue eyes and dark brows and wore a faded light cotton shirt. A red bandanna hung loosely around his neck. Leather fringed chaps covered his Levis. He was Jake McBride, the marshal of Brinson, Nevada.

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He searched the bar as he massaged his gun handle and slightly lifted the weighted weapon from the holster. A certain familiarity descended over him, as if he knew this place and the people. Jake wandered toward the bar and caught the eye of the pudgy bartender, his mustache waxed and curled at the corners, and his black greasy hair parted center. He wiped down the bar with a clean linen rag and smiled.

" Hey, Jake, whaddaya have?"

" Whaddaya got, Johnny? "

He took a oblong green bottle with a bright yellow label from the back shelf. " Just gut a case of this stuff in from San Francisco. Smooth bourbon. Whaddaya say?"

" Fill it, John."

" How wuz yur trip east? You catch that rustler?"

" What rustler?"

" Back early?"

" Yup. I ain't so sure there wuz rustlers out at the Comstock Ranch. Someone's playin' games."

Johnny nodded, opened the bottle and filled the shot glass. " And someone's playin' games with them telegraph wires. Andy Bisbane says they're still down. But that ain't the big news." He plunked the stubby glass and then the bottle

on the shiny bar. Jake grabbed glass and poured the bourbon down his throat. It was smooth just like Johnny said; very smooth.

" Good stuff, brother." He leveled himself another shot as Johnny leaned forward and whispered across the bar.

" Ya picked a fine time ta be out of town, Jake. There was a wreck, and gold stolen at Sorroyo Canyon yesterday. Tracks were dynamited."

" Yeah, I wuz told. I reckon ta look inta it. " Jake held the shot glass half-way, befuddled for a moment as his consciousness was bombarded with thoughts he had never known. He set the drink on the bar and pointed at Johnny.

" Railroad ain't sayin' much. Andy's last wire said there's a railroad man is comin' in. Gold wuz headed to the U.S. mint in Carson City. I intend ta go out there presently. If it happened in my town, it's my responsibility."

" Soaring Bird and the Shoshoni saw the wreck, Jake. Injuns were lookin' fur food."

" I know that, too."

" Everybody headed out to Sorroyo, but the area was deserted."

" Don't understand that."

" Somebody at the hotel told Jim Coltraine the railroad is offerin' a re-ward," said Johnny.

" Ain't heard nothin' bout no re-ward."

" Coltraine says the freight car wuz filled with gold bars. Filled, Jake."

" Filled?"

" Yup."

" I need ta talk ta the passengers and the engineer," said Jake.

" I don't know nothin' bout the passengers. Ain't seen none of them in here. I tell ya, they're all gone."

" Gone where?" asked Jake.

" Dunno."

" I don't like it. I'm headin' out there."

A thin woman, brown hair tucked under a black hat strutted like a well formed mustang through the swinging front doors. Like a man, she wore gun. Jake first studied her tight dark britches and new chaps, but stopped at her smooth face and luminescent green eyes. She walked over to a table and sat with Gene Hawkins, a hand from the Turner Ranch. " Pam Grayson. What the hell is she doin' back in town?"

" I heard she was workin' on the Turner ranch. The sheep among the wolves. Those Turner boys-"

" She ain't no sheep. She can hold her own, Johnny. She can hold her own." Jake filled the glass, but let it sit on the counter.

Pam looked wilder in her earthy garb and wind blown hair. She could reel in a man with the wink of an eye, but was not the kind of woman who would waste her time buying fancy dresses and silk stockings from some city boutique. She could punch the cows just as well as the men. Jake was attracted to her naturally seductive earthy eyes, but she was selective in choosing her men. She sat with Hawkins and a bunch of rowdy ranch hands at a table across the room. They ordered up a drink for her. Two months ago she had left for Texas. Jake was surprised to see her back.

" She's one wild woman."

" As an old forty-niner, Alby always says, she ain't no petticoated astonishment."

" No, she ain't... Speak of the devil."

Jake turned and Alby crashed through the front doors. His deputy, worn green leather hat crunched into his thick mass of gray hair, raised his finger and staggered around the tables. " Marshal! Marshal!"

" What is it, Alby?"

Alby reeked of body odor and split whiskey. He grunted and spit a mass of tobacco juice near the spittoon. " Marshall, Dan Dalton! Dan Dalton!"

" Calm down, Alby. What the hell 's under your skin?"

Alby's dark eyes opened wide as he spoke, curling up his top lip and exposing two missing teeth as he jumped up and down like a monkey. " They wanna string-up Dan Dalton!"

" What?" Jake glanced at Johnny and stepped off the barstool.

" The Turner boys. They gut him out at the Dunbar place. Somebody killed Tom Dunbar! Shot in the back! Shot in the back!"

" Turners don't give a damn," said Johnny.

" This ain't another one of your wild stories, is it, Alby?"

" I tell ya Tom Dunbar, they shot the bastard in the back!"

" Is he alive?"

" I just know they shot him in the back, Jake."

Jake pulled out a gold coin and flipped it onto the bar. He tipped his hat to Johnny and plowed behind Alby through the saloon, making eye contact long enough with Pam Grayson to send a burst of energy through his gut. Alby parted

the louvers. The sunlight hurt Jake's eyes as he trotted along the boardwalk. Menewa was hitched in front of his office across the street.

He rushed across the prairie dirt and mounted his spotted brown and white horse. Dan Dalton was a quiet man who had washed dishes in The Coltraine for years and did not even carry a gun. Jake gave Menewa a spur kick and the horse galloped down the street. The Turners were powerful enough to squelch a lynching, and as he chased after Alby's horse in a swirl of dust, Jake questioned why the Turners would do something stupid like hang Dan Dalton.

* * *

Outside of town, along rounded sandstone cliffs, Menewa leaped over a small gulch and up the sandy sage covered slope. Jake leaned forward in the saddle, gripping the reins as he chased Alby along the ridge to the Dunbar ranch near Hammer Creek. He gazed south toward Sorroyo Canyon, carved deep and red into the flat land. The vague outlines of the jackknifed train appeared like a broken line across the brown plains. To the west, jagged foothills led toward the higher Sierra peaks silhouetted against the open blue sky. After he investigated the Dalton thing, he would head out to Sorroyo Canyon.

* * *

Elton Dunbar built his log ranch after the war under a long red rock ledge. Hammer Creek flowed quickly about two hundred yards beyond a long line of lofty trees. Everything passed down to his sons when Elton died a few years back. Tom maintained the house with his family. He raised a few head of cattle, minded his own business and had no battles with the Turners. Now he was dead.

Jake slowed Menewa along the cascading creek. A couple of dozen people had gathered under the tree clump ahead. Rody Turner rode wildly on his black steed in front of the boisterous crowd, trying to move them back. A thick hemp noose dangled in the midday sun from a branch extending toward the creek, and Dan Dalton, hands tied behind his back, stood next to chestnut stallion.

Jake pulled his gun and fired into the air. Alby, never missing an opportunity to make some noise, fired both his revolvers. The crowd turned and Menewa galloped into the encampment. Fat Junior Turner quickly looped the noose over Dalton's neck. Jake fired his gun again and pulled back on the bridal. "What in hell do you think you're doin'?"

"This man killed Tom Dunbar," said the unshaven Mike Turner. All the brothers looked the same. Dark eyes, and hair, half shaven faces with pig snout noses like the old man.

The heavier Junior walked up to Jake. "Shot him in the back."

Mrs. Dunbar, her brown hair a tangled mess in the breeze, held her two children back in the crowd. "He killed my husband. Tom is dead!"

"You ain't gonna let some murderin' bastard go free, are you, Marshal?" asked Rody, the eldest and most arrogant of the three Turner boys.

"I don't intend ta."

" Good, that's what we wanted to hear." Rody turned toward Junior.

" Loop that noose around the son of a bitch!" Jake rolled off Menewa and drew his gun squarely in Rody's dark eyes. " Belay that, Junior. This man is going back to my jail!"

" So, the Marshal won't serve justice," said Rody, stepping back to Junior.

" What's the matter, Marshal, worried about what the judge might say when he come to town?"

Jake, with his gun drawn, followed the smaller Rody across the dirt. This would not be the first time he shot someone threatening his manhood. " You can talk plainer than that, brother."

Rody stared at his gun hand and looked at his Junior and Mike.

" Don't try nothin'!" cried Alby, his guns pointed at the other Turners.

Jake read fear in Rody's eyes. Rody looked back to Junior and waved his arm. " Let em go!"

" Now, why don't you and yur brothers get back to your place. And you tell Sam how you were out here this morning tryin' ta string up a man without a fair trial."

" Pa is fur it," said Junior.

" Shut up, Junior!" yelled Mike.

" You haven't heard the last of this, McBride," said Rody. He and his brothers strode together back to their horses beyond the trees. Jake turned to Alby and then they mounted up. " Bring him in, Alby."

" Close call, Danny! Close call!" said Alby.

The Turner horses produced a dust cloud toward the creek. The brothers crossed at the ford and headed west under the high clouds. Alby pulled out a wide Bowie knife and sliced the rope around Dan Dalton's wrist. Dunbar's wife, clutching her children, wept as Dalton, only in his early twenties, staggered forward and meekly stood in front of Jake. Jake did not see guilt in his blue eyes.

"What happened, Dan?"

"I rode in, Marshal. Came over ta borrow Tom's saw. Talked about it yesterday at the Arroyo. Got witnesses."

"You rode in and what happened?"

"Found him inside. Dead on the floor. I run out just when his wife and kids come up in their carriage."

"You kill Dunbar, Dan?"

"Nope."

"Okay." Jake scanned the clearing back to the house. "You'll have a chance to prove yourself when the Judge MacKenzie comes to town. Alby, bring him back and lock him up."

"Will do, Jake."

Jake turned to the neighbors. "You men, Griffin and Pauly. Ride back to town with them."

The Turner boys had disappeared over the yellow grazing land across the river. Jake was surprised they were out here at all seeking their own kind of justice and he wanted to know if Sam Turner really knew about it. As Alby and the others brought Dalton away from the clearing and along the creek, Jake moved through the crowd to Mrs. Dunbar.

" Marshal, are you sure you did the right thing?" asked Newton Cory, one of the old miners.

" Yeah, I did the right thing, Newton. The man will be proven either guilty or innocent at his trial." He looked into Mrs. Dunbar's washed out red eyes.

" You heard what I just said, Myra. If Dalton killed your husband, he'll hang."

" Tom was a good man, Marshall. To be... to be shot in the back. At his own place. You make sure Dalton hangs!"

She cried into Grace Whitman's shoulder. The kids looked up at McBride with wide tearful eyes. Growing up without a father was not fair. They still did not fully know or understand the death of their father. Jake spun back to the crowd.

" Did anybody see what happened out here?"

" I'm the one who saw Dalton," said Newton, moving his mouth around his beard. " Saw the whole damn thing."

" Whaddaya tellin' me, Newton, you saw Dan Dalton shoot Tom Dunbar?"

" Well, not, ah..." He tightened his bushy white brows and scratched his head.

" I didn't think so. I think you and Alby softened yur brains drinkin' in the mine camps long time ago." Jake faced the crowd. " You listen ta me, all of you! I'm gettin' sick and tired of you people accusing Dan Dalton of things you *think* he did. You were about to string him up because Newton *thought* Dalton shot Dunbar. Man's innocent until proven guilty."

" But, I saw him comin' out of the house!" cried Newton. " He run from the house and left in a gallop!"

" So, what?" Jake put his hands on his hips. Back along the creek a surrey approached the grove. " Now, who the hell is this?"

Jake moved a few steps forward. The aging Doc Talmadge and Jim Coltraine sat in the front as the carriage came to an abrupt stop. Coltraine, in his San Francisco vested blue suit, his black boots still spit polish clean, leaped out first. He rushed across the clearing. " Jake, I heard Tom Dunbar is dead. If you think Dan Dalton killed him, you're dead wrong."

" You heard correctly, Jim. He's dead. And Dalton wuz out here." The disheveled Doc moved around the horses. " Little late for your services, Doc."

" Passed Alby on the way, Jake. Dalton do it?"

" Damned if I know," said Jake. He motioned for Jim and Doc to follow him to the yard. Dunbar's tools hung neatly along the barn wall and his horses were still in the stalls. Jake rubbed the darker horse's snout. " Good fellah."

Jim held his arm. " I have one question for you, Jake."

" What's that?"

Doc passed a whiskey flask among them. " No thanks, Doc," said Jim.

" Dan Dalton worked in my kitchen at the hotel. I don't ever recall the kid wearing a gun, Jake. I can't believe that he would come out here and just shoot Tom in the back."

" Stranger things have happened," said Jake, wiping the whiskey from his mouth and he handed the flask back to Doc. " Come on, let's go in the house."

Jake scanned the dirt as they crossed the yard. He moved across the porch and stepped in the opening. Across the clean swept floor Tom Dunbar, in a mass of long curly auburn hair, lay face down on the floorboards under his stone fire-

place. One precise round hole had pierced his dark vest. Doc checked the body while Jake looked through the house.

"What's this?" asked Jim, holding a long, wide blade saw.

Jake laughed. "Looks like a saw."

"Yeah, but what is it doing here on the floor? All the other tools are hanging in the barn."

"I don't know." Jake turned to Doc. "Any other wounds, Doc?"

"Nope. One shot. From behind. I'd say he never knew who killed him. I reckon he's been dead three or four hours."

The whole thing bothered Jake. Whoever shot Dunbar in the back did not want to be seen and wanted him dead quick. Dan Dalton did not even own a gun and why would he be so yellow to shoot Dunbar in the back? Jim set down the saw on the table. Because the rest of the tools were in the barn, maybe the saw had something to do with Dunbar's killing.

"Okay, when the wires are up, I'm sendin' a wire to the judge bout this."

"Good move," said Jim.

"Let him the judge try Dalton, but with Sam Turner's boys involved in this, I'd keep your ass out of this," said Doc.

"I want this thing handled the way it's supposed to be handled." Jake moved into the sunshine and glanced down the porch boards as Doc and Jim continued talking about the shooting. He walked down the length of the porch. Along the edge were several black, greasy scuffs on the new wood. He bent down and ran his finger through what looked and smelled like creosote.

He ducked under the rail and stepped into the yard. The smudged boot prints led toward the cattle pens beyond, ending at horseshoe marks near the corral. Someone had dismounted from a horse and headed onto the porch. He followed the horse's trail along the fence toward the open range. The horse had come and gone from the east.

Amidst the sand grains, stray grass blades, and pebbles, an alternating bright reflection shone in the dirt. He moved forward, reached down and picked up a spent Remington shell. Then he gazed across the long stretch of range. Anyone riding in from the desolate eastern land would be riding some distance. He put the shell in his vest pocket and headed toward Dunbar's barn.

" You find somethin' out there, Jake?" asked Doc.

He placed the shell between his fingers. " This."

" Remington," said Jim, inspecting it closer. " Could be anyone."

" No, someone with creosote on his boots. A rider came in from the east, hitched his horse away from the house next to the cattle, and then sneaked up the side porch. But his boot scraped them boards."

" Better check Dalton's boots," said Doc.

" Yup."

" Andy says that railroad man, Noonan, should be arriving soon on the stage. He reserved a suite," said Coltraine. " Why are the telegraph lines down?"

Jake stroked his chin. " I don't know. You said this man is named Noonan? Can't place him. Why would a railroad man be arrivin' on a stage and not on a train?"

" Don't know."

" Jim, I'm ridin' down ta Sorroyo. Why don't you and Doc come with me?"

Coltraine looked over at Doc. " You won't find nothin'."

" Whaddaya sayin', Doc?" asked Jake.

" Train's empty. "

" Train's empty? This happened yesterday mornin'. Yur tellin' me, in thirty hours, the gold and the passengers are gone?"

" Guess the engineer gut the passengers out on the wagons to Carson City," said Doc.

" Yeah, but what about the gold? When the hell did the gold disappear?"

" Dunno..."

" Well, damn, where's the engineer? asked Jake.

" He's not in town. As a matter of fact I was preparing to get rooms ready. Then we find out the passengers are gone."

Jake looked toward the brown ridges folded against the wide blue sky and blocking the view to Sorroyo Canyon. " You comin' with me?"

" Yeah, we'll go," answered Coltraine.

In the grove the parson had arrived and was comforting Mrs. Dunbar and the children. Jake turned eastward toward the old mines burrowed into the distant sandy knolls. Someone rode to the Dunbar Ranch from that direction and he sensed it was not Dan Dalton. If he and Alby had not arrived when they did, Dalton would be swinging from the tree branch back in the grove.

4

Jake brought Menewa ahead of Coltraine's surrey. The long black passenger cars, folded off the rail beds into the desert, were sprinkled with a thick dust layer nearly covering The Overland Railroad's gold letters above the windows. Up front, facing west, the massive metal locomotive had only slightly left the track and its smokestack was dipped toward the prairie. Doc was right about the place being abandoned. The railroad's hired gangs had only laid this track two years ago. The rails had rusted along the sides, but the top steel was polished by frequent use. He walked along the cross ties and followed the telegraph wires disappearing into the cloud swept eastern sky. He wondered who ordered all the passengers to Carson City.

Menewa rose with the gravel bed and moved toward the rear car, still connected to the rest of the train, but angled downward from the tracks. Jake slid out of the saddle and hitched the horse to the car's rear rail. Even though no one was out here, something in his gut told him to draw his gun. Coltraine slowed his surrey, and he and Doc stepped out.

" Soaring Bird first saw this?" asked Jake.

Coltraine looked at Doc's furrowed brow. " Last night, Jake. He told Alby."

" That wuz his first mistake. Did anyone in town see the passengers or the gold?" asked Jake. He peered past the open windows and down the length of the rear car.

" Nope. Only that engineer and his helper."

" Where the hell are they?"

" Dunno," answered Doc.

Jake turned back to them. " Then we only have the word of them two as ta when this here train went over. Johnny told me someone gut the tracks good."

" Yeah," said Doc. " In the middle. Come on."

The three men stepped off the gravel bed. Deep, criss-crossed wagon ruts cut the brown gritty soil along the rear car and toward the front of the train.

" Look at this, will ya?

" Wagons removing the passengers?" asked Coltraine.

" Or the gold," said Jake. " The army guardin' that gold? "

" The army usually guards gold," said Doc. The rest of the passenger cars were collapsed on the rails. " Jake, you may have a point."

" How did they git all them passengers out so fast and where the hell is the gold?" asked Jake. The center rail bed was ripped into a hollowed out crater. Splintered lumber pieces were strewn across the dirt and sage.

" Maybe the gold ain't stolen," said Doc. " Maybe the army just gut it the hell out."

" Maybe... But you know as well as me, boys, someone waited fur this train. Someone with a dynamite box. When the train wuz close, they pushed the charge. They needed to know the train had gold on it."

" Maybe that railroad man knows more," said Coltraine. They trampled across the debris and a new assortment of wagon ruts.

" Well, that's another good one," said Jake. The wagon tracks converged around one of the freight cars and had chewed up the gravel beds. " Wreck happens yesterday and the railroad has a man out here in less than a day? The Overland's office is in Omaha."

Jake headed along the derailed sections, passed an open car loaded with cut wood and stopped at the massive black engine. He crawled at an angle up the metal perforated stairs into the cab. Wood was deposited over the floor below the warm open boiler. " Whaddaya see, Jake?" asked Doc from below.

" Ain't nothin' in here." Jake stroked his beard stubble as Coltraine pulled his way up the handrail. " Gentlemen, somethin' ain't right. When we get back ta town, I wanna wire The Overland, the army, and the Pinkertons."

" Good luck with the wires down," said Coltraine.

Jake nodded and wondered if the damaged telegraph line was related to the gold shipment. " Army musta taken the gold to the U.S. mint. We gut no witnesses sayin' it wuz stolen."

" I submit there are no witness at all, Jake."

Jake wrinkled his hardened lips toward the rising purple Sierras. The rugged trails would hamper the wagons. It made sense to bring the gold south. Sorroyo Canyon, tapering south along California to New Mexico Territory, was parched and in the opposite direction of the Carson City mint. " Well, we gutta folla them tracks wherever they lead. And soon. Just in case it wuz stolen. Wagon loads of gold require strong and fresh horses. We should be able ta catch them. I say we leave tonight if we have ta."

" We?"

" Yeah, you comin' with me?"

" Jake, I'm not a scout."

" A southern gentlemen, Coltraine."

Coltraine grinned. " We all have our responsibilities."

" We do."

" You can take Alby with you," he said, looking across the prairie and still smiling.

Jake squinted and half grinned.

" Look!" shouted Doc.

Jake leaned in the open window. From the western foothills a ghostly image of horses galloped across the range. Soaring Bird rode bareback on his white pinto and three Shoshoni on darker horses trailed behind. Jake climbed down the engine ladder and stepped across the gravel bed as they approached. Soaring Bird rolled off his horse and walked slowly to Jake.

His dark eyes had a quietness Jake could never understand. A single black and white feather stood straight up from a swirl of black hair that fell along his high bronze cheekbones. The hair was bound by tiny blue ribbed clamps near the shoulders. Numerous red and bright green beads were strung about his smooth neck. In the warm air he wore an open tanned vest and some army issue leather britches.

Jake shook his hand. " I thought you wuz up at Duck Valley."

" Agent Palmer received your letter on my behalf. Thank you. I have a pass." The Indian had a mellow, but melodic tone to his voice and had learned English when he was a child. Since his days as a deputy in Elko, Jake had known Soaring Bird. He found the Indian smarter than most white men he knew.

" There are many Newe who wander, McBride. Some have become farmers with the white man's army. Others work on ranches now as laborers. And others are at Duck Valley or Ruby Valley. When Yepani arrives we find ourselves returning to Pia Sokopia, the Earth Mother."

" I'm glad you're free fur awhile. Wuz a time you and me roamed about and nobody bothered us."

" Those days are behind us, McBride."

Jake pressed his lips and contemplated his friend being hemmed in on some reservation. " I just gut back ta town."

" Welcome back."

" Some welcome."

" We were out on the flats yesterday. We saw the train."

" You saw it blow up?" asked Jake.

" No... The train had already left the tracks. When we tried to ride closer the army kept us away."

" The army?"

" Two army men. They told us to leave or we would be killed."

Jake gazed across the mud caked flats toward Sierra foothills. " Many soldiers?"

" We were too far away. They said they were loading passengers into wagons for travel to Carson City. Rough terrain."

" What about the gold?" asked Jim Coltraine as he approached.

" Mexicans. They were robbed by Mexicans."

" Mexicans?" shouted Jake.

" Did you see Mexicans?" asked Coltraine.

" No, Coltraine. We were forced to leave and were too far away. We went back to town, but McBride had left after rustlers..."

Jake shook his head and put his hands on his hips as he studied the train again. " I'd give my month's stipend not ta have been chasing rustlers." He pointed to the numerous wagon tracks in the soil. " Whaddaya make of this?"

Soaring Bird squatted and ran his fingertips over the dusty ruts. He walked with the other Indians away from the train. They faced the canyon rim a few miles to the south. Soaring Bird pointed as he looked over his shoulder. " In the canyon."

Jake gazed toward the rim. " Now, that's just plain stupid. Why the hell would Mexicans take heavy wagon loads of gold into Sorroyo Canyon?"

" The canyon trail will allow wagon travel," said Soaring Bird.

The Shoshoni knew the terrain, yet he had no answers. Jake questioned how Mexicans could overpower a train load of soldiers. " And why not bring the passengers back ta town?"

" But why the canyon?" asked Coltraine. " You're talking about traveling along the rapids. You reach the spilt where the land levels and what have you got? Dry parched land down to the Panamints."

" Death Valley to the west and if yur lucky you hit the trail south to Arizona and New Mexico Territory," said Jake. " And Mexico."

" Good place ta git the gold hidden," added Doc.

" Maybe." Jake looked back at the buckled train. Then he turned to Coltraine and Soaring Bird. " I'm movin' out tonight. Tommora mornin' at the latest. We'll

find out whether the army has the gold or it wuz stolen. I'd like to wire Fort Churchill right now... You wanna come with me and find that gold?"

" I will go," said Soaring Bird, looking at the Shoshoni. " But my people will return to Duck Valley."

" Good, I need yur help. If that gold wuz taken, it ain't gonna be given up easy. Sure you don't wanna go, Jim?"

" No, I'll stay back in town. Wait for the railroad man."

" Probably a good move. I need you in town. Having Alby in charge don't exactly make my soul wanna jump for joy, brother. I'll see if I can locate Robbie Pauntok. Deputize him and have him check the telegraph lines. Meantime, Soaring Bird and me will track them wagons."

5

Glasses and plates clanged and conversation hummed inside the Coltraine Hotel's long dining room. Along the pale yellow walls and next to a long row of white pane windows Jake and Alby crammed a late meal as the wispy crimson haired Andy Bisbane pinched a crumpled telegram between his fingers. He spoke in a low, wandering voice and his eyes wandered. " Hey, Jake."

" Andy."

" I furgot ta give ya this."

Jake left a fork full of steak and potatoes on his fork. " Wires up yet?"

" They keep goin' down as soon as Robbie fixes em. Somebody's messin' with them wires."

" Pauntok's a smurt kid. He'll find the bastards."

" He's gut Sawtooth with him," said Andy.

Jake gave a quick nod. " Good shot, Sawtooth."

" Sawtooth bit a man ta death!" shouted Alby.

" We know the story, Alby." Jake looked at the crisp yellow telegram and set the fork back on his pewter plate. " Whaddaya gut?"

" Telegram. Came from Carson City three days ago. The judge's."

Alby tried to grab the wire. " Whad he say? Whad he say?"

" What *does* he say?" asked Jake.

" Here, read for yourself."

Jake held the paper in his hands.

**LEAVING CARSON CITY SUNDAY STOP GET CRIBBAGE BOARD
READY STOP GIVE YOU SECOND CHANCE STOP WILL TAKE CARE
OF ALL BUSINESS STOP WILL ARRIVE MONDAY STAGE**

MACKENZIE

With a half grin Jake set the paper on the red and white-checkered table cloth.
" Well, good. I just wish I couldda told him bout Dalton."

" Whad he say? Whad he say?" asked Alby, gushing some potatoes between his missing front teeth.

" He says he'll be here on next Tuesday. Better contact Garrett Miller. Dalton's gonna need a lawyer."

" Judge think he did it?" asked Alby.

" Now, the judge ain't gut no way ta tell that, Alby, with them wires down."
Jake flipped a coin to Andy. " Thanks, Andy. Much obliged."

" You want me ta wire the judge when the wires are up again?"

" Hell, we need ta contact the army at Fort Churchill and The Overland Railroad. Then again, that railroad man's rivin' tonight. You hear anythin' else, Andy, you let me know. Specially if them wires are up again. If I didn't have ta folla the gold, I'd ride out along the line with Robbie. "

" Them wires keep comin' down in different places, Jake..."

" Anybody new here in town before the wreck?"

" Nobody unusual."

Jake scooped up some more potatoes as he thought. " Well, it ain't sittin' right with me how fast this here thing happened. The tracks git blown up and the gold and them passengers move out like jack rabbits."

" A con-spiracy," said Alby.

" Maybe, Alby. Somethin' ain't right. I'm gonna talk ta that railroad man when he gets in. I'd like ta know where the hell them passengers are stayin'."

" I'll let ya know, Jake."

" Obligated, Andy." Jake watched him leave the dining room, but as he cut into the charcoal chunk of beef on his plate, Alby cackled again.

" Jake, Dalton kept tellin' me! He kept tellin' me! Said he didn't do it. Said Tom Dunbar was on the floor, Jake. Already dead! Already dead!"

" Well, maybe he was. I never took Dalton for a liar." He was becoming annoyed by the way Alby kept talking and eating at the same time. A mixture of potatoes and peas, hung from Alby's beard stubble. " Jake, he went over to borrow a saw, Jake."

" Come on, wipe your chin, for cryn' out loud," said Jake, sipping the coffee. " I don't think he did it. I told ya, someone rode into that place from the east. The spent shell was out on the range. And his boots wuz covered with creosote. Dalton's boots were clean. Listen, I gut some papers to get in order for MacKenzie, case I ain't back."

" Ain't you comin' ta the saloon, Jake?" Alby wiped the rest of the food and gravy from his plate with a piece of bread.

" I'll be over later fur I head out," he said as he stood. He put a coin down on the tablecloth and picked up his hat.

Alby raised his bushy brows. " Jake, can ya spot me some drinkin' money?"

" You just tell Johnny I said ta put it on my tab. I'll se ya over there."

Jake nodded to the pretty young brunette waitress, scurrying between the tables, and marched into the hotel lobby. Several men in eastern formal clothes and a woman and child, all covered with dust, lingered at the buffed mahogany hotel counter. He looked past a large leafy green plant and up at the grandfather clock's brass face, surrounded by phases of the moon. The late stage must have just come in.

He opened the heavy hotel doors and stepped onto the boardwalk. Dim light covered the quiet street. The coach, angled downward, was only about twenty feet away and with the luggage rack empty and the six horses were being marched to the livery. He thought all the passengers had entered the hotel. A stocky man in a black pin striped suit stretched his legs out the stage door, stepped on the bottom brace and pulled himself out the side panels. Once on the street, he looked carefully around the town. Jake approached one of the drivers, still holding his rifle as he dusted off his pants. " How's the trail from Eureka, Ed?"

" Trail's the trail, Jake. You drinkin' later?"

As the other driver trucked remaining baggage into the hotel, Jake studied the last passenger with an unusual intensity. The fancy gold pocket watch and the cut

of his vest indicated the man had both class and wealth. His dark coat was draped over his shoulders, he wore smooth black leather gloves, and a vanished cane with a brass head was neatly tucked under the coat. Thick side whiskers and black hair extended from a felt Stetson, black and balanced above his block shaped face. Ribbed eyebrows rose above his dark eyes and a shadowy clean shaven beard covered his cheeks. A stogie was stuck in the corner of his mouth. "That the railroad man?"

"Noonan, from Omaha," replied Ed. "Transferred in Eureka."

"Transferred in from where?"

Noonan turned quickly with a sly smile and a spoke in a crisp Midwestern voice. "Marshall."

"We met before?" asked Jake.

"I don't think so. I'm Pat Noonan." He balanced the stogie between his teeth as he shook Jake's hand. His hand was stronger and more callused than a man of leisure.

"Jake McBride... You in town bout the gold?"

"I'm here to find the gold for the railroad. That shipment was due in Carson City. Although I have very little information with your wires being down. I was wired in Eureka by my company was told the passengers were sent to Carson City by the army."

"Yup."

"And the engineer wired them from Carson City, saying that Mexicans had stolen the gold shipment. I think you as a law man would understand the implications of that."

" The engineer's in Carson City?"

" Yes, but I instructed him to return here to..." Noonan looked to the saloon down the main street. " Brinson. This is Brinson, correct?"

" Correct." Jake furrowed his brow. " Line heads north to Carson City and west to San Francisco on the other side of the Sierra."

" I was told you were out of town, Marshal."

" I wuz... trackin' some varmints who wuz rustlin' cattle south of town... But I gave up. They're long gone and I'm back early. This gold... it just disappears under the army's nose?"

" Mexicans overpowered and soldiers. Man named Cortina."

" Cortina?"

" Engineer says the twenty men onboard were brought south. Nothing has been proved though. I need to wire my company, but, again, your wires are down."

" I'm aware of that."

Noonan smoothly puffed on the stogie and nodded. " You been out there?"

" Yeah, I been out there. Place is deserted."

" Well..."

" How'd you git out here so soon?" asked Jake. Something about Noonan bothered him. " The damn train just went down."

" Fortunately, I was on an inspection trip, checking service and The Overland's line. I was in Eureka when the engineer wired Omaha from Carson City. These lines being down is like the war. "

" I wuz in the war. I know that."

" Union?"

" Fought the last two years with Grant in Virginia. On the peninsular," said Jake. Noonan's eyes brightened when he talked about the war. " I was in ordinance. Kept your supplies coming."

" Then you never saw action?" asked Jake.

" No, sir."

Jake folded his arms. " Why the hell would ya have all that gold on a train full of passengers. Risky."

" I don't make the arrangements, Mr. McBride."

" I'm gonna folla them tracks inta Sorroyo Canyon."

Noonan inhaled and finished the stogie. He snuffed it into the dirt. " Why don't you let the Pinkertons handle the gold, Marshal. I think your over your head, trying to track the Mexicans."

" I ain't over my head. And I keep hearin' bout Mexicans, but it's all second hand. If I could talk ta the passengers."

" You're welcome to talk to Callahan or Billy. They should be in by tomorrow... Cortina led the attackers. They were all dark haired and speaking Spanish. They loaded the gold in wagons and took off into the canyon."

Jake leaned against the hotel's support post. " Yup, I seen wagon ruts all over the place. But I gut fresh wanted posters bout Cortina in Texas. He's been givin' the Rangers trouble fur years. Cortina's in the border region and he ain't never come this fur north."

" Maybe for a car load of gold bars he would."

" Where the hell wuz the army durin' all of this?" asked Jake. " A car full of gold and they let a bunch of Mexicans just take it."

" Couple of men were killed. Some helped the passengers to Carson City. They and the rest were taken by Cortina from what my company said on the wire. Callahan scared he's be blamed for the issuing gold. I have two additional army men from Fort Churchill due in tonight. They'll help me and my company is bringing in Pinkerton detectives."

Jake laughed. " Listen, waiting fur Pinkertons ain't gonna do nobody no good. We need ta get afta them wagons tonight."

" Wait until daylight... We'll ride out to Sorroyo Canyon tomorrow," said Noonan.

" It's my job ta look into this. I do need ta talk ta Callahan and his guy."

Jake was uncomfortable when Noonan placed his hand his shoulder." We'll have some breakfast and all meet out at the canyon. What do you say?"

" What exactly do you do, Mr. Noonan?"

" I'm a vice president and am personally responsible for the track from Omaha to San Francisco. If I don't find that gold, I will be responsible for nothing, Marshal."

Jake turned toward his office. A single oil lamp burned in Dalton's cell. Deep in thought, Noonan stared across the prairie lit stars and removed another stogie from his inner pocket. Jake rapped his arm. " If them Mexicans left yesterday, we can catch wagons stuffed with gold in a few days. They'd be near Death Valley or they may have already headed west."

" I need your help in finding that gold. And there is the reward."

" I have my duty... Don't care bout no money, but ya might want ta get some money ta the widda Dunbar. Her husband wuz gunned down. Shot in the back."

" Marshal, whomever earns the railroad's reward, can do whatever he wants with it."

" I'll remember that." Jake faced the dark eyed Noonan again. Noonan removed the stogie from his teeth and held it between his fingers without lighting it.

" I just have trouble believin' Cortina and his gang came up from Texas."

" You can talk to Callahan in the morning."

" Nope. I wanna leave tonight."

" Your a persistent man".

" I aim ta folla them wagons south from Sorroyo."

Noonan seemed distressed, but McBride did not know why as they drifted onto the boardwalk.. " Listen, I'm going out to inspect the train in the morning. I'd be glad to go down in the canyon with you then."

" Then I'm gonna miss ya."

" You want army men with you?" asked Noonan.

" Nah... I'm bringing a Shoshoni friend with me. Jake laughed and put own his hand on Noonan's shoulder. " You may be good at railroadin', Mr. Noonan, but Cortina don't come up here. Texas is fur away."

" I believe what Callahan is saying."

" Well, in my business you believe half of what you hear and the other half you shoot the sky with. I'll be in The Arroyo." Jake pointed across the street to the glowing, frosted windows. A few cowhands staggered through the half louver doors. Even down the street he could hear the piano.

Noonan stepped onto the boardwalk and shook Jake's hand. " Maybe I'll get in some card playing."

" You a gamblin' man?"

" I can be persuaded. Look, I'll meet you before you leave. I'm sure that working together we can solve this thing quickly."

" That's another thing bout this business. You never can count on nothin'."

" I suppose that's true." Noonan tipped his hat and stepped down the boardwalk to the hotel entrance. Hotel help descended upon him and scrambled to get his bags.

Ed walked up from the livery down the street. " Who the hell is he, Ed? Likes people to carry his bags."

" He's a big railroad man. You drinkin'?"

" Man's never too big to carry his own bags." Jake glanced at Ed. " Yeah, I'm drinkin', but I'm ridin' out... Have ta check my prisoner first. I'll see ya at the saloon."

" I wuz beginnin' ta wonder."

Jake grinned and started across the street to his office. The stars were brighter as he left the hotel lights. He noticed something was not right when Noonan had stepped from the stage. Jake wanted to telegraph the railroad and get a reference. That would have to wait until the line was repaired. He opened his office door and struck a match against the plaster, and placed it on the oil lamp wick. The wick flared and the office brightened. Holding the desk lamp he moved with the shadows down the hall to check the jail cell. He unlocked the back door. A singular low flame burned near the steel sconce. Dalton was in the corner, slouched on the bed with his hands folded on his chest.

Jake again checked his boots against the bed. The heels were clean, but the black leather was scuffed and dusty. " You all right, Dan?"

" As right as an innocent man can be."

" I hear what you're sayin'. Judge MacKenzie, he's comin' in Monday. I need ta get ya a lawyer."

" I don't want no lawyer. I didn't do nothin'. I went over ta borrow Dunbar's saw."

Jake leaned against the stucco wall. " You'll get your chance ta tell yur side. You need some water or somethin'?"

" I don't want nothin' cept gettin' out of here." He stood and held the thick cell window bars.

" I advise gettin' a lawyer, but that's your choice. "

" They all think I did it."

" I know, I know. Them Turner boys gut everyone all stirred up. MacKenzie will decide this with no help from the Turner boys." Dalton shook his head and gazed outside. Jake stood for close to a minute. " You want some grub?"

" Nah. Ain't hungry. Jake, you're the marshal. Alby says you found that shell and the creosote. I saw you lookin' at my boots. Now find out who killed Tom Dunbar."

" Do my best."

Dalton swallowed, his eyes moistened and continued to stare out the window toward the saloon. " I hear yur followin' Mexicans down Sorroyo."

" Gutta."

" Turner boys could come in here and string me up."

" No, that ain't gonna happen with MacKenzie comin'. And I'm appointin' Robbie Pauntok deputy while I'm gone. He'll have Sawtooth with him. And Jim Coltraine will be my eyes and ears in town."

" Robbie and Sawtooth ur both damned good shots. Just remember, Marshal, if you don't find who gunned down Dunbar, I will be hangin' from that tree out at his ranch."

" Not if you didn't do it... Get some shut-eye, Dan. I'll be back in a couple of days."

" If Cortina don't kill ya."

" When yur dead, yur dead."

Dalton returned to the mattress and sprawled his legs over the edge. Jake locked the bars and shuffled with the light into the hall. He locked the outer door and went back to his office. At the desk he wrote down notes for MacKenzie. Dalton might be lying but he doubted it. The creosote on the porch might be from something else, yet Dalton did not carry a gun.

Jake pulled the worn wood cribbage board from his desk draw and placed the wrinkled card deck on a yellowed newspaper. Maybe this time MacKenzie would beat him. Quickly, he lifted his saddlebags and supplies on Alby's desk. He had packed enough supplies to last a week. As he lifted a lantern onto the desk, he debated whether to wait until morning, but twelve hours might be just enough time for Cortina to somehow transfer the gold. He needed a drink first and left his bags half packed. He blew out the desk lamp, looked around his office before extinguishing the wall lamp.

Outside, the stagecoach was already inside the livery. He crossed the road diagonally and walked steadily down the street to the saloon. Even from the road O'Malley's piano playing and crowd clapping broke the nighttime silence. He pushed open the louvers and the tobacco smoke hit his face. On the stage women danced in bright crimson, satin show dresses, kicking their legs higher as men yelled. He nodded to O'Malley and pushed through the crowd to the bar.

Alby was down the end with Ed. "Over here, Jake!"

"I'll be right there, Alby." Jake moved up to the bar. Johnny was already getting him a bottle and shot glass. "Thanks, John."

He walked over and set the bottle and glass on the bar. "Whaddaya hear, Ed?" he asked, pouring himself a shot. He sat and looked across at the bottles Alby had put on his tab. "Glad you're havin' a good time on my tab, Alby."

Alby leaned over his drink. "Ed says Noonan's here about the missin' gold, Jake. You still leavin' tonight?"

"Yup, I'm headin' out. You seen Soaring Bird?"

"Ain't seen em. Ain't seen em."

"Noonan gut out here too quick," said Jake.

Alby grabbed Jake's wrist. "He's meetin' two calvary men from Fort Churchill, Jake. I hear the railroad's sendin' Pinkerton detectives."

"Old news, brother." Jake lifted the shot glass to his lips and drank the whiskey. He rapped the glass on the table. "Well, it's their own damn fault. They shouldda had that train filled with just soldiers not passengers."

"I heard Injun bands been out there," said Alby. "Maybe they took it."

" I don't think Injuns are gonna do much with that gold, Alby. You believe every rumor that come floating inta town. Soaring Bird would have known if other Injuns were involved."

" Noonan keeps talkin' bout Mexicans," said Ed.

" Somebody took the gold and the soldiers away in wagons."

" Listen, Alby. Find Sawtooth and track down Robbie Pauntok. Tell Robbie he's been appointed deputy while I'm away."

" What about me?"

" What about you? Just tell Robbie. Simple message. I don't want them Turners comin' back ta town with the hangman's noose."

" I'll keep a lookout, Jake."

" You'll find Robbie." Jake caught sight of Pam Grayson across the bar and was drawn to her tight, dusty dark britches. She must have just arrived. " Whew, boy. Excuse me, Gentlemen."

" Cat's on the prowl," said Alby. " Cat's on the prowl!"

Jake shook his head and moved around the tables. Pam's green eyes focused on him. He tilted his hat. " Pam, hear you're stayin' out at the Turner Ranch."

" Jake McBride." She drank the whiskey straight. " Last time I saw you, you were tryin' ta get me up to your room."

" Maybe, I still am... How ya been?"

" Punchin' cows and listenin' to them Turner boys tell me I don't know what the hell I'm doin'. The old man made it too soft for em. They don't know a hard day's work. Leave it to the punchers and the ranch hands."

" I'm sure you don't take any of their guff, Sunshine."

Somehow seemed to like being called Sunshine. She spread her tanned arms across the back of the chair and her muslin jersey opened at the collar. " So, who you gut behind bars, Marshal?"

" I gut bigger problems. That gold out near Sorroyo Canyon. Still within my jurisdiction. They gut Pinkertons comin' out here, rail man's already checked in, and I really don't care bout them comin' in here. Oughtta let folks solve problems where them problems happen."

" Amen to that," said Pam, taking another shot. " But you should just the railroad handle it. Don't you get involved."

" I don't trust the railroad, the Pinkertons... None of them bastards. But there's a re-ward out."

" So, you really are goin' out to Sorroyo Canyon tonight?"

" Yup," he said, sitting next to her.

She whispered and purposefully leaned forward so he could see down her jersey. " You ain't answered my question. Who you gut behind bars?"

" You haven't heard about Tom Dunbar?" asked Jake.

" Shot dead. right?" she asked.

" Yeah. Dan Dalton was found over there."

" He do it?"

" Hell no. He was over there borrowin' a saw. Judge MacKenzie is comin' into town on Tuesday. Somebody came in from the east, I reckon,' Pam."

" What makes you say that?" she asked.

" Call it intuition, Sunshine."

" You know, Jake." She ran her fingers down his rough beard stubble.

" I'm in two-twenty at The Coltraine... That is, if you're interested."

" Ain't goin' back to the Turner ranch tonight?"

" Think it would be worth my while to stay in town?" She smiled and finished the whiskey. " Unless you have to leave tonight."

" Depends."

She stood and stretched her tight form before him. Jake let his eyes walk up her leather britches. She placed her finger against his lips as she leaned over. Her eyes were heavy. " Don't wait too long..."

Jake followed her as she sashayed toward the louvers, but she turned and smiled before she stepped outside. Chasing her into The Coltraine would nix his plans to ride into Sorroyo tonight, but he had chased her for months. He finished another shot, checked the wall clock and now knew he was about to give Cortina another twelve hours.

6

Jake spent the next twenty minutes at the table with Alby and Ed Ferrier. A couple of the showgirls lounged around the table for about half an hour, but Jake's thoughts were stuck on Pam Grayson. She was like a wild horse, working alongside the men, and never took any lip. Her unsavory reputation made him want her even more. Maybe he could spend a few hours with her and then move out. Or maybe he'd worry about Cortina in the morning.

Ed slipped upstairs with one of the girls and Alby staggered to the bar with a few cattle punchers. Jake paid the tabs and glided into the cooler air outside. His eyes adjusted to the blurry stars across the prairie. He recognized the big dipper from his days in the army. Night after night, he waited to fight the rebs in Virginia. Night after night he became friends with the stars. Men died but the stars remained.

He looked up to the second floor of The Coltraine and trotted like proud a steed down the boardwalk. Some rooms had lamps burning, others were dark, and he had suspicions whether Pam Grayson was just leading him on. Inside the hotel, Buford Peck, his feet propped on the table, was asleep behind the counter. Jake crossed the lobby rug and pounded his fist loudly on the wood counter.

" Good God!" cried Buford, his eyes opening wide as he exploded out of the chair.

" Where do I get some service around here, Buford?"

" My Lord, you scared me half to death, Marshal." He took out his green handkerchief and wiped his high forehead.

" Pam Grayson," he said in a lower voice. " Is she in two-twenty?"

" Pam Grayson?" Buford stuffed the handkerchief in his back pocket.

" Oh, yes, Pam Grayson. The cowgirl," he said grinning.

Jake scowled. " Well?"

" Ah, let me see." Buford put a pencil between his teeth and scanned the guest register. " Yes, you are absolutely correct. She is registered, but-"

" What about Jim Coltraine and Soaring Bird?"

" Soaring Bird said he would find you in the saloon later and Mr. Coltraine was invited to dinner by Mr. Noonan."

" Noonan?"

" The railroad man."

" I know who he is, Buford. You tell Jim the marshal said he was leavin' in the mornin'."

" Yes, sir. Marshal, but-"

" That's all. Now go back to sleep."

" But, Marshal."

Buford sat in the creaky oak chair as Jake headed for the dark carpeted staircase, overlooking the lobby. As he climbed to the second floor, Buford quickly looked downward. Upstairs Jake followed the lamps down a narrow, half lit hall with ripped green flowered print paper and he came to a stained door. The tarnished brass numbers hung at an odd angle.

He rapped his knuckles against the wood and waited. His mind drifted back to Pam's long hair when she had walked from the saloon. This woman must have been crazy in a bedroom. But as he knocked louder this time, he began to think he had been conned. Half a minute later, he rumbled down the hall and descended the stairs. "The lady's not in, Buford."

"I was going to tell you that, but you interrupted me," said the clerk.

"Well, where the hell is she? You couldda saved me a trip up them stairs."

"I saw her earlier with that railroad man."

"Noonan? What's he in a receivin' line fur everybody in town? She don't waste no time landin' a man with money."

"They talked over by the fireplace." Buford pointed to the dying fire across the lobby. "They talked for fifteen minutes just after he got off the stage."

"What did you do, time them?" Buford produced a meek smile. "They leave?"

"Yes, with the two cavalry soldiers."

"Interestin'. I wonder how she knows Noonan."

"Pam knows everybody," said Buford, covering his mouth as he snickered. "If she don't she will."

"You don't miss a beat, do you, Buford? I won't bother buying The Bugle no more. I'll just wait ta hear from you."

Across the lobby Pam Grayson slowly slid her riding hat back so the cord dangled around her neck. Her long brown hair bounced down over her muslin jersey. She nursed a smoldering stogie as if she were posing for a photograph inside

the open hotel doors. Jake stepped away from Buford and swaggered across the wood floor. " Evening, Pam. Didn't see you up in yur room."

" You weren't looking' too hard."

" I got sidetracked, Sunshine. But I ain't sidetracked no more." He placed one hand against the wall and leaned over her shoulder.

She took a final drag from the stogie, blowing the smoke out slowly across his face. " I think it's time I git upstairs Marshal. Whaddaya think?"

She kissed him hard and held the back of his neck. Then she tossed the stogie through the open doorway. He eyed her rounded breasts below her jersey and did not care who she was talking to or what she had ever did. She tiptoed her fingers under his shirt and dragged her arms around his chest. They backed toward the stairs as Buford ducked into the back room. Jake clipped her at the knees and lifted her up. The remnants of a sweet city perfume mixed with an outdoor freshness drove him wild. He kissed her again as he hoisted her up the staircase. About midway he let his hand slip up her jersey and he gently cupped her firm smooth breasts.

Down the darkened hall she enveloped her lips around his mouth. He staggered to room two-twenty and kicked open the door. In the rose scented room he lowered her to the satin sheets. He shut the door and lit the oil lamp, but as he turned, Pam had removed her jersey. Her hair fell over her bare shoulders. Jake threw his vest and shirt on the floor. Pam sprang from the bed and trampled across the shirt. Then she flipped off her hat and pulled off her dark leather boots. Her slim body was well toned from work and she clawed her way across the bed like a wild mountain lioness. She pulled Jake across the satin sheets, climbing on top of him

with a disregard for convention. In the flickering lamp light she peeled off his clothes and Jake forgot about Tom Dunbar being killed. Finding Cortina and the missing gold was not important now. He would head into Sorroyo Canyon in the morning.

* * *

Jake drifted in and out of sleep with Pam's arm resting over his chest as she lay on her stomach. He let his hand glide down her buttocks. In the dim twilight, her long dark hair swept across the sheets, moving with each breath as she slept. He slowly changed his position, staring over the almost indiscernible clothes and boots scattered across the floor. He wanted her again as he waited for dawn. Although restless, his heavy eyelids closed.

When he finally woke, the dim light had brightened and the clothing trail was clear across the wood boards. From the next room he heard splashing in the tub. He sat up and rubbed his eyes as he looked out the window. Judging by the daylight he thought it must have been near eight o'clock.

He rolled out of bed and thought about hopping in the warm water with Pam. She sat in a raised tub in the middle of the room, her hair pulled up, and her breasts nestled in the suds. When she saw him a wide smile came over her face. " I wuz wonderin' when you'd get up. I thought maybe I wore you out."

" Came close. What do ya know about Noonan?"

She played with the suds and did not look at him directly. " He's an important railroad man. He has money."

" You sleep with him?"

" Now, Marshal," she said, standing, the suds slowly meandering down her slick skin. " That ain't none of yur business."

" Maybe not. I wanna know who went after that gold."

She moved naked over to the chair and curled a white linen towel around her upper torso. " Then I suggest you git out to Sorroyo Canyon."

" I intend ta."

She walked by him with a mild indifference. He peered out the window toward his office. Dalton needed to be fed and the shades were still drawn.

" Word has it you *were* talking to Noonan and army men last night."

" Marshal, if you counted all the men I've talked to since the gold was taken, you'd fill yur log back in yur office." He stood in the doorway. She already had on her riding britches and boots, but her jersey was on the chair. When she pulled the jersey over her long hair a sly smile stretched over her tight face. " If you'd kept yur mouth shut you might have slept to noon."

" I never sleep ta noon, Sunshine,"

" Maybe ya should." Pam grabbed her hat and moved up to him. " And I ain't sayin' I wouldn't see you again..." She placed the hat squarely over her head and said nothing more as she left the room. The door shut tightly and Jake scratched his chin. She was cagey enough, but this time she knew something more. Jake was unsure whether it concerned the gold directly or something on the side. He should have kept his thoughts to himself.

7

Alby stomped into the office as Jake placed the speckled blue metal coffee pot over the wood stove. He put the coffee grinder back on the wall shelf. Given the liquor his deputy had consumed last night, Jake was surprised to see him so early. His wide brim, dusty green hat was pulled down to his eyes and he prattled on about Noonan wanting to see Jake at the hotel. Noonan and the two cavalry soldiers were heading out to Sorroyo Canyon to view the derailed San Francisco train.

" Soaring Bird and Jim Coltraine said they knew."

" They knew what, Alby?"

" Bout you and Pam."

" Neva mind bout me and Pam," said Jake, checking the coffee.

" Hey, Jake. If I had ta choose between Pam Grayson and ridin' inta Sorroyo-"

" Alby, shut up. Listen, you go tell Noonan I'll join him and the soldiers at The Coltraine. Then I am headin' south. Got ta make up fur lost time."

" Yur a fox, Jake."

" You go tell Noonan fore I shoot yur ass full of lead."

" I'm goin'. I'm goin'."

Alby cackled as he opened the door and left. Jake finished making the coffee. He took some bread rolls from the cabinet and placed everything on a metal tray. Thoughts of Pam Grayson in the hotel room clouded his mind. He gazed out the

window toward room two twenty-two. While he had never been with a woman like Pam, he kept thinking back to what Buford said about her talking to Noonan. Jake did not think that conversation was so innocent, yet he still brought her up to the room.

He grabbed the tray, unlocked the back door and walked down the dank hall. Dalton was awake and staring into the sunshine through the metal bars. "Ain't bacon and eggs, but it will have ta do, Dan."

"Ain't hungry."

Jake unlocked the cell and held the tray. "Suit yourself. I'll leave it here on the table."

"Don't matter. I'm a dead man, Jake."

Jake stared at him for a minute and thought he might confess to killing Tom Dunbar. He set the coffee and the rolls on the table and turned. Dalton kept tapping his fingers against the bars. "You wanna tell me somethin', Dan?"

Dalton turned. His reddened eyes tightened and he pushed his teeth together. "Yeah. Don't let me hang."

"You ain't gonna hang. You sure you didn't see nobody out there?"

"No... But you have the shell."

"Yeah, I have the shell and it don't mean nothin' right now. I'm more concerned, Dan, as to why someone would kill Tom Dunbar. If I knew why, maybe I'd find his killer."

Dalton put his head in his hands and nodded. He kept mumbling something about the judge not believing his story. "Judge MacKenzie will carry out the law. If yur innocent, you'll go free."

" I wuz in the wrong place at the wrong time, Marshal."

" Justice has away of gettin' out. Nothin's gonna happen till I git back. I've already written a note bout this for MacKenzie." Jake put his hand on Dalton's shoulder. " You don't worry, son." He left the cell and Dalton fell back on the mattress. The coffee was still steaming on the table as Jake locked the metal cell door. He headed down the hall to his office, opened the gun cabinet and held one of the new rifles in his hands. The wood handle was polished and the barrel still fresh with an oily residue. He locked the cabinet, loaded extra ammunition from his desk drawer into a saddlebag. For half an hour he finished packing his bags and finally secured the straps. Then he filled his canteens for the hot desert to the south.

Jake poured some coffee and stepped through his office doorway. Alby scrambled like a sidewinder across the dirt. " Noonan is all set! He's all set!"

Jake moved to the edge of the boardwalk.. " Where you been, Alby? What he say?"

" Says he knows."

" Knows what? Did you give him the message or not?"

Alby bit his lower lip and held the brim of this hat. " He says it's his job to look into that train goin' off the tracks. They're goin' to Sorroyo! And for... well."

" And?"

" They were havin' breakfast. I had some grits."

Jake looked over toward The Coltraine's unpainted wooden clapboards in the morning sun. " Alby, he's an important railroad man. You don't go barging in and eatin' breakfast. You probably wolfed it down, too, didn't ya?"

" Noonan wanted to see ya. But then he tells me. He tells me ta get the hell out when I asked fur more food."

" Well, I don't blame him."

" You got her last night, Jake."

Jake squinted and held his coffee cup. " You best worry about yur own business."

" You gut that look on yur face. I bet she wuz wild."

" Alby, shut up. Listen, I want you here. You watch Dalton while I'm gone. Where's Robbie Pauntok and Sawtooth? "

" They been riding the telegraph lines lookin' fur the cutter. Robbie said he'd be over. Jake, let me go south with ya."

" Bullshit."

" Come on, Jake. I don't want ta stay back here. First Noonan tells me ta get out and now you-"

" That should tell ya somethin'. And the last thing I need is railroad men in a snit. Start usin' your head, Alby."

Alby mumbled as he trudged back into the office. Jake started across the street and looked at The Coltraine's gray clapboards. The sun heated his back, but something gnawed at him inside. Maybe it was Dalton being held in that cell while a killer was free. The creosote smeared on Dunbar's porch and the spent shell in the range beyond were left by the killer. He would have preferred to look into this thing on his own. Noonan or the Pinkertons might hamper his finding Tom Dunbar's killer.

The sun glowed through The Coltraine's dining room windows. Only a few people were left from breakfast. He did not see Jim Coltraine or Soaring Bird, but near the empty hearth Noonan was eating with two blue uniformed cavalry soldiers with bright-knotted yellow bandannas. The dark haired soldier wore lieutenant's stripes and the other man, sergeant had bleached suspenders and a lighter, faded uniform. He remembered what Buford said about them speaking with Pam Grayson in the hotel last night. And Pam did not want to talk about it.

Noonan's brown vest, silky blue bandanna and smooth white linen shirt convinced Jake he had money. His leather riding pants were unwrinkled, boots polished and spurs not tarnished. He set down his utensils when he saw Jake. Something about his dark eyes looked familiar and Jake could sense he met him before last night. He did not trust Noonan and for unknown reason, harbored an intense anger toward him. Noonan stood and extended his hand. Unlike his arrival on the stage, his eyes were now bloodshot, hung heavy, and were ringed with deep circles.

" Marshal. Always a pleasure."

" Mr. Noonan."

" Please, sit down. You want something to eat?"

" Much obliged. I had my chow earlier," said Jake. " But I will join you, thanks." He sat between the two soldiers, still cleaning their plates. " I apologize fur my deputy barging in and eatin' yur food."

" He's a unique individual." Noonan raised his brows and lifted his coffee cup. A second empty cup was pushed off the side of his plate. " Guess, you decided to wait until morning to head south."

" Yup. Yur company must be mighty anxious ta get that gold back."

" Panicky is the word. And the telegraph wires are still down. We have to find the gold. "

" How?"

" Maybe the army. Company's got Pinkerton men heading up the east and up from Santa Fe. You may meet up with him if you're heading south."

" I'm heading south from Sorroyo."

" Good." Noonan smiled, glancing at the soldiers. He sipped the coffee and nodded. " And I have Callahan and his assistant ready to talk to you out at the train." He motioned toward the lieutenant and nodded to the sergeant, an older, stocky man with a creeping gray-red mustache. " By the way this is Lieutenant Willis and Sergeant Gavitt. Marshal Jake McBride."

" Gentlemen. You weren't on the train when-"

" I never said I wuz on the train," said the Lieutenant. He had a cocky tone Jake did not like. " We just come in from Fort Churchill."

Noonan pushed his fork into a fluffy mound of scrambled eggs. " As you know the railroad is responsible for the gold shipment. I have raised the reward to a thousand dollars."

" Hefty re-ward. I wuz never one ta turn down money. My job is upholdin' the law out here." He thought about Tom Dunbar's widow and kids. They could use the money. " Any new leads?"

" The soldiers guarding the car with the gold were all taken south, " said Noonan, raising his index finger. " But the engineer saw it all."

" What did he say?"

"Mexicans," said the pudgy Gavitt. "Juan Cortina and at least fifteen of his men. All the bastards got away."

"Juan Cortina?" asked Jake, laughing. "I keep wonderin' why Juan Cortina would be here in Nevada?"

"Gold, Marshal," said Noonan. "Enough gold to set a man for life. Word must have got out that gold was headed to the U.S. Mint in Carson City. Someone gave him inside information. If Cortina and his gang went through the canyon, he could be headed to New Mexico Territory. But we can't be sure. Other trails head across the Grapevines into Death Valley."

"You've been studying the maps," said Jake. "I say send out the cavalry from Churchill. Go get em."

"Wires are down, Marshal," said Willis. "You know that. Or ain't you payin' attention."

"I'm paying attention just fine, Lieutenant."

"I will tell you one thing," said Noonan. "If you find Cortina and the others. Just find them, mind you, I will offer another five hundred of my own stock to you."

"That's quite an offer. Where is the engineer?"

"He'll be out at Sorroyo with his the other railroad man in the cab," said Willis quickly. "If it's all right with you."

"You lookin' fur trouble, Lieutenant?"

"Depends."

Jake slowly let his hand slid onto his Colt handle. " Let me get this straight, all them passengers all gut swept out of there real quick. And everyone else guardin' that gold gets taken south. Cept the engineer and another man."

" That the way it goes, Marshal," said Gavitt, holding his fork as if he were going to stab somebody. Jake did not like him, Willis, nor Noonan, and thought Willis saw the anger in his face.

Noonan set down his own fork again. " That's a damned good question. We'll find out at Sorroyo Canyon this morning. Your deputy should have told you all this."

Jake was still miffed about Alby trying to scoff a breakfast from Noonan. " Yeah, he told me. Not much for witnesses"

" Callahan and Sumner are your witnesses," said Willis. He sat back, folded his arms and grinned. " And Marshal and you'll just have to live with that."

" I'll help you of course," said Noonan. " This is a railroad investigation. My job-"

" Just ta let you know. I'm the kind of guy who likes to do his job without any outside interference. No offense."

" No offense taken." He pushed his pewter plate forward. " As I was about to say, my job is to find those gold bars. We won't tread on what your doing. I think we both are after the same thing."

" No argument from me. "

" Then we'll meet you out at the wreck and talk to the men?"

" I'm plannin' on it. Then I'm headin' inta Sorroyo. "

* * *

Jake stood between Menewa and the lanky Robbie Pauntok. Sawtooth talked with Alby near the hitching post. " Don't take no guff, Robbie. No guff at all from them Turner boys. You deputize anyone you need. Judge will be here on the Monday night stage. I ain't worried once he's in town. And find them bastards who are cuttin' the wires, will ya?"

" I ain't seen much of the Turner boys since they tried ta hang Dalton, " said Robbie.

" Must be back on the ranch."

" The old man doesn't like you. Tuckerman was his man."

" I ain't responsible fur Rody Turner challengin' Tuckerman. Wuz a fair fight. And I'm aware the old man don't like me. I'm not his boy is why."

" Rody's a weasel," said Sawtooth, exposing his canines.

" Bite em, Sawtooth!" shouted Alby. " Bite em!"

Jake grinned as Jim Coltraine walked behind Soaring Bird and his fully packed pinto and he strutted to the jail hitching post. " The old man ain't gonna risk nothin' with the judge comin'."

Jim Coltraine spoke in a lower voice. " You're finally leaving town, Jake, or shall I reserve two-twenty for another night?"

" I don't think I could take another night, Jim," said Jake and all the men laughed. Even Soaring Bird had a slight grin on his normally stolid exterior. He wore a red and black Mexican blanket over his shoulders and a wide brimmed white hat. " Hell, Soaring Bird, you look like one of Cortina's gang. How is your horse?"

" I have a fresh horse. My horse was lame."

" I'm tellin' ya, boys, you find out who's wreckin' them telegraph wires. Andy has my messages all set ta go once the line is clear." Jake put his foot in the stirrup and climbed atop Menewa. He looked around the street as Soaring Bird mounted his horse. " And, Jim, watch Noonan."

Coltraine stood next to Menewa and looked up at Jake. " Buford tells me Noonan got in the hotel early with the soldiers... about five."

" I thought the son of a bitch looked tired, but not hung over. Have old Buford keep an eye on both Noonan and the two soldiers. If anyone can stick his nose inta other people's business, Buford can."

" Will do, Jake. You be careful out there. Following those wagons could be risky. Real risky."

" When yur dead, yur dead." Jake tipped his hat and Menewa cantered left. " See you men in a few days."

* * *

Jake pulled back on the bridal and Menewa slowed near the gulch. Sorroyo Canyon, cut deep into the prairie's red sandstone ledges, was five miles west of town. He wiped his brow with his bandanna and pulled a water flask from his saddlebag. As the cool water trickled down his dry throat, he kept wondering why Noonan would offer up five hundred of his own stocks to find the gold. Maybe his job was on the line because the railroad was liable for the gold or maybe it was another one of those things that did not make sense.

" Noonan and the cavalry soldiers are back at train," said Soaring Bird. He bent over and continued to study the wagon ruts. " Heavy wagons, McBride. Heavy if filled with gold."

" Tricky part was gettin' it down the canyon. Once they did that they could head south along the river."

Soaring Bird stood and held the rope to his pony. He gazed across the flats back to the train. " Why were engineer and other man not in town?"

" Dunno." Jake looked at the trail winding deep into the canyon. " We talk to them and then we leave. I wanna leave within the hur."

He brought Menewa away from the canyon walls. Noonan and the soldiers were less than half a mile back across the dry land. In the wavy heat ahead he saw the outlines of the train again, scattered like silhouetted behemoths over the desert floor. Two men moved along the cars. He gave Menewa a kick and as he galloped closer. The imposing dynamited crater rose from the sand and dissected the rusted rails, past the third car. He had seen twisted rails like this outside Atlanta and craters in Petersburg during the war.

Noonan and the soldiers huddled on their horses along the broken cars. As he slowed Menewa, he thought something about this wreck was not right. Noonan brought his black sheen horse up front, leaving Jake with the cocky Willis next to the splintered car. The blast hole meant considerable dynamite, probably planted precisely to coincide with the train's schedule.

" Whaddaya think, Willis? Them Mexicans got explosives like this?"

The Lieutenant straddled the horse, adjusted his dusty hat and crossed his arms over his chest. " I really don't know."

Jake swung out of the saddle. Menewa stayed back as he walked toward the debris. " Haven't seen nothin' like this since the war. What unit were you with?"

" Michigan. Sixty-Ninth Michigan."

" The Iron Brigade?"

" What?"

" I said, were you with the Iron Brigade?" He lifted some of the scattered boards and stepped onto the blasted ground.

" Ya. sure." Willis smiled. " The Iron Brigade."

" What I'm sayin', this looks like somethin' during the war."

" Right."

Jake put his hands on his hips and studied the folded train cars one more time. " And they gut it all out of here real quick."

" You gut all the answers, haven't you, Marshal? Far as I'm concerned you're just a tin horned little sheriff." Again Willis grinned as if he wanted to provoke a fight with Jake.

Jake stepped closer to his beard stubbled face and gazed into his dark, crow's peak lined eyes. " Don't push me, brother." He turned toward Noonan and Gavitt, up front talking to two men next tilted derailed engine. Before he left Willis, he faced him again. " And I have my doubts bout you and the Iron Brigade."

Willis raised his brow, still smiling, but he said nothing. Jake was more concerned about the passengers and what they saw. He mounted Menewa and scanned the train. The people responsible for taking the gold had to know of the shipment to the Carson City mint and they knew the precise train schedule. That meant planning. According to the wanted posters, Cortina's bandits were hit and run and stole cattle

along the Rio Grande. They would not likely have the information about the train schedule, but they might have helped execute the heist.

Inside the heavy black derailed locomotive Noonan turned quickly at the cab's open window. He whispered something to a man with gray striped overalls and a white gauze bandage under his matching striped cap. Jake brought Menewa up to the window. Soaring Bird dismounted and walked around the wreckage.

" Right this way, Marshal," said Noonan.

" Which car held the gold?:"

Noonan pointed down the jackknifed train. " Second from the end. There's wagon ruts all around."

" I seen them." Jake looked over his shoulder and leaned down. " I'd like to speak with the engineer."

Noonan turned to the man in the overalls. " Callahan here was the engineer. He hid under the wood stacked in the next car."

" You see who held up this train?" asked Jake.

Callahan looked at Noonan and then back at Jake. " I saw them Mexicans. Wearin' bright colored sombreros. They kept yellin' for Cortina. All them bandits, they killed one soldier. Then loaded the bars, the dead man and soldiers into the wagons. "

" U.S. cavalry soldiers captured by Mexican banditos?"

" Yup, and then they headed south into the canyon."

" And wagons weighted down with gold?"

" Yes, sir," said Callahan.

" That's what the man said," said Willis, arriving on foot.

" Wouldn't be my route." Jake tightened his lips, ignoring Willis and again studied the train. " Well, it mustta taken some time to unload a car full of gold, Mr. Callahan. Didn't someone go for help?"

" We were too scared, Marshal. Too damned scared." A little man in a red shirt kept squinting and nodding his head from inside.

" Who the hell are you?"

" Me?"

" You."

" Billy Sumner."

" Whaddaya see, Billy?" asked Jake.

" Same as Callahan. Mexicans," he answered quickly. " Went south."

" So, you're all tellin' me, it was Cortina up here?"

" Cortina," answered Billy, his eyes like slits.

" What the hell is wrong with yur eyes, Billy? You look like you have trouble seeing anything."

" Heat bothers my eyes."

" How many men?" asked Jake.

Noonan put his hand on the engineer's shoulder. " Fifteen of them, right, Callahan?"

" Fifteen. Billy and me wuz thrown against the wall and out of the engine. Damned Mexicans. Billy wuz right there."

" And the lot of them went south?" asked Jake.

" How many times does he have ta repeat it, Marshal?" asked Willis. He now had a rifle cradled in his arms. " Cortina robbed the train."

" Were you here, Lieutenant?" asked Jake.

" You're not listenin'. I wasn't here, Marshal."

" Tell me again. What did you see, Billy?" Jake whistled for Menewa.

" What Mr. Noonan said."

" Never mind what Mr. Noonan said."

Noonan lit a stogie. " We just want you to tell what happened, Billy. You, too, Callahan."

" Mexicans. Swarmin' with Mexicans, shootin' and cussin' in Spanish," said Billy. " They loaded the wagons and went into the canyon."

" After Cortina and the soldiers left, what did you do?"

Callahan glanced at Noonan before he spoke. " Well, I wuz in town. Thought I would be blamed or them stealin' the gold."

" Understandable," said Noonan.

Jake tilted his head and paused before he spoke. " I couldn't find you in town... Any passengers hurt?"

" No, sir."

" And the Mexicans overpowered the soldiers?"

" They told you that several times, Marshal," said Willis. He raised his rifle up a few inches. " Yur the lawman. Worry more about Cortina."

" You actually saw Cortina? What he look like?" asked Jake. When both Callahan and Billy looked over at Noonan, Jake pushed his lips together.

" He looked Mexican," said Billy, squinting again. " Led the rest of them. They went right for the gold car."

" The car with the gold, Billy?" asked Jake.

" Yeah. Rounded it up. Took em awhile to unload the bars."

Jake nodded as Menewa nudged against his shoulder. " Listen, again, I'd like ta talk with the passengers in Carson City."

" I'm afraid the passengers are on their way to San Francisco by now," said Noonan, leaning on the window sill.

Callahan shrugged his shoulders. " The company didn't want them inconvenienced. Like I said, we put em on wagons to Carson City. After all, this is a private railroad matter. "

" How the hell did yur company git wagons down here so fast?" asked Jake.

" We had two wagons and horses in the back cars," said Callahan.

" Get me a passenger manifest. We need to verify what these men are sayin'."

Noonan tightened his brow and sprang from the window. He scampered down the angled ladder and onto the desert floor. When he reached Jake he threw the stogie on the ground. " I think these men have told you as much as they can."

Willis swaggered across the dirt, rocking the rifle in his hands. " Why don't you head south now, Marshal?"

" And the railroad doesn't have to get a manifest," said Noonan.

" I'd be obliged if you did." Jake swung around in the creaky saddle. Both Noonan and Willis bothered him. " I am the law here, Mr. Noonan."

Willis tilted his head back and laughed. " The army is the law here, Marshal."

" I want that list."

Noonan nudged closer to Jake. " This is a private railroad matter. I brought you out here as a courtesy."

" The Marshal ain't too courteous," said Willis.

Noonan pointed at Jake. " You want to help us, fine. I'll even send one of the soldiers south with you if you wish."

" No thanks." Jake took Menewa by the reins and started along derailed cars. He was ready to either punch Noonan or Willis. As the horse shuffled in the gravel, Jake had a gut feeling they were all covering up something, but could not prove it.

" Marshal!" called Noonan. Jake brought Menewa toward the gold car down the end. " Marshal!"

Jake turned. " What is it?"

" Listen, we're being pressured by the railroad and the government will be involved soon. I apologize if we've been abrupt with you. This could cost me my job."

" I need that list."

" I'll wire the railroad."

" Good, cept the wires are still down."

" I'm sure they'll be fixed soon and I'll get you a list."

Jake held the saddle horn, the sun warmed his back, and Menewa trotted along the buckled train. He stopped at the freight car. Soaring Bird crossed the floorboards. " We won't find anything here. We need go to canyon now, McBride. We will gain nothing here."

" Agreed. We're losin' time." Noonan moved on foot toward them. He thought about Buford seeing Noonan and the soldiers talking to Pam last night.

" You know Pam Grayson."

Noonan squinted. " Looks like you got first dibs."

" And it looks like you were up late yurself..."

" Little drinking, little fun. Didn't get much sleep."

" You know the feeling, Marshal," said Willis.

" Right. I see you in a few days... Anything breaks, you know we're headin' near the Panamints, maybe further south."

" Good luck, Marshal. I will stand by my reward."

" I hear ya." Soaring Bird mounted his pony and started with Jake down the train. Jake checked the empty rear car as he passed. " Weren't no horses in this car."

" It would appear you are right."

The two men quickly moved away from the train. When they had covered some distance, he looked over his shoulder at Noonan and the soldiers gathered with Callahan and Billy. " That man is a liar."

" Which one?" asked his friend.

Jake grinned. " Noonan."

" He afraid for his job, McBride.."

" I know it. I tell ya, his being out in Nevada is just too damned convenient," said Jake.

" Are you saying is a part of this?"

" I don't know. Too many unexplained things. Too many people just disappeared out of here real fast. And why did he come in by stage? He's a railroad man."

Soaring Bird shook his head. " It doesn't matter whether he's involved, McBride. We need to follow the trail. Move fast and locate the wagons."

Jake looked across the flats at the train one more time and nodded.

The Fitton Chronicles

Fool's Gold

" Let's git into the canyon."

8

Jim Coltraine pulled The Coltraine's leather register book across the counter. He brought his finger down the guest list and stopped at the flamboyant brown inked signature of Patrick Noonan. Noonan had returned to the hotel at noon and spent a few hours in his room before dining with one of the soldiers. Coltraine noticed nothing unusual during the lunch and in the afternoon the two men had casually strolled over to The Arroyo.

" Andy says the telegraph is still down," said Buford from the back.

" And Robbie Pauntok can't find nobody."

" How can that be?"

" It gets fixed and someone cuts it again. Sabotage."

Coltraine pushed the book back. " You may be right."

" Really?" asked Buford. He moved behind the counter and adjusted the book to what he deemed its proper position on the counter. " You think it has to do with the gold?"

" I'm beginning to wonder. It's like the town is cut off from the outside world."

Buford put a stack of papers over his mouth as he whispered. " Junior Turner was in town today."

" Is that supposed to be news?" asked Coltraine. " Who are they hanging now?"

" Filled his wagon. Spent over an hour in the general store. Henry Higgens says he was buyin' supplies."

Coltraine moved around the counter. " I'm going to see Noonan and the soldiers in the saloon." He moved toward his side office, but turned abruptly.

" What kind of supplies? Why just Junior? Where were the rest of them?"

" Filled his wagon. I think Sam was over the bank."

" Really?"

" Mean anything?" asked Buford.

" I don't know. Listen, Buford. You keep watch out here. I know you will." Coltraine lifted his coat off the brass rack in his office. " I'll be across the street."

Coltraine walked briskly across the lobby. The grandfather clock chimed four times as he stepped onto the boardwalk. As he crossed the sun-drenched street, he peered south and thought of Jake and Soaring Bird tracking the wagons from Sorroyo. With the telegraph being constantly cut, the stolen gold upset him even more. The Arroyo's white washed clapboards were in shadows and the raucous could be clearly heard from the street. A couple of men he did not recognize lay drunk against the outside wall.

He pushed the half louver doors and surveyed the bar. Noonan, clad in a black coat and dark Stetson and smoked a finely wrapped cigar at the green felt gambling table. He flipped some cards down and was dealt a new hand. His face remained flat and smoke sauntered upward toward the red shaded oil lamps as the players solidified their hands. Coltraine did not see the Turner boys. The Turners were usually here every Saturday afternoon and night. Noonan's face brightened with a wide smile, the other men folded, and he scooped an assortment of coins

across the table. Coltraine spotted Henry Higgens at the bar. Lieutenant Willis played a banjo and was singing with Alby near the stage. As Coltraine moved through the crowd toward Henry, Noonan's self assured demeanor caught his attention. The game broke up and several disgusted men wandered from the table.

" Henry."

" Jim."

O'Malley adjusted some sheet music and his fingers tapped a new round on the worn ivory keys, but could not drown out Alby's off key mining songs and Willis' banjo strumming. " Say, Henry. Junior Turner in your place today?"

Henry's wide jaw moved up and down and his eyes opened. " He wuz. Hell, he wiped me out."

" Really? What did he buy?"

" Everything. Mostly provisions. Some wood planks. Things like the Turners always do when they drive their cattle."

" Where did he say they were going?" asked Coltraine as Johnny set a glass of whiskey on the bar. " Thanks, John."

" Junior kept repeatin' how he and his brothers were going with Sam east to buy cattle cause head are cheap now afta the panic. Thought I heard somethin' bout Abilene. He bought all my grain and a mule harness."

Coltraine straightened his frame. Mules could transport gold over rough terrain. Linking the Turners to the stolen gold was a leap. Although rumors had followed Sam Turner west, no one ever proved he skimmed money from the government during the war. He was in the shoe manufacturing business and supplied Union troops. Maybe people jealous of his wealth started innuendoes or maybe he

really did move west to avoid any Congressional investigations. Deliberately stealing a government gold shipment required nerve and risk. " What was Junior going to do with a mule harness?"

" Put it on a mule," said Henry, smiling and holding his drink.

Coltraine grinned. " He didn't mention that, eh?"

" No, sir. He brought enough provisions to feed the army of the Potomac. I figure maybe they're makin' some kinda cattle deal and they'll ship heads of cattle back on the train."

" When are they going?"

" Junior said right away and then the old man comes in, pays the bill, and pulls him outside. They both went into the bank."

" Business at the bank?" asked Coltraine. Noonan had drawn in more men at the table and was already dealing cards. " Man knows how to play poker."

Henry glanced over his shoulder and turned back to Coltraine. " Sam Turner holds all the assets at that bank, Jim. They paid me in coin. Seventy-five dollars."

" Hefty amount for an afternoon's shopping. They ever shop like that before?"

" Like I say. Only before their trips back east."

Coltraine turned toward Alby's discordant singing. " The Lieutenant isn't bad but Alby sounds like a sick cow."

" Oh, the miner works hard with a shovel and a pick
Till his body is feeble and tender

And then he goes into town at the end of the week
And spends all his dust on the benders."

Alby, his wispy gray hair askew, shook hands with Willis staggered back to the bar. Willis set down his banjo and wandered near Noonan at the poker table.

" Them wuz hard days," said Alby. " Out at Grisley Flats and Whiskey Diggins."

" Sounds like you survived the rush, Alby," replied Coltraine. " I thought you are supposed to be watching the town?"

" Let Robbie watch the town. I need song and drink. I'm too worried bout Jake and the Injun. Them Mexicans are killers."

" Jake can take care of himself."

" So can Cortina," said Alby as he caught sight of Noonan at the table.

" Well, there he is. The all important, Mr. Noonan. Why the hell isn't he out there lookin' fur the gold? Lets Jake risk his life..."

" Noonan has his own company's agenda. He'll conduct his own investigation. But he does look like quite the gambler."

" Ah!" Alby looked over at Johnny. " Johnny give me some gin."

" Alby... Where's yur money?"

" Put it on the Marshal's tab."

Johnny twisted his waxed mustache and wiped the counter. " Hell, I ain't doin' that ta Jake."

" Jake always lets me drink on his tab."

" Well, he didn't tell me nothin' when he left."

Alby looked at Coltraine. " Alby, I know what your thinking and forget it."

" Maybe the magnificent Mr. Noonan will spot me a few rounds," he said, falling back from the stool, but he remained on his feet.

" Alby."

Alby gripped his guns and took large strides across the saloon floor.

With a half smile Henry looked over his shoulder. " He's gonna get himself inta trouble."

Alby approached the gambling table. Coltraine winced. He stood, shook Henry's hand and started across the saloon. " Thanks for the information, Henry."

Henry pretended to salute him. Across the room, Alby was already babbling, sticking his face near Noonan's cards. Noonan's furrowed brow and pursed lips indicated his annoyance. His eyes shifted and he finally set his cards face down on the table. He slide several coins across the table and smacked them in Alby's hand and Coltraine heard his words across the noisy saloon. " Now get the hell out of here."

" Much obliged, Mr. Noonan. You ain't half the snake the Marshal says you are."

Noonan's face tightened, he squinted and studied Alby's dusty clothes.

" I don't take kindly to such remarks, Mr. Conner."

" You challengin" me, Mister?" Alby rubbed his palms over his gun handles.

Noonan looked down at Alby's hands and flipped open his coat, revealing a small derringer in his vest pocket. " You best go over to the bar."

Willis rushed forward and grabbed Alby from behind. " Alby! You want to get yourself killed?"

" Man's challengin' me."

" Best not bother Mr. Noonan when he playin' cards. Come on, we'll sing another song."

" Songs are over, Lieutenant. I think its time for you to stick to the business at hand. Good luck."

Willis nodded and abruptly shuffled around the poker table. Coltraine watched him disappear through the louver doors. Johnny dragged Alby back to the bar as Noonan looked around the table. Several of the men had left.

" Game's breaking up. Can I buy you a drink, Mr. Coltraine?"

" Thanks."

" What do you like?"

" Whiskey."

" Whiskey," he said to one of the girls. " You're hotel is the exception to the usual holes I stay in on my swings out here."

" You work for the railroad long?"

" Sixteen years. Since the war. I worked moving freight and men by rails during the war. Made contacts with the railroad."

The girl placed Coltraine's thick whiskey glass on the table. " Thanks."

Noonan balanced the lit cigar between his thumb and index finger.

" When the railroads moved west. I got in on the action. Railroads are opening up this country, Mr. Coltraine. Soon, the stage will be a thing of the past."

" You may be right. So, you were out here when you got word of the gold."

" Yes, my company wired me in Eureka. I had to take the stage."

" Thing of the past," quipped Coltraine.

" Touché." Noonan finished his own drink. " You know, I hope your marshal finds Cortina. I feel helpless out here. I just wish I could contact my company and find out where the Pinkertons are. The lines still are down."

Coltraine nodded. " Cut."

" During the war trying to find someone along the line, someone who springs out and cuts the line is difficult. You in the war, Mr. Coltraine?"

" I'm from Virginia. You were probably moving your railroad freight to fight us."

" War is war."

" True. You ever meet Sam Turner during the war?"

Noonan shook his head and exhaled. " Turner has a ranch outside of Brinson, correct?"

" Yes, sir. He worked with the army. Made a fortune selling shoes to the troops and other things but it's never been proven. "

" War profits?" asked Noonan.

" Yes, but, again, no one ever proved anything."

Like a magnet Noonan's stubby fingers lifted the remaining coins from the green felt table. " Temptation was always there. I know many a man who was not, shall we say, above board. Happens during wartime."

" I find it odd that you sit here gambling, Mr. Noonan... While the gold is missing. "

Noonan raised his brows and seemed to think about the question.

" What can I do? Your marshal and the Shoshoni are tracking the gold. I'll defer to the Pinkertons when they arrive. My feeling is the group from Santa Fe will stop Cortina cold and this will all be over."

" And if they don't?"

" Then," said Noonan, standing. " I've got myself one big problem." He extended his hand. " You have yourself a good evening tonight, Mr. Coltraine. Perhaps, I'll see you at breakfast."

Coltraine stood and shook his hand. " You're welcome at my dining room."

" Obligated. Thank you."

Coltraine shared Jake's feeling about Noonan. His sly look and the timing of his visit west were too coincidental. Yet, for Noonan to steal gold on his company's train would have taken elaborate planning as well as nerve, nor would he attempt such a feat unless he was certain of success. Coltraine had the odd notion, because of their purchases in the general store, the Turners were in the middle of the heist. If he allowed his theory to go forward, the gold would be still in the area. Maybe it was time to take a ride out later to the Turner Ranch.

* * *

Soaring Bird's pinto followed behind Jake down along the wide trail above the canyon. The smooth red rocks hid any wagon tracks. A stiff warm breeze shot up the canyon walls and the swift river's roar grew louder. Jake peered across the distant sandbars and trees spread in the distance under the lofty rock walls. Noonan's telling the truth about Cortina depended what he found at softer ground

along the sandbar. Although he wanted to fight Willis, he regretted leaving Noonan behind and had the feeling the railroad man was shifty from the moment he saw him get off the stage last night at The Coltraine.

He pinched some tobacco from his side pouch into a paper wrapper and rolled the paper over the mixture. Pam Grayson crossed his mind as he struck a wood match against his belt. Menewa moved along a level stretch above a long string of rounded boulders fallen into the canyon. Pam was like home made still whiskey; potent, effective and irresistible, but potentially deadly and a guaranteed hangover. As much as he wished he could meet up with her again in The Coltraine, he kept thinking Noonan might have set him up. None of that mattered now.

He neared the canyon floor and the river's fury rushed only a dozen feet below the trail. Water sloshed over fallen rocks, pouring with a force he did not understand, but like other things he did not understand in his life, he knew the effect. The river could kill him if he fell into the surge. When you're dead, you're dead. Soaring Bird continued along the gritty dirt ledge and McBride yelled out.

" Whaddaya see?"

His Shoshoni friend's voiced echoed back over the canyon walls. " The wagon tracks."

" Thought so. Looks like we're gonna head south." Soaring Bird, off his pony, looked at the red gritty soil furrowed with ruts. " Same tracks."

" Deeper."

" Could be the soil .".

" No, McBride. The wagons are heavier. They may have moved gold into fewer wagons for journey south."

" Okay, that's even better. That means a slower time fur them horses pullin' the gold. We've gotta move quick. They've gut at least eighteen hurs on us."

" Agreed."

Soaring Bird mounted up. " We should travel by night. Cut down the distance. There is something else."

" What's that?"

" I will help you track the gold, but I have seen too much killing, McBride..."

Jake nodded. " I understand." The shadow edge cut a definite diagonal line from the water up the canyon rocks. He squinted. The ledge extended close to a mile as the canyon widened in the sun's blaze. He scanned the empty sandbar ahead, gave Menewa a kick and galloped toward the open ground along the river bank. The river looped and meandered through the sand and around the ruffling green tree clumps ahead. He pulled the reins, threw the cigarette into the river, and slowed. More wagon tracks laced the moist dirt down to the trees as Menewa trotted along the sandbar.

Beyond the long stretch of trees, the canyon walls tapered as the river veered south. In the late afternoon sun the tracks, still compacted red dirt blended into the developing purple horizon. Darker slopes and sun-topped hills were visible to the south. The milky blue Panamint Mountains materialized on the southwestern horizon. Near sunset he brought Menewa to drink at the river's edge. The horses would not be fresh if they traveled by night, but he needed to close the gap. Menewa dipped his head and drank the fresh water as Jake refilled his own canteen. He cupped the cool water over his half-shaven face and wiped the droplets off his

cheeks, but as he looked back into the canyon he had the feeling someone was watching him. " Someone's out here."

" Did you see someone?" asked Soaring Bird

" Just a feelin'." He stood and grabbed the Remington. For a few minutes he scanned the canyon rocks before he climbed back in the saddle. Menewa moved from the water and stepped onto the dirt. Jake gripped the rifle and fanned it along the towering walls. He wondered whether Cortina had posted a guard in the rear while the wagons carried the gold away. " We gutta ride all night ta git near Cortina."

Soaring Bird nodded and Jake looked ahead. The river emptied across level ground leading out of the canyon and across the wide stretch of prairie covered by late afternoon orange light. They followed the tracks out of the canyon and onto the southern trail. The heavily compressed trail through the sage was cut deeper with fresh wagon wheel ruts. Slowly, evening swept the stars over the flat desert. Jake clung onto his rifle and kept looking back. Something told him he was being followed out of Sorroyo.

9

Morning clouds moved in from the west. By late afternoon a few stray raindrops melted on Jake's sweaty neck. Riding all night had left his eyes stinging as he neared the Grapevine Mountains, bordering Death Valley.

" When I first met ya, you spoke of this area and the Sierras ta the north. Yur people harvested the pine nuts in the higher elevations and nobody bothered ya."

" We did." Soaring Bird turned and McBride could only see the feather upright in his long dark hair. " It was inevitable, McBride."

" What was inevitable?"

" That your people would dominate."

" Don't seem right, if you ask me," said Jake. " Should be able ta live together somehow."

" No. Pia Sokopia remains but we are scattered. Do you understand?"

" Yeah, like me. I can always go back ta Illinois. But I can't say I want ta."

" Why did you leave your land?" asked the Indian.

Jake wiped his tightened brow. " A woman. I came back afta the war, but she wuz dead. I headed west." He studied the two sets of tracks across the barren soil. " Them wagons split. They split the wagons."

Soaring Bird nodded and climbed from his pony. " The tracks here are fresher. We're gaining on them."

" But why did they split?" asked Jake.

" Maybe it was their plan."

" I'll head down through the pass. The north rim of Death Valley."

" *Tomesha.*"

" Ground afire. " Jake gazed up at the thick gray clouds. " Rain will cool the ground afire." He faced the bare brown mountains. " We'll have ta separate, track them til them Pinkertons come up from Santa Fe."

Soaring Bird shook his head. He squatted and smeared red sand from the lighter soil across his fingers. " Sand from Sorroyo Canyon."

" Good, at least we know we're afta the right wagons. "

" I wonder if the gold went one way and empty wagons the other way."

" Don't know. We'll find out, my friend. We'll meet back here in two days... Good luck, Soaring Bird."

" Be careful, McBride."

"*I will...*"

Menewa navigated along the long slope west. Jake lifted his canteen to his lips and watched Soaring Bird and his pony cross the tapering eastern ridge. The Indian waved once and disappeared into the gray mist. Jake looked west. Twice, in springtime, he had traveled into Death Valley. The heat always worked against him here and he welcomed the fall storm. A pink spotted gecko shot across the wagon tracks, cut deeply into the white gritty soil. The wagons must have swayed from side to side as they moved down the stark emptiness of the open pastel slope. Distant darkened peaks touched the heavy clouds. He knew he was close, maybe only hours from catching the wagons.

* * *

Jake worked on more tobacco after munching smoked beef stick and a hard roll. Sunset scattered yellow rays through broken gray clouds above the lofty blue Paniment Mountains and the sloping talus shadowed the approaching night. He needed rest and let the potent tobacco fill his lungs as he sat on his blanket, knees propped to his chest. With the wagons not far ahead, he doubted whether he could personally apprehend Cortina, but reporting the Mexican's location would lead the army or the Pinkertons to the gold. At least he would know for sure who took the gold and where they were headed. As he stared into the sporadic mist, the stars brightened between breaks in the silver clouds, chugging like puffy train cars above the desert..

Jake looked over toward Menewa grazing in the gray light a few feet away from his bed roll. Still, he sensed someone was behind him in the hills. He stood and checked the saddle, spread on another blanket. He dragged it closer to his own blanket, and was ready should someone spring out. Jake let Menewa slurp water from a small metal pot and rubbed his snout. Then he stuffed the pot back in the saddlebag. " You keep yur eyes open."

He lifted the Remington out of its saddle holder and removed a second blanket from his pack. The desert's cool air descended over him as he lay back and thunder rumbled to the south. His head rested against the saddle leather and he gently sucked the tobacco as he pulled the flannel blanket over his chest. The stars blinked between the clouds and his eyes hung heavy. He ground the cigarette into

the soil as the lingering fire smoke hung over him. His thoughts floated back to Pam Grayson and fell asleep thinking about her in The Coltraine.

* * *

Rain drizzle woke him in the morning. He ate quickly and broke camp. Menewa's hoofs dug into the moistened sand and he dodged the rock talus spread over the crushed brown slope. More red soil, darkened with the rain appeared sporadically along the incline. He rolled off the saddle and quickly bent down next to Menewa, holding the reins as he smudged the soil between his fingertips. When Soaring Bird first saw the mixture yesterday, he had not thought much of it. More tapering piles appeared along the wagon tracks, near fist sized rocks up another slope.

Now he harbored doubts whether the wagons contained gold at all. At the top, within the foggy spray, a water pool was sunk within smooth tan boulders. As the ghostly inclines and weighted ridges spread before him, he twisted in the saddle and continued to believe someone was tailing him. Along the line separating the dense sky from the land, he was sure he saw a rider, but the fog descended and shifted. He yanked out his rifle and stepped onto the rocks.

He filled the canteens, took off his shirt and dunked his head in the cold pool water, and then scanned eastward as he pushed his hair back. He rubbed his eyes, grabbed up his shirt. As Menewa nibbled on grass clumps, he removed his field glasses and climbed the rocks. Under the bulging silver clouds to the west, an ash and cinder field surrounded a small volcanic crater set up the ashen slope. He had

once come out here. The Shoshoni called it Ubehebe because it looked like a basket. The tracks led up the crushed cinder fan, but he saw no sign of the wagons.

He set down the glasses and as he pushed his arm through one of the shirt-sleeves, he noticed several brown smudges over the shirt's wrinkles. With his brow tightened he lifted the back of his shirt to his nose. Creosote filled his nasal cavity and he conjured up an image of Pam's dusty boots next to his clothes strewn on the hotel rug. His stomach sunk. He had no regrets about spending the night with her, but he may have slept with Tom Dunbar's killer.

He swung his head back to the bleak northern horizon, toward Nevada, and draped his shirt over his moist covered skin. With the rain bouncing off the rocks, he untied a lower saddle wrap and took out his slicker. Again he checked the land as he buttoned his shirt. He grasped the glasses and slid down the rocks. The sight of Dunbar's children, huddled against their mother's skirt remained fixed in his head as he donned his vest and lowered the slicker over his head. He secured his hat and climbed back on Menewa.

He brought the horse quickly between the rocks and caught the wagon trail, cut into the beginnings of an ash packed incline. Even with a week's worth of provisions stuffed in his saddlebags, he debated whether to return to Brinson because of what he suspected about Pam Grayson. He stroked his gristly chin and adjusted his wet hat. He could return to town by tomorrow night, he thought, as he started up the crater's elongated cinder slope and he lay the butt of the Remington across his legs. Shadows played tricks around him, but he was sure, as he rose upward, someone was behind him. The full view of the volcanic rim widened as he turned and pulled back on the reins.

A muslin sandbag trail lead to five wagons, flipped over along the eroded crater walls. " Son of a bitch..."

Jake turned for a moment and saw a silhouetted figure in the mist near the water hole rocks. He looked for Soaring Bird, but as he lifted his Remington he saw a man in a brown slicker draped over a deep blue army uniform and yellow bandanna. Lieutenant Willis' white riding gloves gripped his rifle and he aimed. Jake swung up his own rifle.

" Don't try anything!"

Jake figured he had caught Willis off guard. Willis slowly lowered the rifle. Jake massaged his finger on the rifle trigger and pointed the gun at him. The army lieutenant emerged from the rocks and started up the cinders. His dark horse was fully loaded. Two extra Colt six shooters were tucked in a side pouch as well as two Rolling-block rifles, and a new Winchester Jake did not recognize.

" Marshal, I thought you wuz Cortina."

" I know when a man's stalkin' me."

" That's a bold assumption."

" You don't mind if I ask what the hell you're doing down here?"

He had the same sly smile. " Doin' the same thing you are. Tracin' them wagon tracks out of the canyon. You didn't believe what we were sayin' about Cortina."

" Yeah, well, you look down this crater and you tell me if Cortina isn't a figment of somebody's imagination."

" What do you mean?"

Jake kept his eyes on the Lieutenant's hands and pointed down the crater gullies to the abandoned wagons below. " Look."

" I'd say someone had played us fur fools."

Jake stared at the arsenal of rifles and ammunition. " You expecting trouble, Willis?"

" Aren't you?"

" Yeah, but I don't know who from." Again Willis grinned. " Somethin' funny?"

" Army wants me ta find the truth."

" That right?" asked Jake, moving Menewa away from the rim, but kept the rifle aimed at Willis. " I'm headin' back ta Brinson right now. Yur engineer and his pal are liars. Noonan is a liar. He sent you out! "

" I came on my own."

" Well, I sure as hell don't believe that." Jake raised the rifle. " Where's the gold, Willis?"

Willis' hands moved toward his Winchester. " This here is a new issue... lighter than the old '66'. Longer range."

" You take everyone of them rifles, brother, and you put em on the ground."

" You don't think I had nothin' ta do with that gold, do ya, Marshal?."

Jake brought Menewa closer through the steady rain. He looked into Willis' washed out blue eyes. " I think you've been followin' me since yesterday afternoon."

" Yur too suspicious."

" Shut up! Get the guns down or I shoot ya where you sit."

Willis dropped the Winchester to the cinder floor. Then he threw the pistols down. Jake slid off the saddle, keeping his rifle pointed at the soldier as he picked up weapons. " If I didn't see ya behind the rocks, I'd be dead now. Right, Lieutenant?"

" I tell ya, you and me have the same purpose. Get that gold."

" Noonan planned this whole thing, didn't he?"

Willis pressed his lips. " My orders come from the army."

" Bullshit. Yur gonna tell me where that gold is. "

" I can't tell ya what I don't know. I wanna find the gold just like you do. There's Pinkertons comin'."

" Everyone says there's Pinkertons comin', but they sure as hell are takin' their time... Yur all liars. Git down!" The rain fell harder now as Jake raised his rifle again. Willis kept his hands in the air as he dismounted. Jake lunged forward and pressed the muzzle against Willis' neck. Raindrops slowly dripped from the soldier's blue cap and down his cheek. " I'm givin' ya one last chance, Lieutenant. You tell me where the gold is and who's involved or I'll shoot ya dead right now."

Willis' eyes darted. His cockiness was transformed into a sudden fear. He squinted and nodded once. " Noonan planned it. Planned it back east. He planned it. Then he come out here."

" Why ain't I surprised? The bastard... What did he do with the gold?"

" Moved it into dynamited caves in Sorroyo."

" Then what?"

Willis squinted and looked as if he were in deep thought. " You ain't gonna kill me cause you need ta know where the gold is."

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" Yur just gonna have ta weigh that in yur mind, Lieutenant. Bring yur horse around. We're headin' back ta Brinson."

The Lieutenant complied and grabbed the horse's reins. As he walked the animal down the cinder slope, he taunted Jake. Jake would not feel bad about killing the army man. He grit his teeth through the rain as they moved back toward the hazy Grapevine Mountains.

" How'd you become marshal, anyway?" Jake tightly held his rifle. Maybe he would shoot Willis. " Heard you got lucky. Somebody shot Tuckerman."

" And where'd you git that uniform? You ain't no army man."

" Sure I am," he said, holding the reins and following his horse up the muddy rock strewn slope. " The Iron Brigade."

" What battles? You tell me what battles The Iron Brigade wuz in."

" I know where the gold is at." Willis' smile developed into a full belly laugh as he trudged forward. But then he started singing.

" Fall off the overcoat, roll up yur sleeves
Minin' is a hard kind of labor, I believe."

" Whaddaya know bout minin', Willis?"

" I know there's gold missin'." Again he laughed and broke into another song as the rain steadily hit the slope.

" Whenever Jake gut full of gin he went lookin' fur a fight
One night he ran against the knife in the hands of old Bob Kline

And over Jake we held a wake in the days of forty-nine."

Jake spun off Menewa, his rifle thrust out as if he were charging into battle. He swung the butt against the soldier's head. Willis' knees buckled, but he kept grinning as he hit the mud. Jake ripped out his Bowie knife and sliced off an end from Willis' lariat. Quickly he wound the heavy hemp around Willis' wrists and tied a timber hitch like he learned working the lumber camps in Oregon territory. He lifted Willis up by the scruff of his neck and secured the line with his right hand. Then he climbed back on Menewa.

" Am I some kindda animal, Marshal?"

" You keep that mouth shut ur I'll tie ya bandanna through yur teeth."

" You ain't gonna find that gold, McBride."

" Get movin'."

Raindrops dripped down the soldier's face. He smiled as he passed. Jake twitched and came close to shooting him. Before he got back to Brinson he might coax the gold's location out of him. Yet, Willis could keep the information about the gold to himself. He had trailed Jake for the purpose of stopping him and made his appearance once Jake found the sandbag wagons. Through the storm as the afternoon darkened, he debated whether to kill Willis. When you're dead, you're dead.

* * *

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Fool's Gold

Under a jutting rock ledge Jake finished a hard roll and washed it down with canteen water. Willis had kept singing and insulting him as they rode through the rain and made camp late in the afternoon near Nevada. Rain water poured like the falls on the Green River over the rocks as Jake held his Remington. Willis sat against ledge, his arms bound, and the rope looped along the dirt, but his high-pitched singing annoyed Jake.

Oh say little doggies, when are
you goin' to lay down
And quit this forever shiftin' round
My horse is leg weary and
I'm awful tired,
But if you get away I'm sure
to get fired

Jake took another bandanna out of his saddlebag. " I'm ready ta put this around yur mouth, Willis."

" I miss my banjo."

" I oughtta shoot ya right now," said Jake, leaning toward the outside.

" Menewa."

His horse neared the cave and Willis looked up. " Why do you call him Menewa?"

" Don't try and distract me."

" You gut me wrong, Marshal."

Jake cupped grain in his hand and lifted his hand toward the horse.

" He wuz an Apache mustang. Wild... I broke him."

" Why the name?" asked the Lieutenant.

" Menewa wuz a Seminole in General Jackson's time. Wuz against the army, but came around. Even wore an army uniform." Jake studied Willis' blue uniform and cap as Menewa finished the grain. " You ain't no solider, but I seen you before."

" You ain't never seen me". He put his head against the damp rocks and sang again.

" The gold is there, most anywhere
You can take it out rich with an iron crowbar
And where it is thick, with a shovel and pick
You can pick it out in lumps as thick as a brick
Then ho boys ho, to Pike's Peak we'll go"

" You know a lot of minin' songs, Willis. Yet ya tell me you wuz in the war," said Jake, taking another fist full of grain from the bag.

" I wuz the backbone of The Iron Brigade." "

" Where did you meet Noonan? In the mines?" asked Jake.

" You make too many conclusions."

" Maybe... Yur gonna spend yur life in Fort Levenworth, you know that, don't ya? Lessen you wanna tell me where they brought the gold."

" I ain't done nothin'. " Willis leaned forward and pointed his finger at Jake. Jake raised the rifle barrel. " Nobody can prove nothin'."

" Noonan tell you to kill me?"

" I don't take orders from Noonan."

" Yur his boy. He says jump and you jump. Sure, he'll throw a few gold bars at ya, but he wouldn't put himself at risk, Willis. He'll kill ya. He ain't gonna want no witnesses. Where's the gold?"

Willis turned and knelt as if he were praying, near the water flowing over the outside ledge. " What's in it fur me?"

" Less time or maybe I'll just turn my back and let you go. You tell me where they took that gold."

Willis stared through the cascading rain. He thought for several minutes before finally turning back to Jake. " Gold's not in Sorroyo."

" Where is it?" asked Jake thrusting out the rifle. " I can kill ya out here and nobody's gonna know it, brother. Who is Noonan? Where is he goin'?"

Willis grinned and shook his head. " If it weren't rainin', I wouldda gut a clear shot at ya back at the crater."

" Who is he?"

" Name's Butkis. Gamblin' man from back east. I told ya, he set it all up with people from Omaha and Norfolk."

" Butkis... I heard that name before. Then he don't work fur the railroad. And you were sent out here ta kill me, you bastard."

" Hard ta kill ya with no weapons, Marshal."

" Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

Jake kept the gun barrel aimed at Willis. The soldier bowed his head away from Jake, but swung his arms up abruptly. Jake's eyes were sprayed with sand and he heard Willis drag something across the dirt. Jake fired the rifle. His eyes burned and he could not see. He lowered the gun and cleaned his eyes with canteen water, but Willis had escaped into the rain. He fired three more times and leaped from under the ledge. Rain tapped his hat brim. "Damn you, Willis... Don't be a fool!"

The dim edges of gray twilight light blended into the desert mist. Thunder cracked and occasionally a jagged surge of lightening danced over the distant hills and dense clouds. Jake fanned the rifle, but Willis was gone. As he inched back to the overhang, the crack of a rifle broke through the rain and a bullet hit the rocks behind him. He dove onto the saturated ground and knew he should have shot Willis back at the crater.

An orange flash ignited in the fog and another bullet whizzed over his head. He aimed the Remington toward the flash and fired. More shots followed, prompting Menewa to splatter the mud and gallop into the night. Jake darted behind a rock cluster as another shell ignited near the encampment. Quickly, he aimed over the rock and fired, but heard nothing. He climbed higher along the slick rocks, but heard no movement through the driving rain. He kept thinking Willis would kill him. It was a deep feeling within him as if someone had warned him.

He felt two shells left in his pocket. The rest were in the cave. Lightening lit the long rock strewn slope, silhouetting folded Grapevine Mountains and now Jake could not see Menewa. Without his horse it might take a week to get back to Brinson.

* * *

Lightening daggers cut the cloud packed sky, temporarily illuminating the ledge. Water rolled off Jake's hat brim and the valley shook with deep thunder. He was certain Willis had not left the area and would kill him at first sight. The rain pelted his shirt and his thoughts centered on this Butkis. He had heard the name years ago back east. Ever since Butkis stepped off the stage something was not right. With the telegraph wires cut, and even with the flimsy story about being out west when the train was blown up, Butkis only needed a few days to move the gold. Jake was still an obstacle. Willis could kill him now or leave him in the desert to die, but without Menewa he was trapped. At daybreak, even if the storm continued, Willis would spot him, and with two bullets left, Jake could not afford to miss.

He leaned against the rocks above the lower ledges. His eyes hung heavy and he drifted out of a fatigued induced sleep. He should have stayed in the canyon and had not been lured south after the wagon tracks. The mounds of red sand along the wagon tracks should have alerted him. When you're dead, you're dead.

" I know yur up here, Marshal!" Jake opened his eyes and his head snapped up. He pulled the rifle closer to his gut. Willis was on his horse and visible only during lightening bursts about fifty yards from the ledge. " Yur a dead man!"

Jake aimed the Remington, but the darkness provided cover. The thunder squelched all sounds and with the next blast of light Willis changed position. Killing him would be the only way he could get back to Brinson and find the gold. When he did not see the Lieutenant he lowered his rifle.

A quick volley exploded and pinged against the ledge about fifteen feet away. Willis was wasting his ammunition. Maybe he had taken his cache under the ledge. Jake moved through the downpour along the boulders. He fought to keep his balance, exhaustion draining his mind, as he circled. More shots hit the rocks above.

" Marshal, I'm gonna kill you!"

In the next lightening flash Willis' army cap was visible just above the rounded brown rocks, fifteen yards away. Jake raised his gun and wondered whether he could plug Willis with two bullets. He waited until more lightening shot across the sky to the south. Then he swung his gun to Willis' new position and squeezed the trigger. The lightening faded, thunder rolled up the valley in the darkness, and he again waited.

With each successive lightening burst Jake scanned the haze. Not until Willis' riderless horse galloped aimlessly along the slope, did he raise his head above the rock. He breathed quickly. Just like the war, his stomach filled with death and the persistent fear of his body being pierced with lead. He nestled the rifle against his chest. With each damp breath he sensed he had killed Willis, but without a horse and no supplies he would be stranded out here while Butkis took the gold.

He moved along the rocks. The dense black clouds blurred high above him and thunder persisted. Butkis' dark eyes, like a cold night breeze in the desert, was fixed in his thoughts. Being duped bothered him more than Butkis stealing the gold. The gold could be anywhere by now. Darkness and settling cold air grabbed him as he crawled onto the ledge. Huge bolts cut the clouds and thunder again boomed up the valley. He pressed his boot against several smaller loose rocks and lost his footing. His shoulder hit the rocks, pushing the air from his lungs. His skull smacked

against another ledge and he tumbled over the talus below. The rain sheets riddled his body as he whipped over and finally landed at the edge of a huge water runoff between the slopes. He choked as the water encircled his scraped face. His bruised ribs throbbed as he used all his remaining strength to roll back in the dirt, but his boots were close to the swift running water. The flashing sky blurred, he half heard then thunder, but he could not move.

10

Coltraine quickly hitched his horse to the telegraph office post. He had just arrived in a steady rain from the Turner ranch north of Brinson. Henry Higgens' suspicions about the Turners' trip were confirmed by Mrs. Turner and the servants. She insisted the three boys and Sam had headed east to purchase cattle near Abilene and would gone for a month. Coltraine stepped under the roof supports and wiped his boots on the rough edges of the boardwalk slats. He opened the telegraph office door and rattled the glass when he shut it.

Andy Bisbane's chair creaked. " Wires still down. Rain ain't helpin'."

" Maybe we need to ride to Carson City. The town is isolated and I don't like it," said Coltraine.

" It is." Andy stood and lowered the papers in his hand as the rain hit the window glass. " Robbie's gut men ridin' the line, but we can't find nobody. You want some coffee?"

" Yeah, I just rode in from the Turner place. I could use hot coffee." Andy moved over to the cast iron stove, dipped the brown pot and poured the thick black liquid into a metal cup. Coltraine looked into his azure eyes as took the cup. " We need to wire The Overland or anyone in Carson City. I'm having breakfast with Noonan. Maybe he has some ideas. "

" Noonan wuz in last night."

" What did he want?" asked Coltraine.

" Pounds on the door. I wuz sleepin'."

The hot coffee soothed Coltraine's throat. He swallowed before he spoke.

" What time?"

" Hell, past midnight, Jim. Wants ta know if the wires ur still down. Fine thing ta be askin' afta midnight."

" Late. Real late." Coltraine sidestepped to the window and stared through the splattered rain drops across the glass. " He was in The Arroyo playing cards. He's good. I'm beginning to wonder about him."

" Well, I asked him some questions about Bud Kendall and Warren Oates."

" Who are they?"

" From The Overland Railroad, Jim. I swear he don't know either man."

" Really?" Coltraine lifted the mug and finished the coffee. " Thanks for the coffee, Andrew."

" You gonna talk ta Noonan?"

Coltraine nodded and grasped the door knob. " I'm going to have a little talk with Mr. Noonan back at the hotel."

" Good idea."

Coltraine opened the door and the damp air hit his face. He stepped from the boardwalk, and unhitched his horse. The rain pounded and he shielded his arm into the air as he led the horse to the small barn behind the hotel. One of his men dried the horse as Coltraine entered through the rear stairway and removed his coat once he was in the lobby. He hung his coat and hat and had Buford leave a message for Noonan to meet him for breakfast. In the dining room he sat at his corner table along the rain dotted windows. He ordered ham and eggs and read a two week old

Carson City paper. Buford appeared the doorway a few minutes later and flew across the room. " What did he say, Buford?"

" Hard ta say."

" What do you mean?" asked Coltraine as they served him coffee.

" He ain't in his room. He was *never* in his room, Mr. Coltraine. Bed's not slept in. Luggage gone. "

" Hell, that's mighty strange. I don't like this. I don't like the Turners all being out of town either."

Alby Conner tripped through the lobby doors and traipsed mud across the dining room floorboards. " They gut em! They gut em!"

" Got who?" asked Coltraine, looking at the mud trail.

" Gene Hawkins. Dead, dead, dead. Sawtooth shot him... "

" Slow down, Alby," said Coltraine. " Why did Sawtooth shoot Gene Hawkins?"

" He wuz cuttin' them damn telegraph wires!"

Robbie Pauntok, his tan coat beaded with water, waddled into the dining room. The smooth skin kid took off his hat and his dark hair shook around his neck. " Jim."

" Robbie... What's this about Hawkins?"

" Dead... He's a Turner man, Jim."

Coltraine had a feeling lodged in his gut about the Turners. He kept thinking about Junior Turner buying the mule harness and the grain. " I'm having my doubts as whether the Turners went east."

" Somebody hired Hawkins," said Robbie.

" What about Noonan, where is he?"

Robbie shook his head. " Heard he won big at The Arroyo. "

" Yeah, but it seems he never went up to his room last night and his luggage is gone."

" Maybe he beat the wrong man's cards..."

" I don't know. Get word around town. If anybody has seen him or saw him leave, we need to know about it " Coltraine looked at Robbie. " I'm more concerned about Hawkins and the Turners."

" He did it! He did it! Hawkins did it. They found the cutters right near him. And cash in his pockets! He did it! He did it!"

" Is the line operational?" asked Coltraine.

" Huh?" asked Alby, eyeing Coltraine's ham and eggs as it was set on the table.

" Can Andy send out wires now?"

" Guess so. You want ya breakfast?"

" Yes, I want my breakfast," said Coltraine, sipping on the coffee. " Robbie, make sure he gets a wire out to The Overland. We may need those Pinkertons. Tell them Jake and Soaring Bird have tracked the gold south. And somebody find Noonan."

" If I find Noonan... you buy me breakfast?" asked Alby, smacking his wide lips under his bristly beard.

" You find Noonan and I'll buy you breakfast for a year."

" Year? Year? You heard him Robbie. One year. One year... Tell him about the Danforth Lode. Tell him!"

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Alby hobbled out of the dining room. Robbie held his gun handles and furrowed his brow. " This ain't lookin' good."

Coltraine motioned to one of his workers and ordered him to clean Alby's muddy mess off the floor. He rolled his eyes and cut into the ham.

" Robbie, I think we need to take a trip out to the wreck and the canyon when the storm breaks. Someone may have gone to a lot of trouble to get Jake out of town."

" While they got the jump."

" Exactly right."

" We've been talkin' bout the gold. Ain't a man in town who doesn't think it was stolen. I gut my theories," said Robbie. " With the help of Alby."

" Alby? You're losing your credibility, Robbie."

" No, Alby's been mining the Sierra fur years. Since forty-nine. He wuz tellin' me bout a railroad spur line west of Bancor Pass. If you bring gold west, you can go right through the mountains along the Bancor trail. Jake went south when he shouldda went west."

" You may be right, Robbie. The question now is: what do we do about it?"

* * *

Coltraine stood on the hotel boardwalk. Water cascaded off the roof as a team of horses trudged through the mud. A freshly honed, rain soaked, pine box, containing Gene Hawkin's body, was pulled down main street. He watched the larger rear wheels spinning and spraying the mud up at the turn toward the undertaker's building near the church. Coltraine dipped his shoulder to the rain and

splashed through the mud to the corner telegraph office. He still could not believe that Sam Turner would risk everything for gold. His ranch brought him great revenues and he was one the largest land owners in the state. Talk abounded about him running for governor. Yet, Turner and his boys were out of town exactly when the gold was missing. And it was Turner's man who had kept the town isolated by cutting the telegraph wires. Coltraine opened the telegraph office door.

Andy Bisbane tapped the key wildly. He raised his index finger and kept tapping. When he stood, a thin sweaty glaze covered his reddened face. He spoke in a lower voice. " Jim, the railroad never knew the gold was missing. Neither did the army."

"*What?*"

" I've wired Omaha and Carson City. They're wild! Carson City has been tryin' to wire stations along the way. Oates told me the gold was supposed ta be in there yesterday afternoon."

" Noonan deliberately said the railroad sent him!"

" Noonan lied." said Andy.

Coltraine stared out the rain-smearred glass. " Jake was right. Noonan's being out here was too convenient."

" And... This train had no passengers. The whole bunch of them, the soldiers, the engineer, all of them were lying."

Coltraine nodded. " Stalling. Sending Jake south... Of course."

Alby came running up the boardwalk. His steely hair was curled up he side of his soaked green hat. " Jim! Jim! They're all dead! Dead!"

" Who's dead now?"

" Back on the range near the wreck. Newton and the others wuz ridin' back inta town. Mass grave. Somebody killed the soldiers. Newton counted eighteen bodies!"

Coltraine peered out the foggy window as more death descended over the town . " We've all been duped."

" We gutta do somethin', Jim!" shouted Alby.

" They're sending federal troops out here from Fort Churchill. Still that will take a day and a half. More time for Noonan and the others to get away. Wherever they are..."

11

Jake's thoughts were muddled within pain and numbness. His head and ribs ached as the force of the wash out water dragged him forward. He fought off a mightier surge along the rock packed slope and tumbled steadily toward a mightier runoff a few dozen yards ahead. In the foggy haze Soaring Bird, trailed by Menewa, moved on his white pony down the incline as Jake spun toward wider stream. His friend leaped from the horse and with a coiled lariat in hand, ran along the torrent. Jake whipped over, coughing and choking as he gasped for air. He was taken under and water sunk into his lungs. His body bobbed upward, but feared he would not reach the slope. In a sweeping motion Soaring Bird unfurled the rope in the gray rain and it splashed somewhere back in the water.

Quickly, the Indian retracted the line. Jake was wrenched under and water pushed into his mouth and nose. He fought, sweeping his arms upward, but he could not compete with the ripping current. His legs knotted over his head. When he surfaced, Soaring Bird, running on the slope, hurled the rope again. The line hit Jake's fingers and he clamped his right hand over the rope, but when he lifted his other hand, the pain shot through his ribs. His body careened obliquely as Soaring Bird anchored himself on the bank. Jake moved his knees up, scraping the sharp rocky bottom as he neared the edge. He pulled himself onto the loose sand, the line still taut as he crawled from the water.

" McBride!"

Jake whispered as he rolled over and the rain hit his face. " Ribs. I busted my ribs... head cut." Soaring Bird took Jake under the arms and dragged him up the rock-scattered slope. Jake caught his breath each time the Indian paused. When they were back under the ledge, Jake rested his head against the rocks as water drained over the rocks. Jake held his ribs.

" ... saved my life, my friend."

" When the soldiers were threatening my family in Duck Valley, you wired the agent, Palmer."

" Them soldiers weren't under official orders." Menewa leaned under the ledge and McBride rubbed his snout. " Yur damned lucky Willis didn't shoot ya."

" I found wagons with sandbags near Badwater. We were tricked."

Jake, his eyes half open, nodded. " I know. They dumped three wagons in Ubehebe. Willis... Willis, he tried to kill me."

" The cavalry soldier?"

" Jake shook his head. " He weren't no solider. And he's dead. Somewhere out there. He worked fur Noonan. But Noonan ain't Noonan, he's Butkis. He don't work for the railroad."

" A false cover. Of course." Soaring Bird gazed through the stringy, overflowing water and down the slope. " And the gold?"

" Not in the canyon. But where would they have brought it?"

" Anywhere," he said, turning. " We should not have been fooled, McBride."

" Don't matter now. Don't matter."

" We need to go back to Brinson. Talmadge should help you."

Jake shook his matted hair. " Oh, no. I'm gonna git this man, Butkis. I don't care bout the gold. This man humiliated me. I'm gonna kill him."

* * *

Soaring Bird checked the makeshift bandage, wrapped around Jake's ribs. The crisp topaz sun now shone clearly through the afternoon desert clouds outside the ledge. Shadows fell. " Don't really feel that bad," said Jake. He nibbled on a piece of smoked meat and stared at the gooey mess Soaring Bird removed from his pouch. " What the hell is that?"

" Waappppittan sanappin..."

" Yeah, so what?"

Soaring Bird smeared the mixture onto Jake's facial abrasions. " It is the pitch from cedar. It will soothe."

" Yur right. It don't sting no more."

" You need rest." Soaring Bird picked up Jake's vest and blue jersey.

" I can't rest. I'm gonna get that son of a bitch." Jake scanned the slope for Willis' body. The flooded washed arroyo was now only a trickle after the storm. He reached for his shirt and held up the scuff marks across the shirt wrinkles.

" You know what the hell this is?"

" I don't understand."

Jake took the shirt and lifted the marks to Soaring Bird's nose. "Creosote. You found creosote on the Dunbar porch."

" Yup. Now, the only time I had this shirt off back in town wuz when I wuz in the hotel with-."

" The Grayson woman."

Jake studied the marks again. " Why would she kill Dunbar?"

" I don't know."

Jake gripped the shirt tightly. All pleasurable thoughts of Pam Grayson now merged into angry mass in his gut. He shook his head and slowly lifted his arm to put on the shirt. Soaring Bird tried to help him, but Jake waved him back and brought up his other hand through the sleeve. He slowly buttoned the shirt and struggled to get to his feet. The Indian grasped his hand and pulled him outside. Jake squinted in the bright afternoon sun near the darkening Paniments to the south. " She wuz workin' fur the Turners."

" Do you think the Tuners had anything to do with the missing gold? Turner has much land."

Jake tucked in his shirt. His lower ribs were tender but he knew he could ride " Sam's gut big ambitions." Jake took a few steps away from the ledge into the clear open air. " I intend ta track Butkis down." He gazed down to the camp over a mile away and saw buzzards circling in the brightening skies. " Willis must be down there. We gutta bury his body."

Soaring Bird looked skyward. " That would be the proper thing to do."

Jake peered down the salty brown slope as he moved to Menewa. He raised his foot into the stirrups. Pain crawled up his rib cage as he lifted himself onto the saddle. Soaring Bird climbed on his pony and moved slowly with him down the ta-

lus. Jake turned back to the overhang. He was lucky having got Willis. " Body's gonna smell bad. We will dig the grave away from the body and then bring it over."

Even fifty yards from the ledge his mind returned to numerous corpse strewn battlefields back east as the pervasive odor of rotting flesh now spread across the open desert. He grabbed the rifle from his pack and fired twice at the vultures sweeping in the burgeoning blue sky. The noise was enough to send the birds flapping back toward the folded brown mountains to the east, but the lure of the flesh kept them hovering at a distance. He returned the rifle to the side pack. " Damn buzzards."

Soaring Bird found a soft spot on the long slope. With his sore ribs Jake used his hands to push back the rocks. The Indian removed an old army issue shovel from his pack and scooped the sand, hollowing out a grave for Willis.

" Even the evil deserve dignity, McBride."

" That's hard ta swallah, but I guess yur right. I'm gonna search the body."

Soaring Bird nodded and pushed back his dark hair off his shoulders as he continued hacking the ground. Jake lifted his bandanna over his nose and mouth. Even through the moist linen the smell was sickening. It was something he never got used to.

Willis was face down in the dirt and his soaked blue uniform and hands were washed with mud, blending into the desert floor. Jake had shot him in the lower back, but the blood was washed off the uniform and the ground. He reached around with his right hand, not wanting to see the dead man's face. In his lower pockets he found a few gold coins, which he left alone. The hardened remains of a

biscuit filled a side pocket in his coat. Jake ran his fingers along the lieutenant's stripes and thought about what Soaring Bird had said about dignity.

Then he unbuttoned the top pocket. Inside was a still soggy, folded piece of paper. With his bandanna over his nose, he walked away from the body and squatted in the sunlight. Carefully, he peeled back each moistened fold, revealing the smeared black ink of a hand drawn map. In the lower right corner were the letters, S.C. Inverted V-shapes formed mountains to the west of a sketched compass cross. A straight line went straight through the mountains and south. Someone had written Bancor Pass in darker ink.

Jake held the wet map. Soaring Bird leaned his shovel against his legs and furrowed his brow. "Did you find something, McBride?"

"Could be where they're bringing the gold." The moist paper glowed tan in the sunlight. "Look here. This has gotta be it. If they could cross the Sierra to Bancor Ridge. There wuz a lode ten years ago near Bancor Ridge. I ain't never been up there, but I heard Alby talk of a railroad trestle built ta haul the silver to Stockton."

"Yes, the Newe, the nut gatherers, harvested pinion nuts and passed behind the ridge. We have seen the trestle you speak of. It extends into the valley."

"You git that gold through the mountains and inta valley, you got it made. Butkis must have contacts."

"He seems like a clever man."

"Damn right. I can see this in my head. Them bastards hid the gold somehow and moved out afta they sent us south. He thought he had me out of town before. He sent that Mexican squakin' about the cattle being rustled. I remember But-

kis bein' surprised when I showed up at the stage. The bastard wuz already out in Nevada. He just made it seem like he come in on the stage. Then the son of a bitch talks ta Pam. Gits me upstairs. She's workin' fur him... That Dunbar killin'... Dunbar wuz involved in this. Had ta be. And Pam gunned him down. When yur dead, yur dead."

Soaring Bird held the edge of the map. " Butkis is well into the Sierra by now."

" Afta we bury Willis, we're heading north toward the Bancor Pass."

" The area you speak of... The high ground of ponderosa and juniper. It is some distance away."

" We can't wait. I won't let Butkis keep that gold."

Soaring Bird nodded and gripped the shovel. " I only hope we have the time, McBride."

* * *

Coltraine and most of the town gathered in front of the hotel as the evening stage from Carson City moved across the prairie. After the storm broke he brought men out to Sorroyo Canyon to bury the soldiers bodies. The rain had washed away all wagon tracks and he now feared Noonan and the Turners had successfully moved the gold out of the area. With the Fort Churchill troops still days away, he realized Brinson's isolation was perfect for the heist.

The team of six horses rumbled around the church, pulling the stage behind and the driver yanked the reins. Coltraine stepped from the boardwalk.

" Dalton's all set! He's all set!" yelled Alby. " Set him free! Set him free!"

" Don't get ahead of yourself, Alby."

Alby tucked a small flask in his pocket. " Turners did it."

" That is unproved. All we know is the Turners could be involved in transporting the gold."

" You ain't the marshal."

" Nothing could please me more," said Coltraine as the mud-splattered stage came to a slow stop beyond the hotel. Coltraine waved to the driver and walked briskly to the coach door.

A bald man in suspenders and a blue shirt leaned out the coach sidelight window. His pudgy face was coated with a deep beard smear. " You Coltraine?"

" I am."

He moved his wide shoulders through the open coach door. " Hobart Bowers. I work for the Pinkertons. The Overland *wants* me to look into your telegraph lines being down. There's a shipment of gold due in Carson City tonight. "

" Oh, no there ain't! The damned gold is gone! It's gone!" cackled Alby. " They've gone to the Danforth Lode!"

Bowers face fell flat. " What is he talking about the gold being gone?"

" He's right," said Coltraine.

" Damn it, we had eighteen soldiers from Fort Phil Kearny!" Bowers wiped his chin and shook his head. " What the hell happened?"

" They dead! Killed outside of town!" Alby stood alongside him. " See it wuz like this: They blew up them tracks and the Mexicans took the gold south. Marshall McBride went afta them."

" We're talking murder of U.S soldiers!" Bowers' face had the tightened look of a man angered, yet disgusted with the turn of events. " When we couldn't wire east, I hopped the stage with the judge. This is a serious matter now. That gold was headed for the U.S. Mint."

" Not anymore! I tell ya, they're headin' to Bancor! Headin' ta Bancor!" said Alby.

Bowers turned to the coach. " Come on, Judge, you want that meal or what?"

" I do," answered the stiff voice inside.

" See, them Mexicans," said Alby. " They-

" Mexicans... That is highly unlikely," said Bowers.

" Didn't you see the passengers?" asked Coltraine.

Bowers folded his arms and stepped onto the boardwalk. " What passengers? Why would they load a train with gold and risk passengers? The murdered soldiers guarded that train."

" They said the passengers went on the wagons headed for Carson City."

" There were no passengers!" Bowers spread his lips and exhaled.

" Judge has to try Dan Dalton!" cried Alby.

" This is unprecedented," said the gray haired, wrinkled Judge MacKenzie, finally stepping outside. " No wonder why we couldn't wire Andy!"

They all started into the hotel lobby. As Alby squeezed between Bowers and Coltraine, Bowers rubbed his pug nose. Even Coltraine smelled the liquor on Alby's breath. " We found a Turner man, Judge! A Turner man, Mr. Pinkerton!"

" That is not surprising." Bowers tried to keep ahead of Alby.

The judge straightened his back and stretched his arms. " We had rain all the way. Just broke an hour ago. What's the story with Dalton?"

" Dalton wuz gonna be strung up till Jake stopped them Turner boys!" yelled Alby.

" Well, maybe the law has finally caught up with Sam Turner," said the judge. " He's been talking to people, important people in Carson City about being Governor."

" Coincidentally, that takes money." Coltraine tried to nudge Alby out of the way. The whiskey and body odor was overwhelming. " Alby, why don't you tell Dalton that the judge is here."

" How much?"

" A meal. Now go tell Dalton." Coltraine motioned Bowers and the judge toward the dining room. " Please, Gentlemen. I have hot meals waiting for you."

Alby continued talking as he left the hotel. " Don't forget about me!"

" How could I forget?" asked Coltraine and they all laughed and stepped into the lobby. He brought them directly into the dining room and sat them at his private table.

" Jake went south?" asked MacKenzie, taking off his coat.

" He and a Shoshoni have been gone for two days," said Coltraine.

" Shoshonis are supposed to be at Duck Valley and Ruby Valley," said Bowers, pulling up the chair.

" The Shoshoni saw the train wreck, but soldiers kept them back." said Coltraine. He went on to describe a chronology of events up to Noonan's winning at The Arroyo last night.

Bowers drank some water from a large glass and cleared his throat.

" Inside the coach we discussed Sam Turner's qualifications to be governor. Turner's background if shall we say nefarious?"

MacKenzie finished his water and Coltraine motioned to the waiter. " I know Sam Turner. Listen, it's common knowledge what he did. I worked in Stanton's office. Turner got out before Stanton cleaned everything up. I tell you, he made thousands. Skimming profits on all those shoes. Wrong sizes. Boots that didn't match, that came apart. He headed west with his money. I knew something was up. Like I said, people in Carson City want him to run for Governor. For a price."

" My guess," said Bowers, pointing. " Is he needed money. I'm not saying he took the gold directly."

" He and his boy wuz buyin' supplies. Mule train supplies! Mules!" yelled Alby, now back in the hotel. " Mules across the mountains!"

" Could mean the mountains. Once you're in the valley you can head for the San Francisco," said Bowers.

" The Golden Lantern," said Alby, pulling up a chair. " The Golden Lantern."

" Robbie Pauntok says it's a way you can go direct but still hide in the mountains," said Coltraine. " Alby's right. I talked to Higgens at the General Store. Junior Turner bought a mule harness, bridles, and loaded up with supplies."

" Looks like they did travel into the mountains," said Bowers. " If they went south the sheriff and the Indian will spot them. North they would be on the open prairie and we or anyone on the stage route would have seen them."

" That includes the eastern prairie, too," said MacKenzie.

" I say west. If you've got people waiting there for you in the San Joaquin Valley, you can get that gold anywhere. We're heading west in the morning. Early. We need to wire Stockton and Fresno. Get people heading east to Bancor Pass. It's Noonan that bothers me."

" I want know how he planned it," said MacKenzie. " I'm sworn to uphold the law, but this was brilliant. Shutting down the town. Blowing up the tracks at the right time and getting the gold out."

Coltraine leaned over the table. " Noonan is a railroad man. Responsible for the line from Omaha."

Bowers stood and banged his fist on the table. " That's is correct. Except Noonan is in Omaha! I wired him two days ago."

Coltraine laughed nervously. " Damn... Whoever we're dealing with sure as hell planned this right."

Bowers nodded. He sat and sawed off a piece of ham with his knife.

" Perfect. Right where the line swings by the foothills. Move fast and you get the gold out ahead of everyone else."

" What about Jake?" asked Coltraine.

Bowers tightened his brow. " He'll find the truth if they don't kill him. That gold... Even if they left days ago, the mules can't move that fast. The terrain is rough. I need somebody who knows the Sierra Nevada to the valley."

" I knows that area like the back of my hand!" said Alby. The men looked at each other.

" Robbie Pauntok," said Coltraine.

" Robbie Pauntok," said Alby. " Robbie's gone through the mountains. He's a mountain man!"

" He lived up there for awhile," said Coltraine. " He's no mountain man, Alby."

" You live in the mountains, yur sure as hell are a mountain man."

Coltraine rolled his eyes and leaned toward Bowers. " But you're right. If they reach the valley, they can get the gold to the bay. Put it on a ship and make your money. Or you can hide it. I'm with you. We leave at sunrise. I've got a dozen men who will track that gold. Horses and guns are ready. Finding the trail will be the hard part after the storm. Robbie can get us through."

" Good. I'll wire the army. I have a bad feeling about this, gentlemen. There's going to be trouble. These men aren't going to easily give up that gold."

12

As a blazing orange sunrise broke above the eastern prairie, the fifteen-man posse galloped across sagebrush flats. Coltraine agreed with Bowers about looking for the gold in Sorroyo Canyon. By midmorning they reached the parched brown hills at the base of the Sierra and quickly rose above Brinson. The rain had smoothed the rocky slopes clear of any recent tracks, but Bowers kept telling everyone they would find some evidence of Noonan's people moving west along the Bancor Trail. Robbie Pauntok figured the valley was less than a hundred miles due west. Once Noonan reached the railroad spur line from the Danforth Lode at Bancor Pass, apprehending them would be impossible.

The group stopped to eat near a rapid mountain stream where scraggly juniper trees sprouted from weathered gray rocks. Coltraine cupped his hand above his eyes and surveyed the lofty green straight rows of ponderosa and Jeffrey pines coating the distant peaks silhouetted under the cloudless skies. To his right Bowers leaned against the rocks and champed on a fat cigar. He glanced at Coltraine but spoke to MacKenzie. " We're not moving as fast as we could. I'm afraid that railroad line is going to be our death knell. Damn, this man is very clever. Perfect planning. Quick movement and execution."

" You sound like you admire what he did," said MacKenzie.

" I'm just telling you, Judge. That damned thing must have been planned a long time ago. I need scouts up ahead. We have to know how close they are to that

spur line. Then the army can send people from Fresno or Sacramento and stop Noonan or whoever the hell he is, in his tracks. Close them in."

Alby held a silver flask in his hands and yelled out from the rocks. " I say take the Lassen cut off! Take em by surprise."

" Lassen cut off?" asked Bowers. " Go north. Go south and Noonan is gone."

" I'll go ahead. I know the area," said Robbie.

Coltraine wondered if Robbie's youth made him more impulsive than smart. Bowers was right about Noonan and the Turners fighting for the gold. A battle was brewing. " Rob, fighting these men will be dangerous."

" Nobody is asking for a fight," said Bowers. " Robbie, take three men with you. We'll trail behind. If you spot them, send somebody to Stockton and back here. You shadow them"

Robbie glanced at Coltraine. " He gut too much of a jump, Jim. We need ta move or he'll get that gold away."

" That's just it," said Bowers. " The son of a bitch would have had the army and everyone else all over him, but he did it so well. This is the Bancor Trail?"

" I'll draw it out fur ya," said Robbie. " You have ta head south fur awhile and then due west to Bancor Pass."

" Draw it out," said Bowers, looking around. " Somebody get this man some paper."

" Over here," said the judge. He reached into one of his saddlebags and pulled out a notebook and a green lead pencil.

Coltraine watched Robbie quickly move the pencil about the page. Bowers continued to puff on the cigar as he paced by the juniper. A few minutes later the judge waved him over.

Robbie held up the page as he spoke. " Don't head west at these peaks. You'll recognize long jagged peaks. No trees. Look like ram horns. Yur head tells ya ta head west, but don't. That trail ends fifteen miles and north of where ya want ta be. Take this trail at the peaks. Head due south fur at least a day. You'll see Bancor Pass to the west. It's a steep climb, but that spur line swings down out of the woods. Then the highest railroad trestle ya ever seen in ya life brings that line into the valley. You gut two days traveling at a steady pace." Robbie ripped the sheet from MacKenzie's notebook.

" Good, you select your men," said Bowers, taking the paper. " We can't waste time with these bastards."

Coltraine saw Sawtooth sitting on the ledge above them. " I'd keep him here. We need some protection."

" Okay," said Robbie as he headed back to the other men.

" What about the men from Fort Churchill?" asked Coltraine.

" If I spent time waiting for everyone to arrive, Mr. Coltraine, I'd have been dead long ago" Robbie went to the men eating on rocks above the stream. He cornered Pete Crimmins and Hank Nevins, men his age. Coltraine was nervous about the whole thing and shook his head as he grabbed Bowers' wrist. " This is a mistake. He's just a kid."

" Sometimes a kid has to become a man." Bowers squinted over Coltraine's shoulder. Alby had mounted his horse and rode around with his guns raised in the air. " What the hell is he doing now?"

Coltraine turned as Alby brought a half crazed, shorthaired horse white toward Robbie. " Go git em, Robbie!"

Bowers stomped across the rocks and drew his gun. " You stupid son of a bitch."

" You talkin' ta me?" asked Alby. The horse shuffled in the dirt, his eyes wide open as if he were spooked at a fire.

Bowers pointed his gun at Alby. " I don't see any other stupid son of a bitch around."

Alby glanced around the trail. " Guess yur right... I wuz just gonna help them."

" Put those guns away. You want to help them, you'll stay back here. I don't want them to know we're on to them. That's the surest way to get into a fight and get everybody killed."

" I say fight em.! And fight em now!"

" Yeah, and I say if you don't get off that half breaded horse, I'll shoot you myself."

" Well, damn. Man wants ta help and he gets spit in the eye." Alby slid down the back of the horse, the horse bucked and nearly kicked him as he jumped. He held his green brimmed hat as he backed away.

MacKenzie chuckled and pinched the bridge of his nose. " Man just wants to help, Bart."

" Don't you start, Judge." He walked quickly to Robbie and the other two men, now on their horses and preparing to head higher into the Sierra. " Give me an estimate."

" If they left Sorroyo yesterday, we should catch em before they reach the spur line. Well before. They just can't move that gold all that fast."

" Agreed, we're still going to travel as fast as we can. You have to go faster, son. Everything depends on you."

" I won't let ya down, Mr. Bowers."

" Good," he said as he reached up and shook Robbie's hand. The three men started up the ridge trail on their horses and soon disappeared into the rocky pine ledges further up. Bowers threw his cigar into the stream. Alby mumbled something, but hid behind the junipers when Bowers passed. Bowers, half grinned and pretended to move toward the sinewy tree.

" He's harmless," said MacKenzie back at the horses.

" Harmless as a cyclone on the open range. We should have left him back in town."

Coltraine, already on his horse, smiled. " Then, you might have nothing to do along the way, Bart."

Bowers put his boot in the metal stirrup and flung his stocky body into the saddle. He held the horn and leaned toward Coltraine. " I tell ya. I'll shoot him myself. I will."

13

Butkis stood upright and squinted toward the tapering mule train stretching like a sidewinder down the mountain trail. The Turners had carried out movement of the gold so well. Compensation was their reward, but he alone had planned it so well and suffered the risk. The risk was almost as exhilarating as the execution of the plan. Getting McBride heading south was part of that risk and had freed him and the Turners to transport the gold from the dynamited cave in Sorroyo Canyon. But his stomach still wrenched with the overriding fear of getting caught. In all his days gambling, nothing scared him and thrilled him like this operation.

Gavitt, his faded cavalry uniform soiled and dusty, started up the slope on his horse. Butkis cupped his hand. "Any sign of Willis?"

"Nah, the Lieutenant ain't back. I'm worried. You shouldda just killed McBride before Dunbar blew up the train. Who would know McBride stop come back? I thought we had him set up.. Bad luck, he come back. And Dalton borrowin' the saw."

"These things happen, Gavitt."

"Turners almost had him strung up cept fur McBride again."

Butkis nodded and looked at the forested ridges leading toward Bancor Pass. Soon he would reach the spur line and Callahan would bring the small train to Maguire and his men in the valley. "Let's hope Willis killed McBride and the Indian like he was supposed to."

" Amen ta that."

Men wandered about the mules, stopped like statues on the slope. " Mules have done well."

" You know what Tom Moore used ta say when I wuz with General Cook."

" What's that?" asked Butkis.

" God made mules fur a purpose."

" I dare say this is a novel purpose."

" They're used ta hauling borax at ten cents a pound. The son of a bitch at the Calico Station changed the agreement. Four fifty a mule. We made the deal fur three fifty at Furnace Creek."

" It doesn't matter. The value of this gold surpasses anything we lost," said Butkis.

" He gave ya the proper mules. Mules shouldn't do heavy freightin' until they're five years old. " Gavitt pushed his lips together, his salty mustache joining his beard. " You gonna be a rich man, Pat."

" Maybe. I take nothing for granted." He studied every inch of the mule train again. " Tell Rody to get the mules going. Sure as hell word's gotten out. The army, the railroad and everyone in Nevada and California is going to be on our ass real soon. We need to get that gold to the spur line. No more stopping."

" Yes, sir," said the Sergeant. " You know what yur doin'."

" Nothing will get in my way. We'll end up skimming off more than we ever did during the war, my friend."

Gavitt smiled. " You have a devious mind, Pat."

" I planned this for too long to have people like McBride or Dunbar ruin my plans. " As Gavitt brought his horse down the trail Butkis stroked his chin and a smile climbed across his face when he thought about how far he had come.

Nine months ago on a cold, rainy spring afternoon Todd Noonan, a Vice President of The Overland Railroad, opened the varnished oak door in his Omaha office. Noonan, a clean-shaven company man who would not steal a pencil from a supply closet, closed and locked the outside door. Noonan owed Butkis for three months of assorted gambling debts. Butkis saw the potential to exploit the situation and at first pretended to want a job moving freight west. Noonan agreed.

Butkis' spent several days studying the freight records and future shipments west. In the safe he spotted what he was looking for. The railroad had made arrangements to haul a substantial shipment of gold for the government to the U.S. Mint at Carson City. His biggest problem was the soldiers from Fort Phil Kearny who would be guarding the shipment. Butkis had accumulated a substantial gambling fortune. He might pay off the engineer and some railroad people on the train, but the soldiers would do their duty. Butkis had all the details and over the next few days further ran up Noonan's debt at the card table. Noonan would say nothing even if he suspected Butkis knew about the gold shipment.

Butkis needed to round up only his most trust worthy friends. Harrison Maguire an old navy man, although now in Norfolk, had sailing vessels to take the melted gold anywhere in the world and contacts to pay cash. Sam Turner made thousands draining shoe profits during the war, lusted for money and power, and lived along The Overland's line to Carson City.

He sat in front of the open window in Omaha and watched the rain hit the outside stones. Quickness was essential. Stopping the train on the open prairie or even blowing it up was easy. He would cut the telegraph wires to the remote town just long enough to haul the gold west. In every poker game and at his dinner conversation he discussed the western terrain. The trick was getting the gold into the Sierra and to the railroad trestle he heard about in one of his games. This long trestle extended from the depleted Danforth Lode at Bancor Ridge. The gold would have disappeared before the people in Carson City knew what had happened. He would become wealthy if he carefully planned the operation and acted quickly.

Sam Turner was summoned to Omaha. Turner's cut-throat instincts had intensified over the years. He had always liked making money and it did not matter how he made it. Turner's interest was immediately piqued because he wanted power in Carson City. As long as he could stay out of the main heist and could make money, Turner might help bring the gold over the Sierra.

Butkis told his old friend about the gold shipment. Turner puffed on a long cigar, nodding and listening with a distant ear until Butkis talked about blowing up the train. He laughed, at first not believing Butkis would attempt such a thing. Turner thought Butkis' plan to be too risky, but he never argued legalities or moral inclinations. When he left the office, Turner feared spending time in some federal prison. He verified the existence of the spur line, but wanted cover and left for Brinson to think about it.

Two days later he surprisingly returned to Butkis' hotel room, and agreed to a partial involvement. Turner knew how to make money and expand his own personal fortune, but would not soil his solid reputation in Nevada. He would stay clear

of actually stopping the train or removing the gold, but would get the gold over the Sierra. Butkis agreed to one third the full value of the shipment, payment to be in the form of cattle and supplies, and specific land north of Virginia City.

Butkis eased some of Noonan's debts once the railroad man recommended Callahan to pilot the train west. For the right amount of money, Callahan and Maguire would get a small locomotive up the spur line from Stockton. Rapid movement into the valley would gain him the time he needed to allude the authorities.

The entire plan depended on Butkis having full control over the shipment. He brought in his old war buddy, Willis, from gambling halls and gave him an army issue uniform. Willis recruited rogue outlaws left over from old bands in Missouri. The soldiers guarding the train would be shot. Willis' outlaws would load the gold bars in wagons, bring the gold into Sorroyo Canyon and store the bars briefly in dynamited caves. He would procure mules from Death Valley. Once packed, the mules would exit Sorroyo up a little used trail and head for the Sierra.

Turner paid Dunbar to dynamite the tracks and easily set up McBride to leave town after the rustler. McBride coming back early was the only glitch once the operation was underway. Late at night when the mules were first brought into Sorroyo Canyon Rody Turner suggested loading the wagons with sand and sending them south. With McBride now ready to look for the gold, Butkis agreed. Now, as he moved into the mountain shadows behind the mule train, he wondered if McBride had found the sandbag wagons.

Rody shouted into the mountain air, directing the mules along the trail.

" Gee! Gee!" Butkis was still convinced they would reach the spur line train ahead of any Pinkerton detectives or the army. The gold would be brought to Maguire in the valley. Before any official investigation commenced, the heist be melted down and taken away. From San Francisco Maguire would sail for Panama City and cross the isthmus. Butkis had not decided whether to join his old friend.

He shook his head and focused on the mule train. As he moved his horse slowly on level ground he pictured San Francisco bay packed with the masts of a thousand sailing vessels, but back on the mountain several men had gathered around a mule off the trail. They checked the mule's leg as Rody Turner raced up the trail on his horse and yelled as he leaped onto the ground. " What 's the matter, Rody?"

" This mule's gonna have trouble gettin' up Bancor."

" I ain't gut time ta slow down. We gutta move and move now." Rody took out a long handled Smith and Wesson.

Butkis cupped his hands, " Hey, Rody, hold it!"

Rody turned. He had the annoying habit of chewing the inside of his mouth. " We gut a useless mule here, Pat."

Butkis dismounted and immediately scanned the packs containing the gold. One man had two of the shiny gold bars in his hands. " I want you men to know you're being watched and every bar has been accounted for and there will be a count once we reach the spur line."

" That's irrelevant," said Rody, cocking the trigger. " We gut a useless mule here."

The Fitton Chronicles

Fool's Gold

" You can't just shoot the animal," said Butkis. " Move the gold to another mule. Spread it out."

" That's what I intend ta do." Rody aimed the gun and a single shot echoed down the forested slope. The mule fell to the ground.

Butkis moved up to the smoking barrel. " You know, you're ruthless son of a bitch."

" Man's gutta do what a man's gutta do."

Butkis took out his small derringer, looked down as the men removed the bars from the fallen mule's packs. " You best not shoot any more innocent animals, Rody or I'll kill you."

" You challengin' me?"

" Directly, you little son of a bitch. This is my operation and you work for me." Butkis carefully watched his hand on the gun handle.

" Since when did you become so mor-al?"

" It's simple. You don't kill the mules, Rody. I think you'd better understand that."

Sam Turner, dressed in Levis and a long dark leather riding coat, smoked a stogie as he rode up the trail. " What's the problem here? I heard a shot, Pat."

" Your son here likes to kill mules."

" That mule wuz lame, Pa."

Sam's white bushy brows tightened. " You do as Mr. Butkis says, Rody."

" *Mr.* Butkis?"

" I don't want any dissension here. We're almost to Bancor." Sam gazed down the trail at the mules. " You do as Mr. Butkis says."

Rody looked at Butkis, spit on the ground, and Sam grabbed his bandanna. " You're my son, but I don't need you in this operation."

Rody grinned and shook his head. " You didn't say that when you needed Dan Dalton killed."

" We needed to cover for Pam Grayson. Dalton was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like I said any one of the boys or the hands could have strung him up. Way I look at it, Rody, you let McBride ride all the way out from town. You should have hanged Dalton and that would have been it."

" And McBride shouldda been out of town," said Rody, sneering at Butkis.

" Any operation has it's bad luck. You've got to expect that," said Butkis, looking ahead. " Let's get the hell out of here."

Butkis climbed back on his horse and rode past Rody with Sam Turner. Sam's dusty coat was draped fully over the saddle and onto the horse. " Can we really be sure about Maguire?"

" We can. He and his people sailed from Norfolk via Panama City last month. I've told you, I wired them in San Francisco. I trust Harrison Maguire with my life. They'll be in the valley." Butkis leaned forward in the saddle. " What about you? I hear cattle's been falling in price since the panic."

" It's a great time to buy, Pat. If you have the cash." They moved ahead, passing the men, horses and fully loaded mules. " I can easily sell land and innocently bring head back west and have nothing to do with the gold, Pat. Come visit me in Carson City when I'm Governor."

" I will. You need a little trust, Sam."

" I trust no one."

" Even your boys?"

" Especially my boys."

* * *

Butkis rode at the front of a continuous line of mules under the towering ponderosa pines. The crisp afternoon sun hovered over the jagged rocks toward Bancor Pass. With the heart of the operation at stake in the valley, he tried to mask his nervousness. Maguire had conned and cheated his way to become a force in the shipping industry, but with so much gold involved now, Butkis wondered just how much he could trust his old friend. He also worried, as the ground leveled, about the army and the Pinkertons. The telegraph would be operational unless the people in Brinson were stupider than he thought. Overshadowing everything was McBride and the Indian. With Willis not returning, Butkis feared something had happened. He constantly scanned the ridges, checking behind the trees and boulders. McBride would know how he was duped twice.

Up the trail men whistled and catcalls echoed through the woods. He turned and slowed the horse. Midway up a rock escarpment, Pam Grayson rode swiftly between the trees. Butkis turned his horse. Men clapped and called out vulgarities, but she galloped to the front of the mule train. " Pat, gut trouble."

" I thought I told you to meet me in San Francisco."

" Pauntok from Brinson and two other men. They're followin' the trail."

" What?" Butkis' apprehension now fully spilled over. " Do you know what this means?"

" It means they're on to us."

" Damn right. Where's Sam?" He gazed down the line. Sam was moving forward with his boys.

Pam held her gun. " I want my cut now. Two bars. You promised me two bars."

" You keep your damned mouth shut or you get nothing. Who else is out there?"

" I didn't see nothin'. Only the three men. I didn't recognize the other two. Robbie, he knows these hills." Pam tightened her tanned brow. Butkis had never seen her scared. " There's gutta be more after us."

Butkis lit a stogie and threw the wooden match down the slope. He rode past Pam and up to Sam and his boys. Sam's eyes reflected the pervasive fear spreading through the mule train. " Sam, Pam tells me we're being trailed by three men."

" Well, ain't that just sweet?" said Rody, looking at his brothers.

" You want us to take care of them, Pa?" asked Mike Turner.

" How many men?" asked Sam.

Butkis spoke quickly. " Three men. A Robbie Pauntok and-"

" Old Robbie," said Rody, grinning. " Robbie's a dead man, *Mr.* Butkis."

" Sam?" asked Butkis.

Sam pursed his lips and nodded. " Get em."

" Hee-Haw!" Rody lifted his hat off his matted hair. He spun his Smith and Wesson in his hand and then held it like an offering toward Butkis. " Do I have yur per-mission ta use this now, *Mr.* Butkis?"

Butkis said nothing as he brought his horse around and stared at Pam in the sunshine. Rody kept teasing him as he headed back to the front of the mule train and looked into her glowing green eyes. " You ride up with me."

" You ain't as confident now, are ya, Pat? It's all real simple when ya sittin' in some saloon plannin' the perfect way ta be set fur life."

" Plans go awry." He puffed on the stogie, clenched in his teeth, and they rode to the bottom of the slope. " I'm giving you another gold bar."

" You are?"

" Yes... You keep your hand on that gun of yours and you keep your eyes on Rody and the rest of these other men. He makes any move or any of his brothers make any move toward me-'

" What about this old man?"

Butkis squinted and nodded. " I may kill the lot of them."

" Then you git me more bars." Butkis turned and she smiled. " A small price ta pay, Pat."

She had flawless skin and symmetrical eyes, a small nose and lips aligned perfectly. " For someone so beautiful, you're so deadly."

" Nature makes flowers in her own way. You just have to know..."

" If Rody makes a move, kill him. We'll kill them all if we have to. Nothing's going to stop me."

" 'Nothin'?"

" Nothing."

14

In the twilight Rody tucked his rifle below the saddle horn as he and his brothers paralleled the main trail. The shadows swept over the forest and gave him more places to hide. He did not take Pauntok lightly as a gun fighter nor as a man.

Junior spoke loudly from behind. " Rody, they're gonna hide in the dark!"

" Shut up," he whispered through gritted teeth. " Damn it, Junior. Why don't ya just ride ahead and tell Pauntok we're out here!"

" Well, they're gonna hide."

" They'll make camp, you idiot."

" Who you callin' an idiot?" said Junior. Rody moved his gun upward.

" You gonna shoot me now, is that it, Rody? Just like you shot Tuckerman."

" You shut yur mouth about Tuckerman and, yeah, you don't shut up and I will shoot ya." Rody kicked his horse and started up a small pine covered slope. He waved his brothers up when he reached the top. The trail was only a few dozen yards through the tall trees, down the murky slope to a barely visible clearing.

" What do we do now, Rody?" asked Junior.

" Ain't goin' no further and I'll tell ya why."

" Ah, why?"

" Cause they have ta take the trail up there. Whether it's tonight ur tomorra mornin'."

Junior creased his brow and shook his head. " I don't understand."

" You don't have ta understand, Junior. Get out yur blankets. We're gonna watch that trail. Each of us will stand guard."

" Robbie gut himself in the wrong place," said Mike.

Rody slid from the saddle. " Everybody takes his own bed."

" I'll make my bed," said Junior.

" You do that, Junior. But I'll tell ya. If Pauntok and the others comes up this here hill, you just kill em. Kill em!"

* * *

Even though his ribs ached Jake was confident once they left the desert and rode into the cooler mountains. Soaring Bird wore a heavier leather garment and Jake removed his long black coat from the saddlebag. Menewa plodded between the towering pines. As the last sunshine disappeared below the angled rock peaks, a group of Big Horn ewes pranced along the western ridges. Jake debated whether to rest for the night. Both he and Soaring Bird as well as the horses needed rest. In the morning they could face the ridge to Bancor Pass fresh. The first stars twinkled in the deepening blue sky when they made camp where the long gray boulders dipped below a row of twisted junipers.

The air cooled between the ridges and Jake leaned against the rock slabs. He rolled the remains of tobacco from Carson City, but tucked it back in the saddlebag. Starting a fire or even smoking might alert anyone in the hills. In the spreading moonlight through the trees, Soaring Bird's round face looked whiter and his dark eyes moistened. " Stealing the gold took precise planning, McBride."

" Yup. Butkis somehow gut mixed up with the railroad. He knew enough to use Noonan's name. The son of a bitch humiliated me..." Jake inhaled the cooler night air. " Somehow, I met him. I can't tell ya how or where, but I *know* him."

" Maybe you just think you know him because of what he did."

" No, I tell ya, I met him before. Maybe it wuz the war. I don't know."

Jake continued trying to place Butkis. Even when he was in his bedroll under the blazing stars he thought about Butkis arriving on the stage. He played his part well as Noonan, pretending he had just been in the area. Jake looked at the full moon now rising above the silver eastern ridges. Soaring Bird was right. Butkis had plotted the operation perfectly.

* * *

Rody lay on his blanket and stared at the sky. He pulled a second blanket over his chest and gripped his gun. With the storm long passed and the clearer air in the mountains, the stars and the full moon shone through the upper pine branches. His ears were perched even though Mike watched the trail for Pauntok, but Junior's snoring bothered him. Back in the bunk house he could put Junior in the back room. He nudged his brother and the snoring stopped. Junior mumbled and turned over. In the woods a distant owl's call was almost hidden in the hills.

He worried about his father's trusting Butkis. Butkis liked to gamble had demonstrated he would win at any cost to accomplish his own ends. He had done well for his father. When his father came back to Brinson from Omaha, Rody ar-

gued against getting involved with Butkis. But his father wanted to move to Carson City and get into politics.

The ground rumbled, Rody turned over under the blanket, and horses shook the forest. Mike still watched the trail. Rody leaped over Junior, drew his Colt and scrambled between the moonlit bushes. He put his hand on Mike's shoulder and whispered in his ears. " They're down the slope. "

" Moon's gonna help us."

" Sittin' ducks, Mike. Sitting ducks." Rody balanced his gun on a broken off tree branch and moved the barrel slowly across the slope. In the silver glaze a spotted horse appeared between two wrinkled ponderosa pines. Mike raised his gun, but he grabbed his brother's wrist. " Wait. I want ta see em all."

" They're dead men."

Junior's snoring commenced back at the bedrolls. Rody crunched his teeth and glanced back to the blankets. " That stupid bastard." He ran through the brush and grabbed Junior by the shoulders. " Junior."

" We movin' out, Rody?"

" We ain't movin' out. Pauntok and the others. They're comin' up the trail. Come on."

He rushed back to Mike and against planted his gun barrel on the branch stub. Pauntok, clothes outlined in the moonlight, rode his black and white horse ahead of two other men down the trail.

" Now what, Rody?" asked Junior.

" Hold it. Wait." Rody wanted the other men in view before they opened fire. " I'll take Pauntok. You take the farthest one back, Mike. Junior take the middle one."

" I don't like shooting men down when they ain't done nothin'"

" Whaddaya yella? Pa didn't raise no yella cowards in this family. You don't wanna shoot, then go back with the others."

" I ain't killin' em. We should just take em in," said Junior.

" We ain't takin' no one in," said Rody. In the silver sight he clearly saw Pauntok 's dark hair flowing from the brim of his hat. " I'll take the back one, too."

" I hear you," answered Mike.

Rody aimed at Pauntok's head. He looked at Mike and nodded. Then he fired, knocking Pauntok off the horse. Mike fired quickly, getting the man in the rear. Rody squeezed the trigger again before the middle man could react. Junior was on his horse when Rody turned. " Where the hell are you goin'?"

Junior rode quickly across the summit and disappeared down the other side. " He's yella. I knew he was yella. What now, Rody?"

Rody eyed the slope and the horses off to the side. He turned to his brother. " One more bullet fur in-surance. One more for each of them."

* * *

Jake sat upright and held his gun upward near the ledge. " I 'd say them shots are less than a few miles up the ridge."

" Too many shots for hunting game."

" Trouble." Jake sprinted back and spun his bedroll end over end. He quickly lifted the saddle back on Menewa and tightened the straps. He crumpled his bedroll and strapped the bag back on the horse. Then he raised his canteen, filled that afternoon with clean mountain river water, and swished the water inside his mouth. As Soaring Bird started up the ridge, he tucked the canteen in his saddlebag.

Jake's heart beat faster, maybe because the shots had shook him from a deep sleep, or maybe because Butkis was near Bancor Pass. He sensed death in the air as he passed through the moonlight and shadows. The shifted stars and movement of the moon, told him most of the night had passed. Sunrise was only a few hours away. He heard no more shots as he continued silently along the forested ridge and constantly studied the milky valley.

" We might have to wait for the sun, McBride."

Jake stroked his five-day beard and again scanned the hills for movement.

" You may be right. We could end up goin' in circles."

He hitched Menewa to a near by juniper and yanked the ropes on the bedroll. Both men settled across the pine needles. Jake closed his eyes and had trouble finally falling asleep. But it was not the sun that woke him. The birds sounded discordant melodies down the slope near sunrise. Two jays darted through the light dampening skies above him and perched in one of the pine branches. He heard a distant coyote bark with the approaching brightness in the east. Soaring Bird's ribs moved consistently as he remained asleep.

Jake rose and folded the bedroll neatly this time. He placed it squarely on Menewa. The horse gnawed on scattered grass along the slope. Jake removed his canteen and poured water into his cupped hands. He placed his hands under the

horse's mouth, repeating the procedure several times, and the horse took in the water. Along the bottom of the foothills the yellow glow between the needled branches heightened and a few rays broke through.

He turned back to camp. Soaring Bird sat up and also listened. Both men quickly finished packing the horses. Jake dismissed his stomach pangs and he chewed on the last of the smoked meat as they moved out. The gunshots from the night were his overriding concern. At least the ridge was easily negotiated in the warming sunshine. His instincts, garnered from hundred of battles, steered him to the vicinity of the shots. Both men circled at the next ridge and where the sun cut through the trees bodies were scattered across the well-trodden trail.

Jake leaped from Menewa and as he sprinted forward, he recognized the black and white vest and mass of black hair spread over the rocks. Robbie Pauntok's felt hat had fallen a few feet to the side. His tan vest was riddled with bullet holes and blood.

" These dead men are from Brinson, McBride."

Jake, kneeling over Robbie's stiff body, looked up at his Shoshoni friend. His voice tightened and he held his gun. " Robbie Pauntok. Somebody gut him and then came back and gut him agin. Cowards." Jake stood and surveyed the canyon. The pine needles were cut with boot marks leading back along the main trail. He walked away with his gun drawn. About fifty yards away he found horseshoe prints in the soil and the pine needles were parted as if bedrolls were spread in the forest.

Soaring Bird was silhouetted against the morning sun up the slope. Jake remained squatted. " Someone stalked em. "

" Butkis?"

" I don't know," he said, rising. " It wuz cold blooded murder. Weren't no shoot-out. They waited fur Robbie."

" Maybe the town sent him up here after the gold. McBride, mules have moved up this trail."

Jake stood and raised his brows. He saw mule hoof marks dug into the needles and darker soil. " How long ago?"

" Day and half. Two days at the most. We are near them, McBride."

" Good. I ain't sparin' nobody. Butkis is a dead man." He hurried up the slope to his friend and gazed back down the other side. He shielded his eyes in the sun. " More bodies. We gutta bury em. Then-"

" Yes?"

" Then we find Robbie's killer."

15

Coltraine dipped his hands into the icy stream and lifted more water over his stubble face. He was certain he heard distant shots last night; from the mountains to the west. His eyes stung and he prayed he had only imagined the erupting gunfire. Bowers had given specific instructions for Robbie to shadow the mule train. He pushed the stream water back through his hair and soothed his eyes.

" Coltraine," called Bowers from the camp. The stocky Pinkerton, adjusted his suspenders and strutted across the clearing. " Coltraine, I'm not asking the others, but I can tell things by the look on a man's face."

" What are you saying, Mr. Bowers?"

" You hear anything last night?"

Coltraine moved a cloth across his face and nodded his head. " You heard it, too..."

" I don't want to start any panic here. The judge heard something. He placed gunfire maybe three or four miles up the slope."

Coltraine folded the cloth and placed it in his saddlebag. " What do you suggest?"

" If it was gunfire, they'll be looking for us. I've been hoping Pauntok got the better of them and would be riding back into camp."

" I don't think that's going to happen."

" We don't know that." Bowers looked back to the men in camp, preparing to mount their horses for the day's journey. He leaned toward Coltraine. " I'm posting additional men up front. I want them fully armed and ready for the fight. I have no doubts there will be a fight now."

Coltraine rubbed his eyes. He pressed his lips together and looked into Bowers' dark eyes. " I thought it was as simple as surrounding Butkis and getting the gold."

" Isn't going to happen. It's important that every man here knows that. That means handling things tactfully and making sure each man is fully armed. I know we have the ammunition." As he spoke Alby Conner's loud voice echoed around camp. Both men turned. Alby waved his hands and gestured wildly toward two of Coltraine's people from the hotel. " What the hell is he doing now? That man is a liability."

Bowers stomped by the spent campfire and Coltraine followed him up to Alby. " Bowers! Bowers, you tell him! Tell him!"

" Tell him what?"

" They all dead! They all dead. I hear shots last night. Robbie must be dead!"

" You, too?"

" Well, I-"

" Did you or did you not hear shots, Alby?"

" I could of... The judge heard shots. The judge hears like a fox. When he says-"

" Then you never heard shots." Bowers rolled his eyes and clenched his fists. Coltraine thought he might smack Alby. As the other men gathered around, he raised his hands in the air. " We're moving out."

" There wuz shots. There wuz shots.!"

" Shut up," said Bowers and several other men echoed his thoughts.

" Then they must be dead!" cried Alby, pulling out his gun.

" Maybe they're dead, maybe not. It should tell us they're aware we're trailing them or at least Pauntok was."

" See! See! Wuz, you said wuz!"

" Alby, shut up! Or they'll be more shots right now," said Bowers, clutching his pistol handle. " Now, listen, I want three men, three men who can shoot, up front. You'll be given extra ammunition.

" Sawtooth. He's a good shot!" said Alby.

Bowers gave Alby a sickening look as the grizzly Sawtooth stepped through the group. He curled his upper lip and exposed his teeth toward Alby. Alby held his hat and backed toward the rocks. " He bit a man ta death!"

" Then you best stay away from him then," said Bowers, grinning. " Sawtooth, you check the trail up ahead. Find out what happened. They fire at you: you kill em."

Sawtooth's milky blue eyes looked wild as he placed new shells in his six-shooter. With his teeth still exposed he crossed the camp to his horse.

" What about the rear, Bart?" asked the Judge.

Bowers nodded. " He's right. I need two men trailing us in case someone picks us up from the rear. The rest of you. You ride with your weapons drawn. Have ample ammunition supplies."

" What are we getting into, Mr. Bowers?" asked Andy Bisbane, his face flushed in fear, standing next to a red eyed Doc Talmadge.

" It should be quite obvious. We're going to fight for that gold. These bastards have probably already reached the spur line. I don't know. We can't stop now. We have to move quickly and reach them."

" People gonna be killed," said Doc as if he were proclaiming a new bit of information.

" Yes, that's why I'm telling you, all of you. If you want to go back to Brinson, go back now! I don't need stragglers."

Coltraine looked at their frightened faces. No man was going to back down in the face of his peers. Alby kept nodding his head and was about to yell something. Coltraine raised his index finger over his mustache and mouth. Alby rolled his eyes and went to the saddle bag. A few seconds later he took several swigs from a small silver flask.

" How far are we from the spur?" asked Coltraine.

" Be there tomorrow," shouted Alby.

Bowers, his hands on his hips, looked westward toward the taller peaks.

" Less than a day? Then we can't stop. It will take time for them to load that gold, providing they get a train up there."

" We're gonna git killed," whispered Alby.

Coltraine stepped back from Alby's whiskey breath and breathed in the clean mountain air. He gazed along the rock ledge and then checked his Winchester. Any glory filled ambition he had when he left Brinson was rapidly fading in abject terror as he gazed to the westward stretching ridges.

* * *

For close to an hour Jake rode with Soaring Bird behind Sawtooth. Through the trees atop the next slope, Jake saw Alby and Jim Coltraine lead the posse down the trail. When Alby spotted the horses up the trail, he cackled loudly and rushed up the rocks. "Yur alive, Jake!"

"Pauntok is dead," said Jake.

Alby turned back to the group. "See! See! Robbie's dead! They're all dead!"

Jim Coltraine and a stocky bald man in a checkered shirt and suspenders brought their horses up the rocks. Coltraine looked into Jake's blue eyes.

"Is he dead, Jake?"

"Yup. Twenty-three years old. Murdered."

The bald man donned a felt hat and extended his hand. "Hobart Bowers. I work for the Pinkertons. I came in with the judge from Carson City."

"Judge here?"

"You bet yur ass I'm here," said the white haired MacKenzie, moving behind the others.

Jake could not bring himself to a full smile with Robbie being dead.

" Sawtooth says you've been trackin' the gold."

" We have," said Bowers. " But how did you and the Indian know to come up here?"

" Willis, the cavalry lieutenant, tried to kill me. I shot him dead. He had a hand drawn map in his uniform pocket."

Bowers nodded as Alby prattled on about Jake killing Willis. " So, the thing about Cortina-

" Wuz a lie," said Jake.

Soaring Bird leaned forward. " They loaded the wagons with sandbags from Sorroyo Canyon. They split the wagons to Badwater and Ubehebe Crater."

" You're a Shoshoni?"

" I am."

" He gut more education than all of us here, Mr. Bowers."

" Bart." Bowers nodded, seeming to accept Soaring Bird. " What did that map say?"

Jake reached into his saddlebag and pulled out the now dry map, ink still smeared and handed it to Bowers. " They mention Bancor Pass?"

Bowers nodded as he unfolded the map and studied the layout. " We figured right. There's a damn railroad spur line, set up from the Danforth Lode to Stockton. Somehow Noonan knew about it."

" Butkis."

Bowers forehead tightened and he looked as if he wanted to say something for a few seconds. " Repeat that."

" Noonan's name is Pat Butkis."

" Riverboat Pat. That son of a bitch."

Jake tilted his head slightly. " You know him?"

" I've know Pat Butkis. Long time back. Clever man. I can see Pat Butkis planning this."

" With the Turners!" shouted Alby. " The Turners left town with mule harnesses!"

" Very possible." said Bowers. " Pat Butkis. I have to admire the man."

Jake grabbed Bowers' wrist. " I don't think you understand, Bart. There's a frontier justice out here."

" Like Dan Dalton?" asked the judge.

" This is between Butkis and me. No man is entitled to make another man a fool."

" I agree," said Bowers, folding the map. " My main concern is stopping them from getting that gold onto the spur line. They get the gold into the valley and we'll never get them."

" You really should bring him in, Bart," said the judge.

" Judge," said Jake. " You know the law and you gotta enforce the law. Butkis ain't gonna just sit back while we politely ask him fur the gold."

" I said my piece," said the judge.

" You men have a vendetta now with the dead kid," said Bowers.

" We're talking murder," said MacKenzie to no one in particular. His eyes moistened as he looked up the slope and held his own gun. " Cold blooded murder."

" These bastards have to know we mean business," growled Bowers.

Coltraine looked at Jake. " He was a young kid."

Jake nodded. He could add nothing to what had been said.

" Is there any other way to Bancor Pass?" asked Bowers.

" Nope, nope," said Alby.

" I ain't never been up here," said Jake. " But I would guess they'll be headin' round the pass ta the spur line."

Alby remained on his horse. " The trail is the only way ta Bancor Pass. You can't git by them mountains by horse. Once yur up Bancor you cin cross through the forest trail round the tracks."

" We need ta git men up the ridge ta see what's goin' by the spur line," said Jake. " Let them men cover the rest of us."

Bowers held his six-shooter in the air. " We're going to have to shoot it out. Clever bastard, Butkis. I can't believe he really pulled it off. I tell you, I'm very worried they're going to get that gold down the spur line. Then we'll never catch them."

" Then what?" asked the judge.

" I don't know. That train from Omaha should have taken another route. Staggered times... more troops. Damn Butkis" He gazed back at the men already digging into the slope dirt.

" We don't rest. We keep going. No stopping. I'll kill that son of a bitch," said Jake from the saddle.

Soaring Bird moved his pinto closer to Jake. His dark eyes tightened.

" This is as far as I go, McBride."

" There's gonna be trouble, no doubt about that." He reached up and gripped his friend's hand. " Thanks."

" I wish you good fortune, McBride."

Jake nodded and watched the Shoshoni bring his horse past the other men. He descended the slope and disappeared between a row of pine on a smaller knoll to the east.

" Damn savage don't want ta fight," said Doc. " They'll attack us, but when it comes ta-"

" Ain't they seen enough killin', Doc? Now, they're herded like cattle up in Duck Valley. Ain't cause he don't wanna fight..."

Up ahead, Bowers waved his gun forward and the group started up the trail to Bancor Pass.

16

Rody Turner's huge brown horse danced around the trail's sunlit rocks. Butkis figured Rody's usefulness was nearly spent after he killed the kid from Brinson. As he rode under Bancor Ridge's top heavy, jutting rock slabs, he grew tired of looking at the grubby, gristly bearded eldest Turner. The spur line and the trestle were only a few miles west. Pam would return and notify him whether Callahan and Billy had gotten the train up from Stockton, but loading the gold would take hours. He was not worried about Maguire and the others in the valley. Maguire knew how to carry out an operation, but the Turners concerned him. He would make good on the payment because he feared the old man's capacity for revenge and because he might someday use Sam Turner once he was in power in Carson City.

Butkis turned in the saddle and looked across the eastern the foothills. His men were ready for anyone who might have trailed the three men from Brinson. Willis was overdue and he wondered whether McBride and the Indian might come riding over the next ridge. McBride could have found the sandbag wagons and then killed Willis.

Rody talked with his brothers and father up ahead next to the rocks along the pass. Butkis creased his brow and brought his horse forward. "What do you hear?"

"Pam's at the trestle. I don't hear word bout the train bein' up there."

Butkis grit his teeth. " I paid those men well and more is coming."

" I tell ya that train *ain't* up there," shouted Rody.

" I don't like your tone," said Butkis.

" I think we're early, Pat," said Sam, tamping his handkerchief over his matted gray hair. " We've moved up here too damned quick."

" What if he don't come?" asked Rody. " You ain't thought of that, *Mr.* Butkis?"

" You let me worry about that, Turner."

" Oh, I'll let you worry bout it," said Rody, walking toward Butkis' horse.

" You and yur big gamblin' ways. You think yur so smart and the rest of us is some kind of in-grates."

Butkis reached for his derringer. " You look that word up in a dictionary, Rody?"

Rody quickly drew his Colt. Butkis instinctively lifted his hands into the air. Sam Turner's eyes popped open. " Put down that gun, Rody, you dumb son of a bitch. You wanna jeopardize everything?"

" He wuz gonna shoot me, Pa."

" He was afraid you'd shoot him and he was right." Sam grabbed Rody's gun, spun it around and gave it back to him handle first. " I ain't having my future ruined by your hot temper."

" You'd better watch him, Pa." Rody tucked the gun back in his holster.

" He's a lying son of a bitch. A gamblin' man. Gamblin' men take yur money."

" You'll all get what I promised. This isn't some back room card game. We have gold slated for the U.S. mint packed on the mules. The whole country may

know about this by now. We need that train at Bancor Pass." He pulled out his gold pocket watch. " We need to be in the valley in five hours. We waste any more time and the government will have agents, the army... everyone will be all over us!"

Sam nodded and turned to his sons. " All of you boys. You get your asses down the track back to Stockton if you have to. Find Callahan and the other bastard. You heard Pat. We have five hours."

" What do you want us to tell him?" asked Junior.

" *Get him up here, Junior!*"

" Damn it. I'll go myself," said Butkis.

" No, we'll handle it," said Rody. " Come on, boys."

Butkis watched the Turner boys bring their horses into the deep shadows under Bancor Peak. " I don't like this."

" The boys will find that train, Pat."

Butkis nodded and looked back at the mule train, halted along the ridge. The gold bars bulged in the leather packs. He would count every bar once they were inside the freight car and he would shoot any man seen with a gold bar. The operation was long in planning and nearing completion. He could make no exceptions.

As he followed Sam Turner into the ridge shadows, he removed his watch again. Maguire would wait and not risk the losing profit he could make on melted down gold bars. Butkis' stomach tightened. He was in control of things for most his whole life. He gambled not on dreams or hopes, but on the sure thing and stealing the gold was designed perfectly, but he would not lose it all at the last minute.

* * *

Rody caught sight of Pam on her black horse, heading along the ridge track. He veered left ahead of his brothers and met her on the tracks. "What did you find out?"

"The train is comin'. Bout a mile down trestle. Callahan had trouble with the boiler."

"Isn't gonna mean shit once we're at the top of the trestle. We'll roll into the valley!"

"Maybe. There's work ahead, gittin' them bars on the train," said Pam.

"Hey, Pam, whaddaya say you and me, we spend a little time up in the woods while we're waitin'."

Pam pulled a long .44 from her saddle and pointed it at Rody. "You never learn, do ya?"

"I like a wild woman."

"Good, then you hire one when ya git yur cut on that gold."

"You only sleep with marshals, that it?"

She cocked the trigger. "What I do is my business. You say that again and I'll kill ya."

"That what you told Dunbar?"

"I had a job and I did it," she said, still keeping the gun on him.

"Just like the marshal?" asked Rody, raising his brows.

"Shut up."

"Yeah... Just like-"

She fired once and Rody's shoulder skin ripped. He grabbed the area where the bullet had grazed the top of his shoulder. A small blood circle formed on his blue shirt. His brothers all drew their guns, but Pam fanned her gun. " Put em down! Or next time I won't miss."

" Yur crazy!" yelled Rody.

" If wanted ta kill ya, I wouldda."

Rody brushed his shoulder. " I'm wonderin' if you ain't right bout that." He turned to his brothers. Junior was smiling. " You stop yur grinnin'."

" Been bested by a woman?" asked Mike.

" She ain't just a woman. I don't know what she is." He started down the rock bed below grade.

Junior looked over his shoulder along the ridge. " I wouldn't mess with her."

" She'd wear you out," said Mike. " Hee-haw."

" She's poison. Damn poison. Poison, I tell ya." Rody moved along slowly in the sun. To his right the vast valley rolled for a hundred miles to the bay. His horse shuffled through the gravel, but he felt the ground rumbling. " Listen, boys. The salvation train's a comin'. I hear it."

" Gonna put Pa in Carson City," said Mike.

" What if the army gits here. They ain't stupid," said Junior.

Rody leaned to the right. Smoke rose above the distant ridge trees. " Here they come. And yur right. The army ain't stupid. None of them are stupid. They just ain't quick enough. We took em by surprise. "

The train's thunder grew louder and the black smoke thicker, forming a tapering trail down the ridge. Callahan waved through the open window as Billy Sumner

stuck his head out the other side. Rody motioned his brothers back up the ridge as the engine, spewing and hissing black smoke from the boiler, chugged backward. Rody counted two green faded paint passenger cars and a weathered wood freight car. He grinned at Callahan as he passed and Billy Sumner waved his rebel cap into the air.

" Whaddaya think, Rody?" asked Mike.

Rody looked ahead. He was too far along the pass to see the trestle. " I think we're all set. Butkis gits that gold up here and we can go ta Abilene and git ready for Pa ta go to Carson City."

17

Bowers' horse trailed Jake in the grove. Sawtooth was sent higher up this time, along the ridge. Jake's eyes followed the upper rocks. Years had passed since he wrapped his fingers so tightly around his rifle and fought off the tension, shooting like comets around his stomach. Trouble was brewing on a smaller scale around these next few ridges. Like his war battles, rifle volleys would again erupt from behind trees and rocks, and men would die.

Coltraine shouted from behind. "How much further?"

Jake turned in the saddle as his friend moved past Bowers. "The rebel is ready for battle," said Bowers. Coltraine said nothing, but his face had a deep consternation. "Oh, you rebs had all the damned talent. I don't give a damn what they say about the south falling. We had men. Men into the meat grinder."

Coltraine turned. "Just like now?"

"Maybe." Bowers smiled and shook his head. "What do you think, McBride? Is this a meat grinder?"

Jake turned, still clamping his hands on the rifle as he faced Bowers. His mouth was dry and his muscles tense. "I'm afta one man."

"Jake! Jake!" Alby called from off the trail. "Dead mule! Dead mule!"

Jake dismounted and hurried through the brush. Alby stood over the stiffened mule carcass. Harness and pack bag marks still covered the mules short gray coat. He looked up at Bowers up on the trail. "Sure as hell confirms it, Bart."

Jake and Alby climbed back to the trail. Coltraine, rifle in hand, glared down at the mule. " We can thank Sam Turner and Butkis for all this."

" I reckon Turner and Butkis knew each other back in the war," said Jake.

" Possible."

Bowers climbed back on his horse. " Guys like Turner used the war and were never caught. If they had been nailed, we might not be out here today." From the second ridge the sound from a single shot bounced between the rocks. A second and third discharge sent Bowers' horse scrambling under the trees.

" What the hell is that?"

" Sawtooth." Coltraine followed him past the other men.

" He's gutta be dead! Now he's dead!" yelled Alby, appearing on his wild horse behind them.

" You don't know that, Alby," Jake shouted.

Sawtooth appeared in a dust swirl up the wooded trail. He slapped his hat against his horse and leaned forward in the saddle as he jumped the rocks. The horse slid forward into the grove. Sawtooth put his hat over his head, and yanked out his six-shooter. " I shot the sons of bitches."

Jake brought Menewa ahead of Bowers. " What happened, Sawtooth?"

" Dead! I tell ya, two of them taking up the rear."

" Only two taking up the rear?" asked Bowers, glancing up the trail.

" I gut em both. Nobody else there. Bancor Pass swings up this last ridge."

Coltraine had his rifle in both hands. " Do you think they heard the gunfire?"

" Unlikely, Jim. Unlikely, " said Jake. " He wuz shielded by the ridge."

" He's right. That ridge would shield gunfire," said Bowers, looking up. The rest of the posse converged around the three men. " My guess is the mules and the gold are around the other side somewhere near the trestle by now."

The rest of the group moved talked among themselves. Jake counted twelve men left. Not an overwhelming force. " Yur right. Bart. We have ta hurry."

" How are we going to approach this?" asked Coltraine.

Jake squinted as Bowers lit a cigar. " I need a volunteer to head around the pass for Stockton. Meet up with the army."

Alby leaped off his horse and ran across the scrub brush. " I'll do it! I'll do it! I cin tell the army!"

" Forget it, Alby," snapped Bowers, puffing on the cigar.

" You want the job done right?" asked Alby.

" That why he wants you back here, Alby," said Jake and the group laughed. " We need you to shoot."

" Now ya talkin'." He removed his gun pointed it skyward. Jake grabbed his wrist and steered the gun back into the holster.

" What about you, Jim?" asked Bowers. " Meet up with the army?"

Coltraine shook his head. " No, sir. This is one fight I'm staying for."

Jake wondered if he was making up for not fighting directly during the war. " Good man."

" I'll go," said Andy Bisbane.

" Good. By the time you reach Stockton this will be over. We'll either have stopped them or the gold will be gone. The army needs to head in both directions. If you are able to use a telegraph."

" I understand."

Coltraine leaned forward in the saddle and stared at the ridge. With whitened knuckles he held the saddle horn and constantly moved his tightened lips. Jake motioned him aside. " You all right, Jim?"

" Yeah." He looked up with moistened eyes. " My brother died at Fredricksburg. I've been there."

" You still wanna go ahead?"

" I have to go. I have to fight the fight."

Jake nodded. " Man should always get a chance to make things right."

Bowers advised Andy stay clear of the trail and the trestle. Andy's horse began wide loop into the woods around Bancor Pass. Bowers stepped into the stirrup and climbed off his horse. He snapped a long brittle stick off one of the trees, cleared back pine needles and dragged the point in the soil. His crude map showed Bancor Peak as a long triangular groove in the darker dirt. He deepened the line where he thought the spur swung up from Stockton across the valley.

" What do you think, Jake? Sawtooth and three men fully armed with rifles up the top of that peak." He raised the stick toward the pointed rock ledges and wispy clouds.

" Yup. We need cover, Bart," said Jake.

" Exactly. That leaves the rest of us to move up the pass." He kept the cigar between his teeth and placed his foot on a stump. Slowly he raised his bushy brows and spoke in a constrained voice. " We have to kill them all... No exceptions. "

" Sounds brutal," said Doc. " I thought we were just supposed to recover the gold."

" It is brutal," said Bowers. " That's the whole point. You think Butkis is just gonna let us walk in and start loading up the bars?"

" They might," said Alby. " We scare the hell out of them!"

Doc moved near Alby. " He's right. If they feel overpowered."

" You can do what you want, Doc, but I'm telling you. Bart is right," said Jake. " We have to do this and do it fast."

" When do they start firing on the ridge?" asked MacKenzie.

Bowers' dark eyes slowly swung toward Jake. Jake thought about what he might see on the other side. He pictured mules, men, and probably a train near the trestle. " You watch me. When I signal you. You fire and you take them out. Because if you don't, we're dead."

" We don't even know how men they gut!" said Alby.

Coltraine grinned at Bowers. " We only have nine men. I hate to say it but he's right."

" See I wuz right," said Alby, stroking his beard and gazing at the group for approval.

" It damn well doesn't matter," said Jake.

" Just wait fur the army," said Doc.

Bowers stepped forward and spread his arms. " Look, they'll get the damned gold into the valley if we wait. I can't let them do that. Anyone who wants to stay behind. Stay behind. We're heading up the pass. Sawtooth, get your men up that peak... " we're moving out!"

18

Butkis watched the engine's driving steel wheels and main rods lock and slid along the rails. The train was pointed down the forested incline around the ridge. Callahan peered out the open cab window. " I told ya I'd be here, Pat. I told ya, you bastard!"

Butkis slipped across the gravel bed and placed his boot on the cross ties below the cab. He lit a stogie and checked the old locomotive. " I would have bet money this train wouldn't have made it up the trestle."

" The boiler's havin' trouble keepin' the heat. I told Maguire this wuz junk. He says he wuz lucky ta get it. "

" That was my next question. Maguire and his people are in the valley?"

" Yup. Fifteen miles. They have wagons ready. All we gotta do is chug this old wreck down the trestle and meet up with them."

Butkis grinned, tilted his head back and laughed. " Damn!"

" We did it, Pat. We did it. I always knew you wuz too smart fur the government."

Butkis continued to smile and inhaled the tobacco smoke. He watched the mules slowly converge down the ridge trail to the train in the clearing. The track curved past the engine, between the blasted boulders and the pines covering the mountain slope. Once they loaded the gold Callahan would stoke the boiler and

bring the train around the bend to the trestle less than a mile away. He tightened his brow. " We haven't done it yet."

" Ah, yur just too damned nervous. Come one. An old poker man like you gettin' nervous." Sam Turner spun away from his boys and started toward the train. Callahan yelled out the cab. " Sam, Pat here is gettin' nervous."

" He should be. We have men from Brinson trailing us."

" What?" Butkis threw down the stogie onto the gravel rocks. " How do you know this?"

" Shots down the trail."

" Get Rody. We start loading the gold into the stock car now. Tell each of those men there's an extra hundred in it for them if they load the car within the hour. And send more men back to cover us."

" You payin'?"

" I'm paying."

Callahan leaned toward Sam. " Just like the old days, eh, Sam. Pick up the extra stuff, then resell it back. I miss the old days."

Butkis grimaced in the sunlight. " What the hell do you think this is? This isn't like the old days. This isn't like sneaking some ordinance shipment away. Or skimming. The government will have the army and agents swarming all over this area!"

" Pat, they can't catch us once-"

" You forget about the old days, take your money and keep your mouth shut for the rest of your life. If I see you again, I'll kill you."

Callahan stared at him and then ducked back in the cab. Sam Turner moved closer to Butkis. " Pat, we'll hold off the Brinson boys. Don't worry."

" I'm worried about a lot of things, Sam." Rody moved along the tracks.
" Rody get that gold into the stock car."

" Then what? I'm just tellin' ya, Butkis." His eyes were wet and his voice shook with emotion. " You owe my father a substantial amount of money and land. We did our job. We gut the mules. We gut Dunbar to blow up the tracks. If yur thinkin' of not payin' up..."

" I never said that. " He drew out a larger .42 caliber Remington. " He's your son, Sam. But get him moving. We have people after us."

" Pa, don't trust him."

" Shut up, Rody. I'm making this deal. You just do as I say."

Rody flashed his yellowed teeth at Butkis and moved closer. " Suppose we want some of them bars?"

Butkis pulled back his gun hammer and pointed the muzzle at Rody's chest.
" Do as your father says, Rody."

" Don't trust him, Pa."

" You load that gold or you're dead."

" You damned fool! Listen ta him! We gut men chasin' us!" Sam yanked on the reins and pulled Rody back to the long mule train. They argued even as Rody got off his horse near a faded red, slatted stock car. Sam directed his son and the other men to unload the mule packs. He pointed to the stock car and several men dragged long new planks across the rocks to the open door. Sam rounded up two men, who almost immediately mounted their horses and trotted up the wooded trail.

Butkis openly displayed his gun from atop his own horse and lingered along the train where he could keep watch on all the men, but he kept looking back up the trail.

Junior Turner lifted the first shiny yellow bar from an open leather mule pack and waddled to the gravel embankment. He handed it to another man who walked it up the plank. Rody had positioned himself inside the door and passed the bar to another man who would stack the gold somewhere inside. Sam, off his horse, walked over to Butkis. " I gut men headin' back along the ridge. Don't worry, Pat. Them boys is good shots. They'll hold off anybody trailin' us."

" We're so close."

" Yur gonna be set, Pat and I'm gonna be Governor of Nevada. I gonna push my way ta the top just like old Abe Curry. And it ain't the end. There's no tellin' where the hell we could go. Them bars will get us anything we want. You know that."

" Time will tell." As Sam started back to the stock car, Pam Grayson trotted slowly along the human chain loading the bars up the planks. She spotted Butkis and started along the gravel bed with her hand on her gun handle, but said nothing. Butkis did not trust her. " Pam, I promised you two bars. You'll get them before the train leaves."

" I'm wanna go ta San Francisco with you, Pat."

Butkis stared at her legs mounted over the saddle. Her hair was tucked under her dark hat. He did not want her around after he sold the gold. " I promised you two bars for killing Dunbar. That should keep you going for quite some time. I have

my own agenda and I won't be in San Francisco very long if at all. I haven't decided."

Pam gave him such an icy stare he thought she might draw her gun. She was still gawking as she brought the horse back to the mules. He owed her nothing. But she must have sensed his pending wealth and power and now sweetened up to him. Butkis felt the same power now. With the proper planning, he would wield that power in ways that he could not even imagine.

Rody had a smirk on his face at the stock car opening. He shook his head and ducked back inside. Butkis' stomach wrenched and his breathing was erratic as he watched the bars move down the human chain. He had never felt pressure like this and would trust no one until the gold was in Harrison Maguire's care. Sam Turner, his gray hair scattered in clumps, held his hat as he walked briskly along the mule train. He shielded his eyes as he approached and then placed his Stetson back on his head. "Lookin' good, Pat."

"How much gold is left, Sam?"

"I'd say we're halfway. They're movin' real fast..."

"What about down the trail?" asked Butkis.

"Men haven't reported in. I can't tell ya about the valley until-"

"I'm worried about the army and the Pinkertons." Sam nodded and trailed Butkis as he paraded along the train with his gun fully drawn. Men looked up at him as he neared the stock car. The men inside had created a five-foot pyramid of gold bars, reflecting the sunlight through the wood slats. He would count every bar before the train started toward the trestle. His confidence returned for the first time that day as he gazed across the ascending gold pyramid. He pulled out his watch

and wanted to remember the exact time when the rest of his life began. In a matter of hours he would be on his way to San Francisco.

Rody cupped his hands and yelled out the opening. " Watch them mules, boys!"

For the next fifteen minutes Butkis alternated glances up the trail with Rody profiled at the stock car opening. He watched as they removed the last gold bars from the packs and sent them down the chain to the stock car.

Sam Turner edged his horse along the railroad bed. He untied one of his saddle bags, searched inside, pulled out two long brown cigars and handed one to Butkis. " Cuban. Enjoy it as the boys finish up, Pat. We outwitted every one of them bastards."

" I take nothing for granted." Butkis then broke into a wide grin as Sam struck a match and lit the cigar. The next gold bar was stacked on the pyramid.

" But it is sure as hell looking good, isn't it?."

" Damn right. That's the old Pat Butkis talkin'. I'd say we'll be fully loaded in fifteen minutes."

" Sam, I'll wire you once I'm settled." He puffed the cigar red. " Whatever help you need politically. I want to be available in the future after this thing blows over. The one thing this gold will net us is power. We may not see it now, but we will. Just make sure your ass and your boys asses are covered after I leave on the train. "

" We'll head to east, do our trading and go home. The cattle will be on trains to Brinson and no one will be the wiser. Just a little business trip fur the Turners. " Sam held the cigar between his fingers and looked at Pam Grayson, atop her horse,

hands on the saddle horn and watching the whole operation near the end of the train. " Pam made this easier."

" She'll be compensated. I told her that." Butkis looked away from Pam and back to the stock car. " I'm counting every bar. "

" No one's gonna challenge you, Pat."

" I trust no one."

" Yup."

Butkis slipped his foot into the stirrup and dismounted. He hitched the horse to the stock car and walked up the plank. Rody leaned against the sideboards, but was silent as Butkis stepped inside the car. His boots clicked across the floorboards. He leaned over and slowly, as if he were seeing the face of God, he touched his fingers to the top bar's cold surface. Again he sensed the accumulating power he had only dreamed about back in Omaha.

" I gotta give ya credit," said Rody from the door as a burly man carried another bar inside, crossed the car and placed the gold on the pyramid. " You ain't the mama's boy I thought ya were."

" I'm pleased you think so," said Butkis.

" I'll get you a count."

" Not necessary. I will count these bars personally and I'll need men up here to re-stack the gold." He pulled his watch from his vest pocket. Somehow its gold case now seemed insignificant when compared to the stack to his right.

" Hey, Mike. Five men up here ta-" Rody's hands moved upward to his throat. The crisp sound of a rifle volley reverberated around the pass. A mass of

thick blood soaked Rody's blue shirt. He keeled over, still holding his neck and fell forward onto the gravel bed.

Butkis ripped out his .44 and leaned around the opening. More shots, blown up like a full battlefield attack, inundated the silent mountain air. On his stomach he hurled the cigar aside, crawled to the side wall and peered through the slats. Men and mules scattered. He needed to get to the engine cab and have Callahan start the train moving toward the trestle. Someone bounced like a monkey atop of the train. He swung his gun upward and sat in front of the gold.

Pam Grayson's voice seeped through the slats. " I'm comin' in."

" Pam..."

In the midst of the gunfire she swung her body through the open door. Holding her rifle she tucked and rolled below the bullet riddled wood slats. " We gut men on the peak firin' at us. Our men ur bein' picked off."

" My gold... My gold." Butkis half closed his eyes. " Callahan has to get this train moving!"

" Callahan and the other man is dead."

" What?"

" Half yur men are dead," she said, standing and pointing her rifle through the slats. " There's men comin' round Bancor. They must be Brinson men... the ones who sent Pauntok and the others."

" We need to start this train moving!"

" They gutta stop shootin' fur that," she said, still looking outside. " Damn... Jake McBride is out there!"

Butkis stood, creased his brow and moved forward. Through the thin light slit McBride and a familiar stocky man fired at the train from a position behind the blasted tan rocks along the pass. More men he could not identify were up on the ridge. He did not see the Indian. "Damn him!"

"We can punch out boards back here and get up ta the engine. I thought Willis was supposed to kill McBride."

"He was... Damn him!" Butkis stared at McBride as he aimed his rifle toward the train. "We have to get this train moving!"

Pam crashed her rifle butt into the slats. "That's what I'm sayin'. Come on, Pat. Help me loosen these boards!"

Butkis turned. He wanted to kill the McBride as much as he wanted to get the gold to Maguire. Pam kicked the loosened slats with a wild ferocity, exposing rusted nails, and the boards dropped to the gravel bed. For a moment Butkis thought about escaping down the tree-lined slope to the valley, but he had come too far. She was right. He merely needed to get the train to the trestle. She moved behind him as he sunk his fingernails into the slats and squeezed through. He leaped onto the gravel and sprinted along the backside of the train. A few bullets whizzed his head and others splintered car's wood walls.

He reached the metal framed engine and grabbed the ladder rungs. Pam followed as he crawled through the cab window. Callahan was dead and his arms draped over the outside window. Billy Sumner was gone. "Now what?"

"We need to release the brake or somethin'."

More bullets pinged the engine's metal walls. "I thought you'd save yourself."

" Save myself? " She moved along the wall gauges and levers. " Don't kid yourself, Pat. I'm a wanted woman. Jake McBride will have me tried for Dunbar's murder, I'll be hanged back in Brinson."

Butkis looked around the edge of the car. The gunfire subsided and he saw Jim Coltraine and a group of other men moving down the trail. " Without McBride... I would have been rich."

" We release this train, we can bring the gold to the valley."

" It's fifty two miles to Stockton," said Butkis, looking out the cab window. " I'll kill him."

" Furgit bout McBride." She pushed another lever, but nothing happened.

Butkis shook his head. The function of the gauges and levers around the engine cabin eluded him. He moved over to Pam and joined her pulling the levers. She stuck her head out the engineer's perch. Butkis leaned over her britches and saw the tall McBride on his horse between the pines and the rocks. The mules had scampered into the woods. Sam Turner and his boys were gone and bodies were strewn over the gravel bed and up the trail. " I knew he'd show up."

" Where the hell is the brake lock?" shouted Pam. " If we can roll and make that trestle down the ridge. At least we'll be in the valley." She pointed her rifle out the cab. " Pat, they're comin' down!"

" The son of a bitch."

Pam moved back toward the boiler and moved switches along the wall.

" Get a hold of yourself, Pat."

Butkis kept shaking his head. " I should have killed him when I had the chance."

" This is it!"

" What?" he asked.

" The brake! Come on, help me!"

She pulled back the long metal stick, but could not release it. Butkis turned and grasped the handle. They both yanked it back. Very slowly the rigid lock produced a thud under the train and the engine's steel wheels squealed against the railroad tracks as they started forward.

Butkis returned to the window. " They're you go, you son of a bitch, McBride."

McBride's horse reached the ledge above the gravel bed as the train nudged down the incline. Pam pointed up at him and put her arms around Butkis' waist.

" All we gotta do is make it around this ledge and cross down that trestle. Once we reach the bottom of the grade, we get this engine goin', Pat. And all the gold is here!"

Butkis drew his gun and shoved it in her stomach. " I'm going to give you the chance to live."

" What are you doin'? Afta all I done fur you?"

" You're expendable. The Turners were expendable. All of you," he said as the train slowly rolled away from the pass and lead rocked the outer engine shell.

" Now, get off."

" Rody wuz right, yur a lyin' bastard!" She turned and he twisted his gun.

" I go out there, they'll shoot me!"

" You stay and I'll shoot you."

She gazed over his shoulder toward the open cab window. " Then let me out the other side."

Butkis nodded, pulled the gun back and fanned it toward the passing pines and bushes. " Go! Get out!"

She backed along the wall, past engineer's body. When she was at the edge, she backed her long legs out the opening. " I couldda made you happy, Pat."

A smile returned to his face. " The only thing that will make me happy is stacked in the stock car."

" What about my two bars?"

" Tough luck."

With ferocity in her green eyes and her lips tightened around her exposed teeth, Pam backed through the opening. Butkis held the gun firmly as she descended the outside ladder. He leaned over the window rail and pointed the gun down. She never looked at him again, leaped off the train, hit the gravel bed and tumbled into the bushes. Near a row of brush and pines she brushed her britches and the train rounded the bend. Butkis grinned. He knew the locomotive was rocking toward the trestle and with the steep pitch into the valley, would descend toward Maguire and his contacts. He stood alone in the cab with all the gold stacked in the stock car. An uncontrollable smile covered his face as he leaned out the window and thrust his hands into the mountain air. He shouted gleefully and the train moved faster over the cross ties. His ultimate gamble, just minutes ago appearing so bleak, now was within reach. But he had to fire up the train in the valley to get to Maguire.

19

Jake and the posse fired at the slow moving train as it approached the bend. Pam Grayson ran from the pines, across the tracks away from the thick gunfire. She scooped a rifle off the ground and mounted a horse. Jake had an easy shot, but he let her horse hurdle the tracks and merge into the tall trees down the side the mountain. He continued pumping bullets at the train engine. Butkis' dark form was occasionally visible within the safety of the cab and he shot a high-powered revolver back at the posse.

Next to Jake, Coltraine peered through field glasses. " It's sustaining the speed, but once he gets to the trestle- "

" I'm goin' through the woods!" yelled Jake. More shots hit behind him, but Coltraine's legs were locked in the stirrups and the field glasses dangled around his neck. A bullet had penetrated his chest, flooding his white shirt and long coat with blood. He formed the smile and pushed out his words in a whisper. " It's a damned good day to die, Jake." His eyes rolled and he fell out of the saddle.

" No, Jim! Jim!" He looked at the rear car rolling away down the wooded track. " That son of a bitch!"

Doc Talmadge ran forward and bent over the body. He looked up slowly at Jake. " They got em..."

" Butkis!" Jake kicked Menewa and slapped the reins. As the gunfire abated, Menewa flew up the wooded knoll separating the ridge from the tracks. The sun

flickered as he moved upward between the towering, wrinkled bark trees. Through tree breaks the distant yellowed valley was dotted with spreading oaks and a winding river. He had to beat the train to the trestle and kill Butkis.

He brought Menewa to a full gallop and sent the dried needles flying. As he crested the knoll, the towering vertical slabs of Bancor Ridge hovered over the forest. Beyond the cleared trees the trestle's wood timbers were bolted securely to descending sections, forming a prodigious myriad of neatly woven sticks curving outward from the rock scraped cliffs. A solid flat upper platform was cut geometrically perfect and swung outward before dipping gradually into the extensive river valley.

Emerging from the forest, Jake did not see the train as Menewa negotiated the bare stone ridge above the tracks. He slid out of the saddle and crawled along blasted rust rocks twenty feet above cross ties. The locomotive's steel wheels ground against the rails at the bend. Above the ridge line the smokeless stack progressed silently through the woods, but as the wide cowcatcher appeared past the rocks, Jake sensed the train's increasing speed.

But he kept thinking about Jim Coltraine shot out of his saddle. Coltraine did not deserve to die. When you're dead, you're dead. Jake bent his knees near the rocky edge. As he prepared to jump, he did not see Butkis in the engine cab. As the engine and wood car passed below, he leaned forward and with his gun drawn, he leaped from the rocks. He was in the air only a few seconds before hitting the roof of the middle car. His gun popped from his hand and tumbled over the edge near the trestle as he fought to stay on top of the car.

He clung onto the top as the car rocked around the ledge, and with an abrupt bump, reached the trestle platform. Like a bird in flight, he gazed over the valley, but bullets now randomly pierced the roof. Butkis, minus his dark Stetson, and with a wide smile on his face, raised his gun near the front of the car.

" Butkis!"

Butkis grinned and balanced the gun barrel on the car's roof. " You can't stop me, McBride!"

Jake gripped the top boards. " You killed Jim Coltraine..."

" You're dead!"

The engine pitched downward, cars dipped, and Butkis was thrown back. The gun discharged as he disappeared between the cars. Jake twisted and inched his way across the swaying roof. He swung his body over the edge and climbed down the opposite side of the car. The angle sharpened and the trestle timbers cracked as the train gained speed. Jake held the metal rungs of the side ladder and peered down the length of a stock car. Past several ripped wood sideboards, Butkis leaned out and fired. Jake ducked back as a bullet flew into the air. He hung on the ladder above the brown river far below. It widened from the mountain folds and meandered through the dry valley grass. Jake positioned himself on the sliding metal coupler between the cars and grabbed the lower supports. Then he crawled under the moving train. Only a few feet above the blurred cross ties, he clawed his way under the stock car. His heart pounded his ribs and his hands gripped the supports as he slowly traversed its full length. When you're dead, you're dead.

Butkis' boots and pant legs were visible at the next coupler. Like a trapeze artist, Jake brought his body diagonally to the outside of the car. He pulled himself

up and through the car opening. Across bloodied floorboards light flickered between the slats and across a collapsed gold pyramid. With no gun he stepped over the fallen bars and crouched along the slats.

"When yur dead, yur dead," he whispered, tightening his face as he steadied himself within the rocking car. He closed his eyes briefly as the train careened into the valley. Butkis must have remained on the coupler. At the opening, he glanced at the blood on the wood and climbed outside again. Arm over arm he inched along the racing car. Now he was less than ten feet from the coupler. He would have to be quick

He grasped the edge of the car and prayed Butkis did not see his fingers around the wood. In a single motion he sprang around the corner and sailed through the air. Butkis turned and swung his gun, but Jake kicked his boots into his wrist. Butkis fired and missed. Jake yanked his bandanna and slammed his fist into Butkis' block chin. "You son of a bitch!"

Butkis was dazed and focused on Jake as his gun hand drooped. "Don't ruin this..."

Jake hit him again. He grabbed Butkis' wrist and tried to shake the gun loose. With a swift thrust, he pounded his knee into Butkis' stomach. As air gushed from his lungs, Jake smacked the gun hand against the stock car wall. He continuously banged the gun into the wood until it bounced across the coupler and disappeared onto the trestle platform.

Against the faded red wood slats, Butkis' opened his dark eyes wider. "Listen, McBride. I'll share the gold with you."

Jake hit him hard above the eye and his head cracked against the wood. Jake then gripped his coat. " The army and the railroad know what you did Butkis."

"How do you know who I am? "

Jake slapped his face. " Shut up! You killed Robbie Pauntok. He wuz just a kid! And now you killed Jim."

The jostling train rocked down the trestle. " McBride, I can make you rich. I have contacts in the valley near Stockton."

Jake steadied himself on the coupler. The rushing wind pushed through his hair and he squinted into the sunlight. " Yur goin' back with the Pinkertons and the government will deal with you."

" You don't know how long I planned this!"

Jake held the car. " I think I know how you planned this. And you almost did it. You just didn't move fast enough."

" Listen, no one will ever know I split this gold with you. We'll get the engine going. You're resourceful, McBride."

" Shut up." Jake peered ahead. Less than a mile away the long support trestle leveled. " We'll just wait it out."

When he turned back, Butkis had a small derringer pointed at him. The derringer did not fire when he pulled the trigger. He pumped the trigger and then threw the gun at Jake. Jake ducked and Butkis moved up the next car's ladder and crawled over the top. Jake leaped forward, grasped the metal rungs and scurried behind him.

Butkis' tried to keep his balance on the swaying car. When he saw Jake, he turned, almost losing his footing, and started toward him. Jake met him halfway. Butkis locked his arms around Jake and they fell onto the roof. As he rolled to the

left, Jake swung his elbow into Butkis' ribs and smashed his neck near to the edge. Jake pinned his shoulders and Butkis peered over the edge. " We'll be dead!"

" When you're dead, you're dead!"

" No!"

Jake gripped his coat at the shoulders, hoisted Butkis into the air and repeatedly bashed his head into the railroad car. Then he released his grip and dropped the motionless Butkis to the roof. As he looked ahead where the trestle met the valley, Butkis scrambled back before Jake could grab him and jumped to the next car. Jake moved like a crab across the roof. Butkis was already crawling across the cut woodpile in the car behind the engine. Jake jumped over the coupler and landed in the wood. He slipped on the logs and air whooshed by him as he crawled toward the engine. Once at the cab window he did not see Butkis within the iron clad walls. " Butkis!"

The trestle slowly evened out, but the train retained its great speed as Jake dropped inside the cab window. He looked toward the river valley, and back up the long wooden structure, thinking maybe Butkis had jumped from the train. As he turned, Butkis sprang from behind the boiler wall and swung a shovel at his head. Jake ducked, but the metal grazed his ear. Blood poured down his neck, but the pain only enraged him.

Butkis raised the shovel again. " You won't ruin my plans!"

" Yur a son of a bitch!"

Butkis hacked the shovel through the air, but Jake dodged the attack, the air brushing his bloodied face. " You can be a rich man, McBride."

" You humiliated me." Butkis grinned, seemingly taking great satisfaction in that achievement and swung at Jake again, missing his shoulder by inches. Jake moved his large hand directly outward, caught the shovel handle and wrapped his fingers around the wooden shaft. Butkis' eyes opened wide when Jake ripped the shovel away. Butkis backed against the boiler and said nothing as Jake grit his teeth, grabbed Butkis' coat with one hand and held the shovel over his head.

" You're a stooge, McBride."

He dropped the shovel and lifted Butkis off the ground and slammed his body against the sooty boiler. Butkis winced and tried to break free. Jake slammed his fist into his jaw. Butkis' eyes rolled and in rapid succession, Jake bashed his face. He figured he had broken Butkis' bloodied nose. Again he forced Butkis' head against the boiler.

Butkis' collapsed onto the floor. Jake stared at the one man who had murdered, deceived, and almost stole enough gold for lifetime security. " Yur still a son of a bitch."

The train lost speed now along the river. Jake moved to the window. Ahead, he saw smaller, dry grass foothills leading from the higher mountains. He looked back at the limp Butkis, head cocked at an angle against the boiler, but had not hit him hard enough to kill him. Yet, within the raging attack against the boiler, he might have hurt him bad. He leaned his forearm on the cab window. His face contracted in the warming valley sun. The muddied river moved swiftly along oak and sycamore lined banks and widened into the parched grass valley. Far atop the trestle within the gray ledges of Bancor Pass, Jim Coltraine was dead and Robbie Pauntok

was buried back in the mountains. The train lost momentum and glided to a stop along the riverbank.

Jake never looked at Butkis when he climbed out the cab. He stepped down the driving wheels and onto the gravel bed. With his bandanna he wiped blood off his cheek and neck. His ribs ached, but not enough to worry about. Back to the east, the trestle blended with a haze the hung over Bancor Ridge. He moved through the shadows to the stock car and leaned in the opening. Shiny bars were scattered from the original pile. He pulled himself onto the floorboards and held one of the heavy bars in his hand. The metal had a coolness he found unusual. He kept the bar in his hand and sat in the opening and let his legs dangle over the edge. The army might arrive during the day, but Bowers, if he was still alive would probably reach the train first. Jake wanted to get back to Brinson, bury Coltraine and forget he had ever heard of Butkis and the gold.

Near the engine, a shadow appeared on the richer soil and Pam Grayson rounded the corner on a brown mustang. She had a hardened look on her tanned face and her dark clothes were as dust laden as the horse's coat. Jake held the bar, but did not move from the opening even though she raised a rifle muzzle toward his head. " Jake..."

" Pam."

" Butkis is dead, ain't he?" She squinted and looked as though she should be smoking a stogie. " Ain't he?"

" Don't matter."

" Nope, don't suppose it does. " She held the saddle horn and looked west over her shoulder. " Butkis had contacts comin' fur the gold. We need to get this train movin'."

" Gold ain't goin' nowhere, Pam."

" Jake, I ain't promisin' ya a life together, but we've gut all this gold. We don't never have ta worry bout nothing agin'."

" You have to worry about standin' trial fur killing Dunbar, Sunshine,"

She raised her head in the sun and pursed her lips. " Dunbar didn't cooperate with Sam. He blew up the tracks fur money. Then he got scared."

" So, ya killed him and blamed Dalton."

" Dalton was convenient."

Jake grinned and shook his head. " What the hell is the matter with all of you people? We're talkin' bout a man's life here. We're talkin' bout gold that ain't yurs!"

" I'm taking as much as I can pack on this horse." She slid off the saddle and kept her gun on him and positioned her boots firmly in the rocks. " If you wuz smart you'd know what I can do fur you."

" I know what you did fur me."

" And you didn't like it?"

" I ain't sayin' I didn't like it or didn't like you. I just never trusted you and still don't."

She curled her lip and fanned the gun. " Load the bars." Jake held the single bar and sat in the opening. " Look, I'll kill ya Jake."

" Then go head, kill me." Her green eyes focused on him and then she darted left. Jake smiled as she slid a bar across the floorboards. She ran back to the horse

and pulled a bedroll from the saddlebag. Jake wondered how far she could get with the horse fully loaded down. She threw the bedroll across the floor and loaded a total of twelve bars into the bags. Jake remained in the opening. " Just where you gonna go, Pam?"

" I ain't sayin'."

To his right Butkis staggered around the engine and aimed a rifle at McBride. A grin covered his swollen bloodied face, but a quick loud shot shook the area. Smoke drifted up from Pam's rifle and she fired a second time. Butkis' gun fell to the cross ties and he clung onto the engine as she hit him two more times in the chest. For a moment he staggered forward, but fell face down with a thud onto the gravel. A steady stream of blood seeped between the little gray rocks.

Pam looked up from the smoking barrel. " Problem with you, Jake, is you trust too much."

He thought she might shoot him, but she tucked the rifle back in its holder. " They'll be afta you."

" Maybe... Sometimes, the law ain't always upheld. People git ta keep what ain't theirs and there ain't nothin' ya can do nobody cin do bout it." Jake nodded. " You can still come with me."

" Nope."

" Yur the only smurt one, Jake. " She brought the horse around and moved down the gravel bed. Jake stepped over the railroad ties and checked Butkis. Then he climbed on the cow catcher, propped his knees and watched her trek along the river. He gazed back over Butkis' solid form, sprawled face down the gravel bed. Assuming Butkis was dead in the engine cab had almost gotten Jake killed. Maybe

he did trust too much. Pam's horse successfully forded the current in the distant haze Her ghostly image blended into the heat waves rising skyward across the river bank and she was gone.

20

Alby danced across the saloon stage with a showgirl in a green satin dress. O'Malley pounded the keys and nodded his head at Alby's antics. Johnny handed Jake a large whiskey bottle and glass, and Jake brought it over to the table shared by Bowers and Judge MacKenzie.

" Is Brinson always this crazy?" asked Bowers, finishing his whiskey. Jake refilled his glass.

" You bet yur ass it is," said the judge. " More than just cribbage boards, right, Jake?"

Jake tightened his jaw, nodded and just sat frozen at the table. They had just buried Jim Coltraine on the ridge yesterday morning and he did not want to celebrate anything.

" My company is sending out wanted posters for Pam Grayson," said Bowers.

" You ain't never gonna find Pam Grayson," said Jake.

" Why not?"

Jake shook his head and poured himself a drink. He thought of Pam in the hotel room and could still her disappearing toward Stockton. " What about the Turners?"

" Government will try Sam and the two surviving boys," said MacKenzie.

" They're lucky Sawtooth didn't kill em all," said Jake, looking at the gristly Sawtooth, drinking with Doc Talmadge on the corner.

" I *don't* think Sam be the next governor," said Bowers. " He took a big chance."

Jake spoke with the liquor at his lips. " They almost did it, Bart."

" Yes, they almost did. I owe you."

" I just did what I had ta do." Jake saw Soaring Bird behind the louver doors. His single red and black feather was bright in the sun. Jake set down his drink and crossed the saloon toward his Shoshoni friend. His dark eyes focused slowly . " I figured you'd be back in town.

" I have returned, McBride, but it is time for you to go."

" Whaddaya mean?" Soaring Bird pushed the louvers and moved inside. He motioned Jake toward the bar. Johnny wiped the wood clean and poured a drink for Dan Dalton at the end. Soaring Bird walked into the hall next to the bar.

" What the hell are ya doin'?"

Jake moved forward into the dim light, but the wall next to his Shoshoni friend blazed in a mass of yellow light. Jake raised his arm into the air and half closed his eyes. He heard the dancing and piano playing behind him in the saloon, but his feet were unsteady. When the brightness dissipated, he pressed his fingers against the cold wide window span overlooking the highway. Red taillights pulsed through the city outside his courthouse office. He back away toward his desk. In the reflection he was dressed in jeans and a red sweater.

" *Are you all right, Jake?*"

Jake looked around the office and sat on the desk. " Melbourne?"

" *Yes, I am here at the Nexus House.* "

The phone rang. Jake paused and stared at the phone. He lifted the receiver to his ear. " McBride."

" Jake, it's Alby. Bowers said Pam must have left the country after the stand-off. The FBI has people looking everywhere. What do they tell you?"

" What?"

" About the charges."

Jake stood. " What are you talking about?"

" Jake, we both know Pam killed Butkis. If they're blaming you-"

" I didn't kill Butkis."

" You sound tired, Jake. You aren't still thinking of resigning, are you?"

" Resigning? I'll call you back in a few minutes, Alby." Jake hung up the phone. He wandered back to the window. The frustration he felt in the courtroom overtook him again. He was mesmerized by the taillights. Again, he looked upward. " Mr. Melbourne?"

"*I am here, Jake.*"

" How did you bring me to Brinson?"

" *Does it matter?* "

" Yes, it does. Many people are dead. Including Jim Coltraine and Pauntok. At least I think they are."

" *They are..*"

" What gives you the right?"

" They had the same risks as you when they went in. I told you, when you're dead, you're dead. Everyone faces the same odds. But I am not without compassion. "

" You brought them in there?"

"I offered you justice."

Jake swallowed once, gazed around the ceiling tiles and back to the ever moving traffic. " You did."

" There will never be equality, Jake. We just don't live in a perfect world, but despite all the inequities, there will always be opportunities to seek justice."

Jake compressed his brow and stared outside for several minutes. Maybe he would resign, but his anger surged when he thought about standing trial for killing Butkis. He felt cornered and headed across the room. When he pulled open the door, the saloon's piano filled his office. A smiling Jim Coltraine, alive and in his fringed suede coat stood in the hallway. " Jake."

" Jim, you're alive!" He saw Bowers and the judge back at the table.

" You coming back, Marshal?"

Jake glanced around his office and out the window. Then he faced Coltraine with a smile. " Ain't no justice here, Jim." He took one step forward, his spurs jingled, and his boots creaked. Alby, seated with a showgirl at a front table, waved him over. Coltraine patted him on the shoulder as he picked up another whiskey from Johnny. " Welcome back, Jake."

" It's good to be home. I reckon, Jim, we're both her ta stay."