

Prologue

It was 1886 and the American west was still young. William Dean Ritter had left his small Montana farm three years earlier to become a cowboy. Since then, and through numerous adventures, he'd done just that. He was now foreman of one of the biggest ranches in north Texas. But a surprise telegram from Bighorn Lake brought a chill to his bones... There was trouble back home...and duty called.

This third novel takes Montana back home and straight into his most dangerous adventure yet.

To Abby

Battle at Bighorn

Another Montana Adventure

John E. Richman

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Chapter 1

I'd been colder this last week than I think I'd been in my whole eighteen years. Nobody in their right mind would leave Texas for Montana this late in November, but here I was. Spirit and I made Wyoming yesterday and were starting to work our way into the Wind River country, but I couldn't tell for sure. What little sunlight got through the overcast, only lasted six or seven hours. The days get real short up here in late November and, just our luck, winter was setting up early. Two days ago we were fighting rain. Yesterday we woke up to an inch of snow, and it was still coming down. Seemed like most of our riding was in the dark or near dark...and the snow didn't help.

I was also worried about Spirit. Strong a horse as he was, he needed water and the last two water holes we came by were frozen. Not so thick that I couldn't break through, but it worried me all the same. If this freeze didn't break soon, I knew I'd have a harder time the further north we got.

The sun must'a gone down a while ago because it was almost dark and the light snow'd started up again. This is not how I'd planned my return home.

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We'd just come through a small woods, back onto open prairie, when a gust of wind nearly tore my Stetson off. I know I should keep moving, but I also know I need rest – preferably by a warm fire. It was clear that wasn't gonna happen. I'd have to fend for myself again tonight and finding firewood wasn't gonna to be easy on this white prairie. Maybe I should have stopped back in the last woods. Lord knows how far we'll have to go now to find anything close to wood or shelter.

“Keep goin’”, Spirit. I'll find us a place to rest before too long.” Gotta remember the water, too. I can live out of my canteen for a few more days, but Spirit needs more than that. I guess he puts his life in my hands just like I do, his. I gotta just keep ridin’.

As much as I prayed things would get better, they didn't. Mother used to tell me and Mary not to pray for selfish things...that God helped those who helped themselves. I guess maybe praying for shelter was selfish. I knew if I kept riding north, I'd find some eventually. So, no more praying until I really need it.

Another hour had passed it was pitch black except for the slight glimmer of snow in my eyes. That's when I saw it. Up ahead, maybe half a mile...a fire. If it wasn't so dark, I probably wouldn't have seen it, but, on this devilish night it looked like angels calling me in. I figured we were fifty or sixty miles into the Wind River country, so it just might just be that the fire was an Indian

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camp. Wouldn't matter to me if it was. The Arapaho had been at peace for almost twenty years. I suspect they'd take us in without any fuss.

As I approached the light, I was hoping to see some woods, but the closer I got, the more it looked like one lone tree. I guessed that was better than none. I learned years ago to never surprise a camp. Some hundred yards out I pulled my Colt out of my holster and fired a round into the air.

"HELLO THERE! ONE RIDER COMIN' IN." I hoped my shout was heard above the wind, but I'd know for sure in a minute.

"WELCOME STRANGER," came the reply and my heart stopped its pounding.

As Spirit and I rode in I could see that it wasn't much of a camp. One broken down wagon under a single oak, and a man walking toward me.

"Sorry to bother you, but I'm in a bad need of some warmth. What are the chances I could join you at your fire?"

"Mister," the man replied, "You must have been sent right out of heaven because you need a fire and I need you."

As I brought Spirit to a stop I could see that the "man" wasn't a man at all. He was a boy about my age. I also got a better look at that wagon of his. It was leaning bad to one side and a rear wheel was off its axel. The wagon was covered and I had the sense he wasn't alone.

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“Martha, you can come out. Everything’s fine,” he yelled. I dismounted and walked Spirit over to him as he held out a hand.

“Name’s Jesse. Jesse White. That’s my wife Martha in the wagon with my son.” With that, I grabbed his hand and shook it.

“William...William Dean Ritter, but most folks just call me Montana.”

“Well Montana, you came by in the nick of time. I lost a wheel a few hours ago and limped us over to this here tree. As you can see, I got it off and fixed it, but I can’t get it on back on.”

I walked over to the wagon and saw that he’d lifted it with a single branch that’d come off the oak. He levered off a rock to lift the wagon, but the branch broke in two pieces in the process and there seemed little way for him to raise the axel enough to get the wheel back on.

I looked up to see a young woman climb out of the back of the wagon, with a child...a baby clutched to her.

“Martha, this here’s Montana. With his help, I think we can get this wheel back on.”

The woman walked over to me and held her only available hand out. “Montana, pleased to meet you. We surely need your help if you could spare the time.”

I took her hand and shook it. “Ma’am, I’m in pretty sore shape myself. I’d be happy to help you out if you could see your way to let me stay the night next to your fire.”

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She moved her hand up to shift the scarf out of her face and smiled. She was young and pretty and reminded me of my sister. “You’ve got a deal, Mr. Montana.”

With the snow still coming down, I looked around in the firelight and came on a solution.

“Jesse, do you have a strong rope?”

“Yes, about thirty feet. What is it you’re thinkin’, Montana?”

“My horse, Spirit, here needs a rest but he’s still plenty strong. I think if we roped your axel to that big branch up above and ran the rope out to Spirit’s saddle horn, between the three of us, I think we could get your wagon up. What do you think?”

“You might be right. Let me get it and we’ll give it a try.”

Jesse walked over to the wagon and jumped in. Martha had now moved closer to the fire and I got a better look at her. Looked to me like she was about to have another child. As Jesse emerged from the wagon, he could see me looking.

He threw me the rope. “Yes, Montana, Martha’s in a family way again. Baby’s due in a few weeks. I was gettin’ real worried out here on our own.”

Now I understood why they were so happy to see me. I uncoiled the rope and walked over to the wagon’s axel. I threw a loop around the axel and tossed the coil over the branch above it. Then I walked it over to Spirit and tied the other end to the saddle horn. I turned Spirit around so he was

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facin' the other way and walked back to the wagon.

"Jesse, if this is gonna work, I'll shout for Spirit to pull. I'll help by lifting the wagon as hard as I can. When it comes up enough, you get that wheel back on...okay?"

"You got it. Just let me know when you're ready."

I got in position and grabbed the bottom edge of the wagon frame. "SPIRIT, GO, GO, GO!"

Just like I hoped, Spirit moved out and the wagon creaked. I yelled again and lifted as hard as I could.

"NOW, NOW JESSE. SEE IF THAT'S HIGH ENOUGH."

Without a word, Jesse lifted and positioned the wheel on the axel and pushed it in.

"Not too hard. I have to get the rope out," I said.

"WHOA, WHOA! THAT'S ENOUGH."

A few minutes later, Jesse's wheel was locked back on and his rope was back in its coil.

"Montana, I don't know what we'd have done without you. You saved our lives."

"I think Spirit should get most the credit. He did most the work," I replied.

"Either way, you both deserve a lot better than we can give you," Martha added. "At least share our biscuits and our fire."

"I'd be much obliged, Ma'am," I replied. "Jesse, did you find any water around here?"

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“That’s why we stopped in the first place. There’s a little creek over there about fifty feet. It should be all you and your horse need.”

“Then I’ll go tend to him and be back in a while. How about your team?”

“Martha watered ‘em while I fixed the wheel. We’re fine, thanks. Just you make it back to the fire while it’s still hot.”

I did just that and while Spirit was drinking, I looked around for some more wood. Since there weren’t any other trees, there didn’t seem to be any more wood in the area. On our way back into the camp it occurred to me that the branch that Jesse’d broken while lifting the wagon might just be the only available wood to keep the fire going. Looked like it might just get us through the night.

“Jesse, if you have an ax, I’ll chop up this old limb and tend the fire.”

Jesse disappeared into the wagon again and returned a few moments later with a nice ax. “Here you go, Montana. We do appreciate your help. I’d ask you into the wagon but it’s plenty crowded already with the three of us...nearly four. Martha’s gettin’ you some biscuits. Will you be okay out here?”

“I slept in worse last night. Don’t worry about me. You two go to bed and I’ll keep the fire goin’.

Jesse walked over to me and shook my hand again. “Montana, I’ll say it again. You saved our lives and I won’t forget it.”

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A little embarrassed, I nodded as he turned and joined his family in his wagon. I untied my blanket roll from my saddle, which was now sitting on the ground next to the fire, and got under it. With my head resting on my saddle, I pushed one of the cold biscuits into my mouth and hoped tomorrow'd be a better day.

Chapter 2

I heard Spirit moving around and opened my eyes. I'd been up a few times in the night, trying to keep the fire hot, but I was slowly losing the battle. I figured it was around six o'clock, but it was hard to tell in the dark. The good news was that the wind had finally dropped and, though I couldn't see very well yet, it appeared the snow had stopped, too.

It took me a few minutes to clear out the cobwebs and I began to recall the events of last night. Jesse's wagon cover was pulled tight but I heard some movement and a moment later he came out to join me at what was left of the fire.

"Mornin' Montana. I see you didn't freeze during the night."

"Mornin' Jesse. No, I've had better nights, but I've had worse one's, too. Can't complain though. Did you folks make it through all right?"

"Oh, we do fine. Martha's due in less than a month so I worry more about her, but that old wagon's warmer than it looks. I'm sorry you had to endure the wind all night."

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“Wasn’t bad,” I replied. “What do say we break down a few of the smaller branches on this tree and see if we can get the fire up enough for coffee?”

“I was just thinkin’ the same thing. I think if I stand on the wagon bench I’ll be able to reach that dead one over there. We’ll need more than coffee, though. Martha doesn’t drink it and little Davey needs some warm food. We have some salt bacon in the wagon. I hope you plan on joinin’ us for bacon and beans.”

Twenty minutes later we had the horses watered, the fire blazing and Martha had the bacon and beans on the fire. This would be the first real meal I’d had in over a week.

“Oh, that coffee’s good!” I murmured, as the first sip swirled around my mouth on its way to my empty stomach.

“I appreciate your compliment, Montana,” Martha answered, “but either you’re an outright liar or you’re a lot worse off than you’re saying. What you’re drinking is about all we have left and half of it’s toast scrapings.”

“Let me be clearer,” I answered. “It’s hot and it tastes something like coffee. Good enough.”

Martha smiled back while flipping the bacon. “You’re awful easy to please, Montana. What brings you out here in nowhere land on this miserable week?”

“I want to hear your story, too,” I answered, “but I’d like to say grace first, if that’s all right with you?”

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“I’d be obliged if you let me,” Jesse offered and I nodded.

“Almighty Father, please hear our thanks for these blessings and for bringing us help last night when we surely needed it. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”

“Good prayer...short, but to the point,” I offered. “I thanked Him for bringing me to *your* camp as well. I think you found the only tree in forty miles and I needed the fire as badly as you needed help.”

“Where are you off to, Montana?”

“I’ve been on the trail for over a week now. Started out from a big cattle ranch near Fort Worth, Texas. I’m on my way home to Bighorn Lake, Montana. I’ve been three years away and just received a telegram from my little sister Mary, sayin’ only that there was trouble and she needed me home right away. I can’t say that I know what the trouble is, but the fact that it wasn’t from my father or mother has me real concerned that something’s bad wrong with ‘em. What brings *you* folks out in such dangerous weather?”

Jesse took a spoonful of beans and answered while he chewed. “We’ve been livin’ outside Fort Sill, Oklahoma, since I got out of the Army about six months ago. When we found out Martha was expecting again, I thought it’d be a good idea to stay there until the baby was born and strong enough to travel. But with all the soldiers gettin’

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out now, there wasn't much civilian work around there and I was havin' trouble keeping food on the table. I was even thinking about re-enlisting, just to start making some money again. But, Martha's had enough of Army life and her father offered me a job in his business up in Gillette, Wyoming, near the Montana border. Her family owns a logging business there and it would give us a chance to settle down once and for all.'

"Well, Jesse, that makes us darn near neighbors. My family's farm is on the bank of the Bighorn Lake. It's a nice enough farm, but at sixteen I needed to see something different. I guess I wanted to be a cowboy. I left and got a job at a big cattle ranch near Jackson Hole. Stayed there a few years and finally left to run cattle up the Chisholm Trail from Texas. I met some nice folks down there and ended up foreman at one of the biggest cattle ranches in the area. That's where I was when the telegram came. I'm hopin' to be able to go back after fixin' the problem back home. I've missed my family, though. I wanted to visit for a while now and just hope I'm not too late to get them out of the trouble they're in."

"I'm sure it'll all work out, Montana," Martha joined in. "You're invited to join us if you want, since we're heading pretty much in the same direction."

"I'm much obliged, ma'am, but Spirit and I are movin' fast and I'm afraid your wagon wouldn't be able to keep up with us."

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“I understand,” replied Jesse as he took the boy from his wife so she could finish her meal. “As soon as we’re done here, I’m gonna get Martha and Davey in the wagon and take off myself. I don’t know how long this break in the weather’ll last, but I’d like to take advantage of it. Driving this team through the wind and snow isn’t my idea of fun. You go on ahead, Montana. Maybe the fates will put us together again someday. I hope so.”

“Stranger things have happened,” I answered. “If there’s nothing else I can do for you, I better be off. There’s stars in the sky for the first time in a week and I wouldn’t be surprised if we had some real sunlight today. Let’s make the best of it.”

Martha put down her plate and came over to give me a hug. “Montana, we likely owe our lives and little Davey’s to you. You go with God.”

“I’ll do that, ma’am. You, too.”

I’d already saddled Spirit up, so it was just a matter of jumping on and moving out. Nice folks...I wondered if I had actually saved their lives. It was hard to believe that could be the case, but he was in a real fix with no way to lift that axel up, and, given the weather, they might have been there a long time before any other help came along. Mother also used to say, “God works in mysterious ways.” I’d found that to be true a lot lately. Either way, it was back to me and Spirit and puttin’ ground behind us.

Chapter 3

Bighorn Lake isn't really a lake at all. It's mostly just a wide section of the Bighorn River. The Bighorn starts up near the Canadian border where the Yellowstone runs out of Lake Sakakawea. Just north of Hillsboro, the lake goes back to bein' a river again, and trails through some pretty rough hill country as it moves south into Wyoming. To see it *there*, you'd think it never had flat land around it, but thirty miles north of Hillsboro the land drops down and flattens out. My folks settled there mostly by accident. The war had just ended and my folks were just married. They left Ohio and joined a wagon train in Omaha to seek their fortune out west. Now, Bighorn Lake isn't a typical wagon train stop and I've heard a few stories about how it got there, but however it happened, their journey ended there. My mother told us there'd been some sort of argument between the new wagonmaster and my father about directions. My father always maintained it wasn't his fault, but they decided to part ways and my folks set up a small farm in the bottom-land. That's where Mary and I were born. We grew potatoes,

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wheat and barley, but mostly potatoes. Our closest neighbors were a local tribe of Cheyenne who didn't mind us at all. They hunted buffalo and we farmed. They traded us meat for potatoes and we got along fine. It was near three full years now that I'd been gone and, as cold as I was, it my desire to get home that kept us going.

We'd been traveling for over two weeks now and both of us were exhausted. The snow stopped the morning we left Jesse's camp and, other than a few flakes in the air from time to time, it never really started up again. The weather cleared but it got colder, too. Now the sun was getting low in the sky and, if memory served me right, we were half an hour outside Hillsboro.

Hillsboro is still in the mountains, but it's the closest town to home. I wished we could stop there and rest, but that would put us only another hour or two out, and I was more worried than ever about Mary's telegram.

As Spirit and I came into town, I could already see changes. Three years ago Hillsboro wasn't much more than a hotel and saloon, where the cowboys off the old ML Ranch spent their pay. Now I saw a church and a dozen new storefronts on Main Street. I figured the ML Ranch still owned most the land around and was likely still the biggest employer in the area, but I was seeing people on the street that didn't look like ranch folk. When we passed by a livery, I decided to take a

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break and get Spirit some food and water before we started our last stretch.

It was getting real dark and brutal cold and I needed to warm up a little myself. I figured it'd be a good time to, while Spirit was feeding. I left him with the liveryman, grabbed my saddlebag and started up toward the hotel where he said I could get a warm meal. I was still looking around at all the new buildings when a shot rang out up the street. In the dim light I saw a man run out of what looked like a saloon and jump on his horse. Right behind him came another man who leveled his rifle at the first one as he rode away.

“YOU STOP RIGHT THERE OR I’LL SHOOT YOU OFF THAT SADDLE!” he yelled. “I’M THE LAW AND I’M GIVIN’ YOU YOUR LAST WARNING!”

Seemed foolish for a man to lose his life over whatever their fight was about and the tone of his voice left little doubt that the lawman was about to kill him. As the rider raced toward me, I dropped my bags, stepped up onto a parked wagon and waited for him to pass. Just as he did, I jumped out with all my strength and tackled him right off his horse. We both hit the ground hard, with him on dirt side.

“Just hold still, mister. I don’t know what kind of trouble you’re in, but I think I just saved your life.”

“Lemme go. He’s gonna kill me.”

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“Now, take it easy. He *was* gonna kill you. Now that you’ve stopped runnin’ I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, mister. Get him up.” I turned to see the lawman coming up fast...still with the rifle in his hand.

“I heard you yelling from down here and when I heard you were the law, I thought I’d just help out a little,” I said.

“Well, I’m beholdin’ to ya, son. You just step away now and I’ll take it from here.”

Now on his feet, I got a better look at who I’d just taken down. He was just a boy...younger than me, maybe fifteen. I wonder’d what he’d done.

By now the lawman had been joined by two others wearing badges and they grabbed the boy up and began dragging him back up the street. The boy stopped resisting and was just moving along with ‘em. About forty feet away, I saw the first lawman lift his rifle and smash it into the boy’s back. He started to do it again when one of the other’s stopped him. “Not out here. Wait ‘til we get him inside.”

A cold shiver ran down my back. They weren’t acting much like lawmen. Suddenly my desire to help, turned to concern for the boy. In another moment, they were out of sight.

I tried to put it out of my mind as I gathered up my saddlebag and hat and continued up the street. The lights were bright coming out of the saloon where I saw chase start, so I saw no reason to go

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any farther. I didn't want to spend too much time here and the closer to the livery I could eat, the better. I climbed on the porch and pushed the swinging doors open, ready to put it behind me and take my long overdue break.

As soon as my eyes adjusted to the light, I could see that the saloon was a lot bigger than it looked from the street. It was deep and high – two stories high. There were tables in the front and a big bar that wrapped around the left side and across the back. Behind the bar were mirrors and glass shelves that reflected the lamp light back into the main room. The stairs were off on the right and went up to a row of doors on the floor above the bar. There were dozens of people laughing and carrying on like nothing had happened at all. This sure was different from when I was last here.

I pulled a stool up to the bar and laid my saddlebag on the floor next me. Just as I was starting to ask about food, the piano player started playing and I had to shout at the bartender, not three feet from me.

“CAN I GET SOME FOOD HERE?”

“YEAH, WHAT IS IT YOU WANT?” he yelled back.

“JUST GET ME SOMETHIN’ HOT. HOW ABOUT A STEAK AND MAYBE SOME WATER?”

He turned away as if he'd understood. I hoped he had. It didn't look like anybody at the bar was

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eating, so I spotted an empty table over in the back corner and headed that way. On the way over, one of the lawmen I'd seen on the street saw me and came over.

"Hey, aren't you the guy who stopped the Baker kid from gettin' away?"

"I suppose," I replied, turning to shake his outstretched hand. "He must have done something real bad to get handled like that."

"He did," he answered. "His pa doesn't like payin' his taxes, so he got roughed up a little last week when we went out to collect. I guess the boy thought he could do what his old man couldn't. He walked right in here and called out the sheriff. Good thing for him he turned yellow and ran when he saw us. He's lucky you stopped him or Burns would've. Anyway, thanks for the help. If you need a job, let us know. The jail is just up the street."

"No thanks," I replied. "I already have my hands full. Hey, you called him the Baker kid. Is his pa Jeb Baker?"

"That's him. Contrary old coot. He'll be the next one to fall."

"Well, thanks," I said and turned back to my table. A cold shiver ran down my back. Jeb Baker was an old friend of my father's. I never knew the family that well, but he had a spread a lot like ours, just to the west. I couldn't connect why the Baker place would be taxed by Hillsboro, nor why the law here would have to "rough him up." I was

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beginning to wonder if all that and the trouble at our ranch was connected. I guessed Sheriff Burns must have been the one with the rifle. I'd worked briefly with Sheriff Masterson in Dodge City and knew enough to respect the law, but I never saw lawmen act like this. I still didn't know what the problem was out at our ranch, but I already didn't like what was going on in town.

A few minutes later my steak and water came and I dug right in. I'd been at it for a few minutes when I looked up to see a bar girl standing in front of me.

"Can I get you a drink, cowboy?"

"No thanks, ma'm. I already have one."

"I mean a real drink," she replied.

"Thanks anyway, ma'm, but I'm fine with the water."

"That was some trick you pulled out in the street?"

It wasn't clear to me how she knew about that, but evidently she did.

"Wasn't much. I like to help the law when I can," I answered.

"You ought to be careful about helpin' *this law* out too much," she replied, then turned and walked away.

I wasn't sure what she meant, but her short comment described real well what I was already thinking. I wished she'd stuck around so I could have her explain better, but she didn't, and it looked to be quite deliberate. I suppose it wasn't

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too healthy to talk down the local lawmen in public. I finished my steak, left two dollars on the table and headed out. It was gonna to be a hard couple of hours ride down the canyon in the dark and, whatever I was to find at our ranch, I wanted to get it over with.

The next two hours seemed to take forever. I noticed the trail hadn't improved any and working our way down to lake level on those rocky switchbacks was tough enough in the sunlight... and the temperature was dropping again. It should've been higher at the lower altitude of the lake, but didn't seem to be. The Bighorn Lake winter had surely set in.

By the time I found the ranch, there wasn't even star light to light my way. There was, however, firelight shining through our big sitting room window and it brought me in like a moth to a flame.

I couldn't wait to put Spirit away proper, so I threw his reins over the front rail and walked to the door. I wanted to rush right in, but was afraid I'd scare the family this late at night, so, funny as it felt, I knocked just like any other visitor.

The first voice I heard was Mary's. "I'll get it."

It was immediately followed by mother's. "Hold on. You get the rifle and I'll get the door."

Not the kind of reception I expected. A moment later the door opened a crack and my mother's eyes peered out into the dark.

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“Who’s there?”

“I was hopin’ you’d still recognize me, Ma! I haven’t been gone that long, have I?”

With that, the door pushed open and my mother just stood there and stared. I walked into the firelight and held my arms out.

“WILLIAM! MY HEAVENS, IS IT REALLY YOU?” She then fell into my outstretched arms and burst into tears.

“Mother, of course it’s me. Now don’t cry, you knew I wasn’t gone for good.” We hugged for a good long time before she backed off and took a closer look at me.

“You’ve grown! You’re taller than your father now...and real whiskers! Mary, it’s your brother and...and he’s finally come home.”

The next set of arms around me were Mary’s. “Oh I’m glad you finally made it. I was worried when the weather turned so cold.”

This time *I* stood back and took a look. Three years ago, when I left, Mary was still a girl. Now, I was looking at a young woman.

“Mary, it’s been a long time. You’ve grown, too. I hardly recognize you.”

“I don’t know if that’s a compliment or not, but I’ll take it as one. Come on in and get warm.”

“Much as I’d love to, I can’t yet. I have to tend to Spirit...my horse. He’s a real special horse and I need to get him out of the cold. Where’s father... out in the barn?”

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Neither mother nor Mary answered. That would have bothered me but I guessed that they didn't hear me with the wind howling through the door. I turned and went back out to Spirit, hoping father was out there. If he was, I didn't see him, so I walked Spirit into the barn and found him a nice stall. After stripping him of saddle and bridle, I got him some feed and carried my saddle bags back out into the cold. This time mother watched me through the window and opened the door as I got there.

"William, you get in here and warm up by the fire. Mary's warming you some food and we need to talk before you wake your father."

"What do you mean, 'wake' him? Why isn't he awake?"

"Just settle down. We need to talk first."

As much as I was glad to finally be home, my stomach was beginning to hurt. Not from hunger, either...from worrying about father. Something was wrong here and I needed to know what, fast."

"William, your father was injured last month and has been confined to bed since. He's doing better every day now and Doc Fuller says he expects him to fully recover, but for now, he's not the man you left."

"What do you mean, *injured*? How was he *injured*? Was it an accident or did somebody hurt him?"

"He can tell you about it, himself, but probably tomorrow. He needs his rest and I think it would be

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better if we didn't wake him tonight. You can go in quietly and see him if you want, but I'd like him to stay asleep. Doc says he heals while he sleeps."

Mother's words hit me like an ax hits a log, and left me feeling queasy. As soon as I could breathe again, I walked down the hall to their bedroom and slowly cracked open the door. There, on the side of the big bed, was father. He was asleep but looked fine to me except for a noticeable bruise under his right eye. After a few moments, I re-closed the door and returned to the parlor.

"Mother, I have to know what happened. That bruise on his face doesn't look like an accident to me. Looks more like somebody punched him. How did it happen?"

"Well, if you must know, we're not entirely sure. He was jumped in the dark and beaten to the ground. He didn't even get to see who did it, but believes there must have been two of them."

"I suspect he's right. Where did it happen?"

"That's the bad part, William. It happened right here on the farm. Your father's sure it was the work of Sheriff Burns...maybe not him, but some of his men."

"I don't understand. Why would the sheriff of Hillsboro want father beat up?"

"It's a longer story than I'm able to tell tonight and we may be wrong, altogether. I'd like to think we are. But, you're home and safe and exhausted. I want you to wash up and come to the table. We'll get some warm food in you and you'll get a nice

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rest in your own bed. We can talk more about this in the morning.”

As much as I needed to know more, I knew mother was right. I *was* exhausted. I decided to do what she asked and washed up. By the time I finished, Mary'd made pancakes and I must have eaten half a dozen of 'em. I slipped into my old bed about an hour later and, as troubled as I was by all the news, I must have gone right to sleep because the next thing I heard was my father's voice.

Chapter 4

“You’re taller than I remember.”

I opened my eyes to see my father standing at the foot of my bed. He still had his bedclothes on.

“Father! It’s good to be back, and I might be a *little* taller. It’s been over three years.”

“Well, now that you’re up, I’ll give you some time to get dressed and join us for an old fashioned breakfast. It’s good to see you again, son.”

With that, he turned and walked back out of my bedroom. My first reaction was, he looked okay to me, and except for that bruise on his face, I wouldn’t think he was ill at all. I got dressed and used the water in the bowl mother must have left on my dresser, to wash up. Ten minutes later we were all at the table.

Father was the first to speak. “We need to hear about your adventures. Heard you ended up in Texas. Did you get to punch cattle like you wanted?”

“More than that. I’m foreman for the ‘Ring of Fire’ ranch, outside Fort Worth. It’s a big ranch and a big job. We’ve got over a thousand head of cattle and I’ve got over a dozen men. But I need to

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know more about what's been happening around here...and how you got that bruise on your face.”

“Oh, I don't want you to get all riled up about that. I just got jumped in dark about a month ago while I was buttoning up the barn for the night. Probably some drifters just looking for food. One got me from behind and the other hit me in the face on my way down. Unfortunately, I landed on a stump. I know I still carry the bruise on my face, but it's my back that's kept me down. I'm getting better everyday now, though, and I don't want you to get too concerned about it.”

“Now Jacob, I already told him that you suspect the sheriff's men. Don't you tell stories to William. He deserves to hear the truth.”

Before he could respond, I jumped in. “I had the chance to meet your Sheriff Burns last night, on the way in. I was cold and tired and needed break before startin' down the canyon. I'd just put Spirit up and was walking up the street when I heard a shot up near one of the saloons. From a distance I could see somebody run out and jump on their horse, headin' my way. I'd have left him alone except another man ran out behind him, announced he was the law and leveled his Winchester at him. I figured I just might save his life by knockin' him off his horse as he went by.”

Mary, intently listening, couldn't wait for the story to unfold on its own. “Well, did you get him?”

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“Sure did. I jumped from out of the dark and knocked him right off his horse...probably just before he got himself shot. Turns out it was you’re your Sheriff Burns who’d been after him and he and two other deputies took him away. Funny thing, though. As they led him away, one of ‘em smacked him with his rifle butt. Didn’t seem to be any cause for it. Later, in the saloon, one of the deputies saw me takin’ a break and came over. He said if I needed a job, to come see ‘em.”

“I’m sorry, son. I hoped to keep you out of this. Burns isn’t a good sheriff and his ‘deputies’ are worse. They’re bullies and they’ve been bullying a lot of the farmers and ranchers in the county for taxes. But, it isn’t Burns. He’s just a stooge for Kane. Anyway, who’s Spirit?”

“Who’s Kane?” I replied.

“Martin Kane. He showed up around here just about the time you left. He’s a banker, or at least that’s what he passes himself off as. He must have money because, right away, he bought the bank in town. At first a lot of people thought it was a good thing. We’d just come off a dry year and Kane started loaning out money -- lots of money. I never liked the smell of it so we just tightened out belts and didn’t get involved, but a lot of folks weren’t so smart and borrowed on their farms. About a year later he started calling the loans in. That was just after he got himself elected mayor. Now he owns half the town and half the property in the county. It’s pretty clear he wants more of it, too, so

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he and his buddies passed a land tax. Like I said, I wasn't involved in his loan business, but he's taxing the rest of us for the land we already own."

"That doesn't sound legal. Have you contacted the U. S. Marshal's office?" I asked.

"We tried, but the marshal's office is in Butte and we don't see one out here very often. Anyway, Jim Kelly's son is a lawyer in Dakota and when he visited his folks last year, Jim sent him to Hillsboro where he looked up the paperwork. He said Kane's transactions looked legal. Just after that, Kane appointed Burns sheriff, and Burns has been his muscle ever since. If it weren't for his taxes, we'd have nothing to do with any of 'em. How is it that you just decided to come home in the middle of all this?"

His question caught me off guard. Apparently, Mary hadn't told them about the telegram. "Spirit's my horse."

"Billy, I do believe you're evading my question," he replied.

"I just thought it was about time...and I see it is."

"Now, son, I want you to stay out of this. The taxes aren't that much and we had a good growing season. We'll pay 'em and keep Kane and his people off our backs. I need you to stay out of it. Now, tell me more about this ranch in Texas."

I could see father didn't want to talk any more about *his* problems, so I spent the next hour taking all of them through my last three years. After that,

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father went back to his room to rest and I went outside for some fresh air, and to check up on Spirit.

I'd been out in the barn about ten minutes when I was joined by Mary. "Thanks for not telling on me."

"I can see why you didn't tell them about the telegram. I also see he's more troubled than he's letting on."

"Right after you left Texas, I received a telegram back from a Doctor Winters at your ranch. He said that you got the telegram I sent and were on your way up home. I must admit, it was a relief. I don't think father can handle men like these. This time he was just beat up. Next time, they might kill him... like they did Mr. Potter."

"Mary, do you mean old man Potter who owned the pond?"

"Yes. He was found shot to death off the side of the trail about two months ago. The sheriff never found who did it but Mr. Potter had refused to pay his taxes and most of us suspect Kane was at the bottom of it. Right after that, more of the local farmers started paying. Father held out and look what happened to him. There's also been a rash of suspicious fires and livestock kills. I'm afraid."

"This is more serious than I thought. Mary, keep all this between you and me for now, but I'm going back to Hillsboro tomorrow and look into this some more."

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Right then we heard a horse come in the yard. I reached for my Winchester that was still strapped to my saddlebags.

“You won’t need that, Billy,” Mary said, walking toward the barn door. “It’s just Josh. He’s been helping around here since father was hurt.”

The barn doors opened and in walked a big, brown stallion with my old friend Josh Dillon sitting high on top.

“WELL IF IT ISN’T THE FAMOUS BILLY RITTER, AND ALL GROW’D UP, TOO! MIGHTY NICE OF YOU TO TAKE TIME OUT OF YOUR BUSY SCHEDULE TO LOOK IN ON US POOR FOLK!”

“If it wasn’t for Mary bein’ here, I’d drop you off that mule and beat you to the ground...just like the old days!”

“You might be able to do that, Billy, but bring your lunch...it’ll take you all day!”

Josh jumped off his horse and grabbed me in the biggest bear hug I’ve had since I left.

“Great to see you, Billy. How about tellin’ me what you’ve been up to?”

“I’d like to hear more of that, myself,” added Mary.

“Seems like we *do* need to talk,” I replied. “Pull up a stool and I’ll go first.”

I gave Josh a quick run-through of my last three years but hurried it up so I could stop talking and start listening to how Josh would explain what’d been going on around here.

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“So, after all that, Spirit and I came down the canyon in the dark and got here late last night. I could add a lot to my time out on the trail, and will later, but for now, I want to hear more about this sheriff and his new taxes. Incidentally, what brings you out here on this cold mornin’? You couldn’t have known I was here.”

Josh took his hat off and scratched his head. “Now that’s a pretty long story, too, but it’s not as fun as yours. Your mom asked me to help out around here after your father got hurt. I came to feed your stock and get a few bags of potatoes out for next week’s grub. I reckon with you here, I’m probably fired. Sure you want to know more?”

“Josh, I wasn’t even home yet when I saw a neighbor roughed up for no good reason and my own father’s laid up in the house with a near broken back and a powerful bruise on his face. I sure want to know what happened to our peaceful little valley. How do you figure all this?”

Josh stood up and started pacing on the barn floor. “I guess we’re goin’ through the same trouble you are. My father hasn’t paid the land tax yet either, and it’s only a matter of time before Burns and his boys use their badges against us, too. I don’t know how they’re goin’ about it. Maybe we’re next. All I know is that we have to stop ‘em, somehow. From what you just said, it’s comin’ to a head sooner than later if they keep Kyle in jail.”

Mary’d been quiet all the time we were talking, but on hearing that name, her eyes lit up and she

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jumped from up from the barrel she'd been sitting on.

“KYLE! I didn't hear you say it was Kyle. Kyle's my...friend. Did they hurt him, Billy? I've got to go see him...”

“Hey, settle down little sister. I didn't say his name 'cause I didn't know it. All I was told that he was Jeb Baker's boy. Never knew him very well and didn't recognize him...and you're not goin' anywhere. Those are real dangerous men and if there's one thing I've learned over the past three years, it's to not jump into situations like this without a good plan. Anyway, why's this Kyle Baker stir you up so? You aren't sweet on him, are you?”

Mary's temper exploded and she stomped over and gave me a hard punch in the shoulder. “Not that it's any business of yours, but he's a friend from school...and I'm not going to forgive you for turning him into that mean Sheriff Burns.”

At that, Josh sat back down and responded. “Mary, it's probably none of my business, but I reckon you ought to be thankin' your big brother for that one. If it hadn't been for old Billy, here, I'm sure the next time you saw Kyle, it'd be at his funeral.”

His words caught Mary off-guard and she stood motionless while her eyes welled up with tears. After more than a few uncomfortable seconds, she walked over and hugged me again. “I'm sorry,

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Billy. Josh's right. If it hadn't been for you, they'd of probably killed him."

With that, she ran back out of the barn, toward the house.

"Mighty spooky, that sister of yours. But I think you got it right – she's sweet on him alright."

"All the more reason why we need to get to Jeb Baker quick, before he does something that makes all this even harder to fix. Let's go inside and talk it over with my father. Maybe he'll see his way to help us."

"I don't want you gettin' involved, Billy. It's enough that you came home to see us. I want you to forget all this trouble and just relax. From what you tell us about your job in Texas, I suspect you're just visiting anyway, so I want you to take it easy and put a few pounds on that beat-up body of yours."

"Father, you're right on one count...I am visiting, but I promise you I'm not going back to Texas until Sheriff Burns and this Kane fella get off your back and the backs of our neighbors. I've learned that there are bad men in the world and that they usually don't go away on their own. They need a push, and I'm telling you right here and now, you can help me in pushin' them out, or not. Either way, I'm doin' it. I told you I worked with the law for a while in Dodge City. Well, it wasn't just the 'law.' I worked with Bat Masterson's brother Jim, and I learned how to take care of

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myself. I'm not the same boy that left here. Either we'll get help from the real law, or we'll become the real law. And, I can get help if we need it. I've worked with men that could crush Kane and Burns like cheap cigars. I'd rather do it the easy way, but I need to know if you're with me or not."

I wasn't used to talking back to my father and even while my words were working their way out my mouth, I felt bad that it had to come to this. He was my father and I would always love and respect him, but I couldn't let this go on, and he had to know it. I just hoped he wouldn't be too offended.

He stood there, near a full minute, just staring at me. Josh, too. It was beginning to seem like I was the only one that felt that way. Then he turned, sat back down in his big chair, and spoke.

"I'm sorry, son. I guess I hadn't considered that you're all grown up now. Foreman, lawman, I don't know all that you've done or been through, but I see I'm not talking to the boy that left here three years ago. I see I'm talking to a man, and one that makes some sense. We can't keep pretending that Kane and Burns will go away on their own. They're using the law to break it and getting rich in the process. Now, I'm not signing up yet to whatever you want to do, but I'm willing to listen. Let's let the ladies go about their work in the kitchen and you can tell me what you've got in mind."

I could finally breathe again. He took it the right way. Problem was that I didn't *have* a good plan

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yet. I had some ideas, but being that I wasn't as close to it all as father and Josh were, I really needed their help. After mother and Mary'd left the room, we sat down and talked for over an hour. While father and Josh shared what they knew about the trouble, it became clear to me that the center of the problem wasn't Sheriff Burns – it was Kane, and he was using the law against us. I also began to see why that lawyer father talked about earlier, said we'd have trouble using the law to stop him. It surely was a puzzle.

“Billy,” Josh jumped in, “when you met up with Burns and his deputy, did they know who you were...I mean who your father was?”

“No, I don't think so. They never asked and I never told 'em. Didn't seem like any of their business.”

Right then it came to me. I knew what Josh was poking at. Since they didn't know who I was and kinda' offered me a job, I might be able to use their offer to get on the inside. That could put me in position to gather the evidence we'd need to bust 'em. I knew it'd be dangerous and that father likely wouldn't go along with it, but I had to try. The big question was, how would I get it by my family? I looked at Josh and he was looking right back at me. It was pretty clear we were thinking the same thing.

“Well, son, what do you think? Can we make a case to the U.S. Marshal in Butte?”

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“I don’t think there’s a case to make yet, but we *do* need to get the U.S. Marshal involved. Who is our marshal now?”

“Haven’t met him,” father replied, “but I read in the Hillsboro paper a while ago that there’s a new one. I almost remember his name...Prescott, Preston or something like that. We’d have to check it out.”

“I can do that,” replied Josh. “They do know me, so I’ll have to be careful, but I can get to Hillsboro tomorrow and check it out at the newspaper office.”

“Let’s start with that,” I said. “We need to go slow and be careful...one step at a time. While you’re in town, see if you can find out what became of Kyle. Mary seems to be fond of him and I’d like to be able to put her mind at ease. In the meantime, I’ll go back to town tomorrow, myself. They really don’t know me, so I can move around with little attention. Father, you’ll have to see to it that mother doesn’t worry. It’s best that she just thinks I’m just lookin’ around.”

“I agree,” he replied, “but *I’ll* worry, so don’t get too close to trouble while you’re lookin’.”

“That’s a deal. What do you say we sample some more home cooking? It’s been quite a while for me and, as you said, I could use to put some weight back on.”

Chapter 5

Mayor Martin Kane was sitting quietly at his desk when three hard knocks on his door broke the silence. All business, the mayor was an intense man with a fondness for expensive suits. A little behind in his paperwork, he was hoping for some quiet time, but that wasn't to be.

"Who is it?"

"Me, boss...Burns."

"Come on in and close the door behind you."

Nick Burns did as instructed and took a seat on the wooden bench in front of the desk. While the Mayor continued to focus on his papers and ignore him, Burns lit a cigar and put his boots up on a solid brass trash bucket next to the desk. After a long moment, the mayor looked up.

"Now, get your feet off that basket and butt the cigar. Where do you think you are? And, what do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?"

The sheriff stood up and tossed his just-lit cigar in the same bucket.

"I came to ask what you want us to do with the Baker kid. He was mouthin' off last night and one

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of my deputies slapped him around a little, but we can't keep him forever without charges. What do you want me to charge him with?"

"You know, Burns...that's what I pay you for. Do I have to run the sheriff's office, too? I don't know. He trespassed in my saloon and called you out. Isn't that some kind of assault?"

"Might be, but there were a lot of witnesses and he never pulled his gun. The circuit judge would probably reduce or dismiss it altogether. Of course, he could try to escape and get shot in the process."

"I don't know. We have enough trouble with those farmers. If the kid got shot in custody, it'd set 'em against us even more than they already are. Keep him in the cooler a while longer and let me think about it. Is that it?"

"Actually, it's not. We have another problem. One of the deputies had to go back to Wyoming for some family business. We're runnin' awful thin if you expect me to sheriff the whole county and collect taxes, too. I think we need a few more men."

Kane looked back up from his papers and thought a minute. "You'd have to get them from out of town, again. I don't think we could trust any of the locals. I don't have a problem if you hire a few more, but you gotta be careful where you get them."

"I got some ideas. Let me get to work on it," Burns replied, and picked up his hat to leave.

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“You do that,” was all Kane had to say as he turned back to his paperwork.

It was mid-day and I already felt guilty about sitting around the farm. As much as I loved being home, I was used to keeping busy and I didn’t “sit” well. Mother made father take a nap after lunch and I decided to take Spirit out for a ride. I thought we might mosey over to the Baker place. I told mother and Mary I was just gonna check out our fence lines.

Spirit was restless, too. When I got to the barn I saw he’d already escaped his stall and found the oat bag. My old friend was very predictable. If there were oats to be found, he’d find ‘em. I had to take the bag away before he stuffed himself.

“That’s enough, Spirit. If I don’t get you out for a run, you’ll be so fat you’ll have to ride me!”

I saddled him up and we were off. The light snow from last night was still on the trees and bushes, and it made the farm look brighter than the overcast justified. I’d forgotten how much I missed the old place. On the way out the drive, I passed by the old oak with the swing still hanging from it. Mary and I spent many the hours on that swing when we were little. It bothered me that she was so upset about her friend, Kyle. I knew it’d take me near an hour to get over to the Baker place, but I also knew it was important I got there as fast as possible. Out on the main trail, I gave Spirit my heels and let him do his thing.

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An hour later we arrived at Jeb Baker's farm. The first thing I noticed was that there were no tracks on his drive. That plus the smoke coming out his chimney, told me I probably got there in time. It was still cold, so I had my scarf high up around my neck. Just as I dismounted, I heard the door open and a rifle cock.

“WHATEVER YOU WANT OUT HERE, WE DON'T HAVE IT. GET BACK ON YOUR HORSE AND RIDE OUT THE SAME WAY YOU RODE IN.”

It was a woman's voice. I turned to see a Winchester pointed out the door, aimed right at my head. Real slow-like, I raised both arms and turned to face her.

“Now, take it easy, ma'am. I'm not one of the bad guys. I'm Jake Ritter's boy and I'm here to help.”

I stood there for another twenty seconds in silence. Then, I slowly lowered my arms and, with them, my scarf.

“Sorry, son. You can come on in,” she answered. The door opened the rest of the way, and she came out. “I didn't know you were still around these parts. Heard you left Bighorn Lake for good.”

I made it to the door and followed her in the house. Inside was a large parlor with a big fireplace on the far wall. The fire was barely lit and the house was cold.

“Sit yourself down,” she said. “What'd you say your name was?”

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“Montana...I mean William. My real name is William Ritter, but most folks call me Montana.”

“You sit there and warm up, young Montana. How about some warm cider. Julie, bring Montana a cup of cider and don’t wake your father. He needs his sleep.”

By the time I had my slicker off, a girl about my age had entered the room and handed me a cup.

“Be careful, it’s hot,” she said as the cup transferred between our hands.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but I don’t remember your... are you Kyle’s sister?”

“You really know how to impress a girl,” she replied. “Maybe the last time you saw me I was a little younger, but yes, I’m Kyle’s sister. He’s two years my junior. I remember *you* from the fair, maybe four years ago. You won a blue ribbon with that big hog of yours. What brings you out here?”

“I was just about to ask the same thing,” added Mrs. Baker. You said you were here to help us. Is it about Kyle? He didn’t come home last night and we’re worried sick.”

It struck me that I knew more about Kyle’s whereabouts than they did. “Well, in a way, yes ma’am. But, I think I ought to be talking to Mr. Baker, too. Is he here?”

“Goodness, yes. He’s still laid up in bed after those deputies nearly beat him to death. He’s asleep and Doc says he needs all the sleep he can get, so you go on and tell us what you know. Kyle left here yesterday afternoon with fire in his eye

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and his rifle. I'm afraid he got himself into trouble...did he?"

"Yes ma'am, he did. I think he's okay, but he went into Hillsboro last night and called out the sheriff. Near got himself shot. I was just coming through town when I saw him running away. I'd have let him alone except for the sheriff. He had him in his sights and was just about to shoot him in the back. I didn't know what the problem was and didn't recognize him in the dark, but I didn't want to see him shot on the streets either, so I tackled him. They arrested him and it wasn't until I got home later last night that I found out about Sheriff Burns and his men. I'm awful sorry about it, but I think I might have saved his life."

Mrs. Baker broke down and fell into the big chair next to where she'd been standing. While she was catching her breath, the girl, Julie, spoke again. "You may not know it, Montana, but Kyle's sweet on your sister. I'll bet she was as upset as we are."

"I didn't know that either, until my friend Josh came by and I mentioned it. You're right. She was real upset to hear of it, too. That's one reason I'm visiting today. I really think Mr. Baker ought to be joining us while we talk more about it."

"I do, too," came from a man's voice behind me. I turned to see Mr. Baker – a little hunched over and holding the wall for support.

"Jeb, what are you doing up? Doc told you to stay in bed. We'll take care of this."

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“Not a chance,” he replied and carefully made it over to a bench, where he gently set himself down. “I thank you for comin’ over to tell us, but I’ve got to go into town and see what I can do about getting that boy out.”

“If you’ll pardon me, Mr. Baker, you don’t look well enough to make it. I’d like to do it for you, but I’m here to ask you for your help in a different way.”

“You’re probably right, son, but I don’t trust Burns as far as I could throw him. Kyle’s in trouble and we need to help.”

“I thought about that all last night and I think I have a plan,” I explained.

“Jeb, you sit right there and listen to the boy. Anything’s better than riding in there and gettin’ yourself busted up, again,” Mrs. Baker declared. “What exactly are you proposing, Montana?”

I took another sip of cider and began. “Turns out when all that was happening in town last night, I never told Burns or his men who I was. I don’t think anybody else there recognized me, either. Also, while I was warming up just before making the final trip out to our place, one of the deputies mentioned that they might have a job for me.”

“A job! Why would you even consider working for those outlaws? Julie exclaimed.

“Let the boy talk,” replied Mr. Baker.

“Anyway, I was talking this all over with my father and friend this morning, and it sounds to me like Mayor Kane is behind it all, and he’s got

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himself pretty much wrapped up in the law. Stopping him is going to take more than a trip to town. We'll need to know more about his operation."

"You make some sense," replied Mr. Baker, "but it sounds dangerous. What do your folks think about it?"

"My father would rather see me stay out of it, but I really don't see any other way."

Mr. Baker got up from his bench and looked me in the eye. "Well, son, what do you want from me?"

"I just need you to give me some time to work on getting Kyle out, myself. Also, you all need to keep quiet about who I am and what I'm doing. If Burns finds out that I'm Jake Ritter's son, I'd be done for. That's all I can think of for now, but there might be more later."

"I don't understand exactly what you have in mind, Montana, but if you think you could get Kyle back here sooner than I could, I'm willing to let you try. Though, if he's not back here in a few days, I'll have to do something on my own, understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do. And if a few days go by and I'm not making any progress, I'll let you know one way or another."

"It's worth a try," he said, "but the clock's ticking."

"Mr. and Mrs. Baker, I know how important getting Kyle back is to you. Just give me some

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time and let me see what I can do. We might just find a way to deal with Burns and Kane in the process.”

“You go with God, Montana,” Mrs. Baker said. “Are you sure we can’t get you something to eat?”

“I’d like that, ma’am, but I think it’s more important that I get back to our farm before I’m missed. Thank you anyway and it was nice to finally meet you all.”

Julie followed me out the door to the porch. “Montana, as you can see, father isn’t up to dealing with much of this. If you need another pair of hands, just let me know. Remember, I can ride as fast as any boy in the valley and I can shoot, too. I’d just like the chance to get the man who beat up father in my sights.”

“Thanks, Julie. I’m hoping I don’t need much help, but it’s good to know it’s there if I do. You know, I’m beginning to remember, now. Seems there *was* a little girl at that fair who, as I recall, entered one of the shooting contests. She was a lot littler than you, though.”

Julie turned back toward the door and, as she slipped inside, answered. “Won it two years in a row!”

It was time for Spirit and me to get back the farm, but, as I rode through the cold wind, I couldn’t help picturing how pretty Julie was. If that was the same girl I remembered from the fair, she’d done a lot of growing the past three years.

Chapter 6

Father understood what I had to do. He didn't like it, but he understood. Mother would be a different matter, though. To her, I'd always be "little Billie". But it was Monday morning and I was on my way into town. All mother knew was that I was looking for work to tide me over while I was home. I suppose that was mostly true. What she didn't know was that I was looking for work with the sheriff.

The cold, gray weather was back and the ride into Hillsboro took longer than I'd hoped. Spirit and I got there mid-morning and we headed straight for the jail. When I walked in, there were three deputies there talking. The one I'd run into Saturday night was there and he recognized me.

"What'd you do, cowboy? Think about what I said the other night?"

Since I'd already interrupted their conversation, I answered. "Matter of fact, I did. Not much other work around here with winter comin' on. Thought maybe I'd look into it."

One of the others spoke. "Who's this, Ed?"

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“This here’s the boy that knocked the Baker kid off his horse the other night. Did a right fine job of it, too.”

“You might be just in time, kid,” another one said. “Just might be we have an opening.”

“That sounds good,” I replied, “but I’d appreciate you not calling me *kid*. Name’s Montana.”

“Well, I’ll be,” he answered with a smart tone that begged for a slap. “I reckon you need to talk to Sheriff Burns, *Mister* Montana.”

“Montana will do, thanks. Where is he?”

The one I’d met earlier responded. “Take it easy, Montana. He should be here any minute now. We’re all waitin’ on him.”

Just then, the door opened behind me and Sheriff Burns walked in. He took a quick glance at me, kind of like he recognized me, then walked toward his men.”

“What am I paying you all for? Just sittin’ around the jail...all watchin’ one kid?”

He continued walking right through into his office, but left the office door open behind him. The three deputies followed him in and closed the door, leaving me alone in the outer office. I decided to let things move at their own pace and stayed put. Some five minutes later the voices stopped, the office door opened and the three deputies walked back out. As they made their way to the outer door,

the one I’d previously met turned and yelled back. “Hey, sheriff! I forgot to tell you. This kid...or

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guy...out here is lookin' for work." With that, he too, disappeared out the door.

A moment later Sheriff Burns appeared at his office door. "You look familiar, cowboy. Where do I know you from?"

"Name's Montana, sheriff. I believe you and I met Saturday night when I stopped that boy from ridin' away down Main Street."

"That's where. I knew I'd seen you before. What can I do for you? You really looking for work?"

"Yes, sir. I heard tell you might have work for a good hand."

"Could be. You ever worked with the law before?"

"I have -- down in Dodge City last year. Worked with Sheriff Masterson for a few months while I was between drives," I answered.

"Is that where you're from...Kansas?"

"Not really, but I've been living in Texas. Just got in the night we met."

He sat back down in his chair and paused a moment before he spoke again. "How partial are you to the folks around here, if you don't mind me askin'?"

"Not much. Don't know many. Only the second time I've been up here."

"Why are you here?"

"Things were gettin' a little hot down Texas way. Thought I could use a change of scenery. Why do you ask?"

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“Have a seat, Montana. Our mayor here is a man named Martin Kane and he’s got some pretty strong opinions about how to run a county. Last year he passed a land tax on the locals and a lot of ‘em don’t like it. They need a lot of...let’s say persuading. If you were partial to these folks, you could get caught up in it. One of the jobs the deputies do is help out with the collections, when it’s necessary. Do you think you could do that?”

“Well, sheriff, if it’s all part of the job and you’re payin’ me to do it, I reckon I wouldn’t have any trouble with it.”

“I see you’re not wearing a gun. I suppose you have one and know how to use it?”

“Yes, sir. Just didn’t think I needed it in here. Does that mean you got a job for me?”

“Could be, but all the other deputies are new to town. Tell you what. I’ll hire you in a special capacity for a while...just ‘till we get used to one another. Kinda part-time like. Pay’s \$60 a month and you do what I tell you. How’s that?”

“Sounds good to me, sheriff. When do I start?”

“How about right now? That kid you took down the other night...we’re still holdin’ him. Not sure what to do with him. If I thought he was gonna continue to be a problem, I’d keep him, or maybe hang him. But, if we hang him, we’ll just stir up the locals even more and I can’t see any good comin’ from that. Still, if I just cut him loose, I’m afraid he might keep causin’ trouble. You’re not

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much older than he is. Maybe you could sound him out and let me know what you think.”

“I’ll try, sheriff. Where did you say he was?”

Sheriff Burns pulled a ring of keys out of his drawer and threw them to me.

“You’ll need the silver one to get through the big door back there. I’ll be out here if you need anything.”

This was perfect. It looked like I could get on the inside with the sheriff and, maybe, talk him into lettin’ Kyle go. The only question remained, how much of this should I share with Kyle? On my way back to the cells, I decided to share as little as possible...at least for now.

Once through the big door, I entered a hallway with three cells on each side. There was only one prisoner there, and he seemed to be asleep.

“GET UP, GET UP! I DON’T HAVE ALL DAY.”

The boy rolled over and the bruises on his face came into full view. They reminded me of my father’s – probably put on him by the same man. I started to get hot, but knew I had to keep calm for the sheriff’s sake.

“Yeah? What do you want?” he answered.

“Listen, I’m not here to beat on you. I’m here to help you out. Get over to the door here and let me get a good look at you.” He got up and walked over to the bars.

John E. Richman

The more I looked, the worse he looked, but the good news was, he didn't seem to recognize me.

"How are *you* gonna help me? And why?"

"I'm gonna talk to you a minute and see if we can save you from gettin' yourself hung."

"I might be interested in that. What do you want from me?" he replied.

"Just one thing. If you promise me you'll stay out of town and away from the sheriff and his deputies, and not cause any more trouble, I think I can get them to let you go. It's as simple as that."

"That's not so easy," he answered. "Burns and his gang beat my father to a pulp tryin' to squeeze taxes out of him for just living on our own farm. What do you expect me to do? Just sit by and watch 'em kill him? That's askin' a lot, mister."

"Name's Montana, and I know it is. But do you think your family would be any better off if you keep it up and end up on the end of a rope out there in the yard?"

"I don't know. I suppose not," he answered, dropping his chin to his chest.

"Listen, I may work for Burns and I know that makes me one of the bad guys, but I saved you from gettin' killed Saturday night and I'm here to do it again if you just do what I say."

On hearing me out, he looked back up and studied my face. "That's where I saw you before. You're the one who got me arrested!"

"You're right. What you don't know is that Sheriff Burns had you in his sights as you were

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ridin' out of town. If I hadn't dropped you when I did, he would've. But, in that case, you'd be dead."

"Maybe, but one thing about all this bothers me. Why are you doin' this for me if you're one of them? What makes me think you or one of the others won't just shoot me in the back when I walk out the door?"

"I don't care what you think, but I can tell you that's a lot more likely to happen if you don't agree to knock it off. You get me?"

"So, if I do, what now?"

"If you make me that promise, I'll go talk with the sheriff and see what I can do. Now, if you do that and break your promise, I won't be responsible. It's your neck."

"OK, I promise. But that still leaves me with tryin' to protect my father and the farm. What can you do about that?"

"Neither you nor I can do anything about that, right now, but I hear tell there's some smart people around here and if these taxes aren't legal, there's got to be a legal way to fight 'em. Understand?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

"You'll do more than try. You keep your promise and do this the right way or so help me, I'll come after you myself."

"All right, we'll try it your way," he answered as he sat back on the cot.

When I got back into the outer office, Sheriff Burns was still at his desk.

John E. Richman

“Well, how did it go? Did you make any progress with him?”

“I think so, sheriff. I told him it could go either of two ways. If he couldn’t keep out of trouble, he was likely to end up on the end of a rope. If he promised to stay out of town and out of trouble, you might let him go. I told him that it was all up to him.”

“That’s actually about right. What did he say?”

“Sheriff, he’s not happy with his father bein’ beat up and that makes a man, even a young man, real unhappy. But he also sees the value in stayin’ alive and did promise to stay out of trouble if you let him out.”

“I guess that’ll work. Good job, Montana. That solves one problem. But I’ll hold him to that promise...and I’ll hold you to it, too.”

“What do you mean, me?”

“You’re tellin’ me he’s gonna keep his distance. That’s your promise to me. If he breaks it, it’s on your head just as much as it’s on his.”

I was already starting to see why people didn’t like Sheriff Burns. I *already* didn’t.

“So...what’s next?” I asked, avoiding an argument that wouldn’t get me anywhere.

“Stick around town. Get a room at the Bradbury, if you don’t already have one. I’ll get hold of you in a day or so.” Then he looked back down at his papers and waved his arm for me to leave. That appeared to be the end of our little chat.

Chapter 7

After having checked into the hotel, I was walking Spirit down Main Street toward the same livery we'd visited Saturday night, when I heard a whistle from somewhere behind me. I turned to see Josh riding toward me.

"Billie, what are you up to?"

"It's a little complicated, Josh. Listen, we can't be talking out here in public. Ride on by and I'll meet you down at the livery in the time it takes me to walk there."

Josh nodded and continued riding out toward the west end of town. Some minutes later, Spirit and I walked into the livery yard and I put him in the corral. After a quick conversation with the livery man, I walked out the back of the barn and found Josh.

"What's up, Billie? Why all the hush-hush?"

"Josh, I need you to keep this a secret for a while, but I just got hired by the sheriff for some special deputy work," I replied in near a whisper voice.

"Holy cow! They actually hired you? Why'd you do it? What are you thinkin'?"

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“I’m thinkin’ that it’ll be a heck of a lot easier to build a case against Kane and Burns if I had better access to what they’re up to. Of course, if they find out I’m working against ‘em, they’ll, no doubt, have me on the end of a rope instead of Kyle. That’s why we can’t be seen together. Got it?”

“Oh, I get it. But you’re takin’ a big chance, with all the folks around here that know you.”

“Josh, truth is, I’ve been gone three years. I’ve done some changing in that time and there’s a lot of new faces around. I don’t think a lot of my old friends would even recognize me – not at first, anyway. I hope I’m right.”

“I hope you’re right, too, for your sake. Did you find anything out about Kyle? Do they still have him?”

“As a matter of fact, talking to Kyle was my first assignment. I think I got Burns to release him, but he’s got to stay out of trouble or they’ll hang him and maybe me too, for talking ‘em into it. Were you able to find out anything about our new marshal?”

“I’m just coming from there. His name’s Matt Preston and he’s the new U.S. Marshal for western Montana. Sounds like a tough one, too. I just read a story about how he, single handed, busted up a gang of train robbers back in Dakota. The paper said he killed five of ‘em and took the other three in.”

“Sounds like the kind of man we need around here. Where’s his office, Butte?”

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“Yeah, but he’s on the trail a lot. Sounds like he’ll be hard to locate. What do you think, Billie? Should I set out to find him?”

“Not yet,” I replied. “All we have right now is the allegation that the sheriff’s deputies are roughin’ up some of the citizens. Unfortunately, that’s not necessarily illegal, and it’s sure not unusual in these parts. If you’re gonna talk Marshal Preston into following you back to Hillsboro, we need to have a lot more for you to take to him. No, Josh, I have to do my job first. You go back home and stay there for a few days. I’ll stop out when I have something.”

“What do I say to the folks?”

“That’s a tough one. If you see mine, tell ‘em I got a job in town and I’ll stop out to see ‘em in a few days. When they ask what I’m doing, just tell them I’m working hard to get some dirt on both Kane and Burns, and that regardless of what they hear, they need to act like I’m still in Texas. The fewer people who know I’m home, the better.”

Josh lifted a foot to his stirrup and twisted around to face me. “Everybody’s gonna be askin’ about Kyle. What do want me to say?”

“I’m hoping Kyle’ll show up home by tomorrow. You’d do me a big favor if you could go over to the Baker’s and share just enough of this with ‘em so they expect him home. I was out there yesterday and they know I’m home and they also know we were gonna try to get him out. Remind them, and Kyle if he’s there, that if I get exposed I not only

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can't help them, but I probably won't be riding out of here alive."

"Got it. You take care now, Billy. You bit off a lot here. Make sure you chew it well."

Josh rode out and I stared at him until he turned the corner and out of sight. He was right. I had bit off a big chunk with this and it occurred to me that with him riding back home, there was nobody around the help me if I got into trouble. I had to keep reminding myself to think things through before I acted. The best thing I could do was to just keep my eyes and ears open and see how quick I could get the evidence we'd need to put Kane and his cronies, away...and I had to do it before they did the same to me.

I stayed around the hotel for the rest of the day like Burns had told me. Crooked as the whole thing was, this was the easiest money I'd ever made, but I didn't like the feeling.

I was reading in my room late in the evening when there was a knock on the door. Before I could answer, it flew open and one of Burn's deputies walked in.

"I'd ask you in, but I see you're already here," I said. "What do you want?"

"Sheriff sent me to come get you. He tells me you're the new deputy, so you better get crackin'. He don't like waitin'."

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I felt like telling him I didn't really care what the sheriff liked, but held my tongue and followed him out and down the stairs into the lobby.

"So, if you're the new deputy, where's your badge?" he asked.

"Sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Bert, they call me Bert."

I guess I threw him off with my response because he immediately forgot his question about my lack of a badge. I figured it was up to Burns to answer that one.

"Okay Bert," I said as we made our way out into the street. "Let's go see what he's got on his mind."

When we got to the jail, Bert opened the door and we were suddenly in a crowd. It seemed like *all* the deputies were inside. So much for his keeping my identity a secret. I wondered what'd changed.

It didn't take long for Sheriff Burns to see us come in and when he did, he called the group to order.

"OK men, settle down. We got a job to do and I want all of you with me."

About then, one of the deputies pointed me out and spoke. "Sheriff...who's this?"

"That's Montana. I hired him on yesterday as a special assistant to me. I was plannin' to keep him for special jobs, but this situation qualifies and we'll need all the hardware we can muster. So...Montana, these are your fellow deputies."

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With that, he tossed me a badge and told me to put it on. I guess I was now the law.

One of the others shouted from the rear of the room, "SHERIFF, WHAT'S SO ALL FIRED IMPORTANT TO BRING US *ALL* IN ON IT!"

Burns answered, "Seems there's a bit of a revolution goin' on up Hardin way. Five or six of the landowners outright refused to pay their taxes. We need to fix that, so I'm declaring martial law out there. We're going out there first thing in the morning and straighten this all out. Might need to burn down a place or two. Maybe even shoot somebody in the process. We'll get their attention, all right. So hit the hay early tonight. We leave at six."

I felt like speaking up, but there'd be no point. These weren't *real* law men. They were more like hired guns just working for the money and it wasn't clear what I could do about it anyway, so, for now, I'd play along and go out with 'em. Maybe there'd be some opportunity to stop 'em or, at least, curb their plans, but I'd never know unless I went, so the next step seemed pretty obvious. I had to go.

Morning came early and I'd been dreading it all night. Hardin was a little town, thirty or more miles north. It's about twice as far north of Hillsboro as our own farm. As a matter of fact, we'll have to ride through our own land, to get there. This had all the making's of a train wreck. My biggest fear was that if we were met coming

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through our land, I'd be sure to be recognized and that would be a big problem.

The weather was a problem, too. Morning dawned dark and winter-cold. Seemed like winter was coming awful early year. Just what I needed... weather problems on top of everything else. During the ride, I let my mind wander and wondered what the weather was like back down in Texas. A lot warmer, I guessed. I kinda wished I was there.

We rode hard for two hours and I was right, the sheriff led us right through the west side of our farm. Fortunately, with the cold and all, we didn't see anybody. We rode another hour before we got to the four corners of Hardin. Wasn't much there except a combination Post Office and seed store. Sheriff Burns stopped us right in front of it. He motioned us to wait outside while he went in alone. He wasn't inside more than a few seconds when he came back out with a piece of paper in his hand. He handed it to one of the deputies and got back on his horse.

“SEEMS THERE'S A MEETIN' THIS MORNING AT ONE OF THE FARMS. I THINK WE OUGHT TO MAKE A SURPRISE APPEARANCE.”

With that, he sank his heels into the side of his horse and we were off again. We didn't have far to go. I didn't know whose farm it was, but we found it in less than twenty minutes. Coming up the drive, there were four or five sets of tracks in the

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snow as well as a few wagon tracks. As we got closer to the house, we could see why. There were at least that many horses and wagons outside.

We rode up and all dismounted at the sheriff's command. Then we followed him to the door. Just as he got there, somebody opened the door from the inside, and he barged right in. The small room was already so full, most of us couldn't get in, so we had to listen from the porch.

"What are you doing on my land?" I heard one of them say.

"As sheriff, I go wherever I want, and I want to be here. You don't mind too much, do you?"

If there was a response, I didn't hear it.

"What are we meeting about? Wouldn't be about taxes, would it? Just so happens I heard that some of you folks don't think you have to pay taxes. Now, where'd you get a fool idea like that?"

Another voice from in the room spoke up. "Hillsboro can't tax us. This is Custer County. What jurisdiction gives you the right to tax *our* land?"

Then there was a thud and it sounded like somebody fell down.

"This gives me the right?" the sheriff answered. I slid up to the door and looked in to see the sheriff holding his pistol in his hand and a man on the floor in front of him."

"Now all you listen up," he continued. "I'm a sheriff, not a lawyer. If you got legal questions, get a lawyer. In the meantime, you all better start

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paying your taxes or there'll trouble around here. Sad thing, a house fire in the winter. Even sadder to see your livestock taken for unpaid taxes. Best thing for all you is to just pay when they're due...and they're due. You got until next Saturday. Those that haven't paid by then are gonna get another visit, and that'll be my last."

I could still see him through the door as he picked up an oil lamp that'd been sitting on a small table, and threw it in the fireplace. There was a flash of light as it exploded. Sheriff then came back out the door and we all had to quick move out of his way. I wanted to go back and make sure the fire didn't spread outside the fireplace, but I couldn't. We just got back on our horses and started back down the drive, toward the trail. Halfway down, sheriff stopped. He pulled his pistol out again and took aim at a milk cow that'd just come out of the barn.

CRACK! The cow fell onto the snow. Sheriff put his pistol back into his holster and, without a word, started back out to the trail.

As we rode back south toward Hillsboro, I couldn't help but think how cruel Burns was. This is hard country and particularly so in the winter. When a family loses a milk cow, there might not be any milk for the young ones. At the same time, I was glad he hadn't killed anybody, but there was no telling what he'd do next Saturday.

Chapter 8

When we got back to town, the sheriff sent me to the hotel again, apparently to await instructions. I was having a cold sarsaparilla at the hotel bar when it came to me. Certainly, the way Burns behaved up in Hardin was illegal, but again, how could I prove it to the marshal? Burns and his gang of “deputies” would deny anything the farmers said, and given the threats he was throwing around, they might not say anything at all. But, something from our trip stuck in the back of my mind. It was something I’d heard one of the farmers say. Kane *was* the mayor of Hillsboro, and Hillsboro’s in Carbon County. There’s a small marker in a field, just north of our farm that marks the line between Carbon and Custer Counties. Hardin’s in Custer County, just like that rancher’d said back in the meeting house, when he asked what gave the Hillsboro sheriff the right to take taxes from Custer County citizens. He made a good point. It got him knocked down, but it was still a good point. I’m no lawyer, but it seemed to me that Kane and Burns were over-stepping the law in taxing those folks that weren’t even in their county!

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Might be the sort of thing a U.S. Marshal could work with.

“Hey, Montana...what are you up to?”

I spun around on my stool and looked. It was another of Burns’ deputies...a young guy about my age.

“No much. How about you? That was some ride this mornin’.”

“Name’s Micah,” he said as he pulled up the stool next to me and had a seat. “How about another drink? What are you having?”

“Just sarsaparilla, and I’m fine, thanks. I was just leaving anyway,” I answered and started to get up.

“Aw, stick around for a few minutes. I gotta talk to somebody or I think my head’ll explode.”

I sat back down. “Why, what’s the problem?”

“It’s this whole thing. I like the idea of being a lawman, but I’m getting less and less comfortable about the sheriff. Picking on those folks this morning and killin’ that cow...just doesn’t seem right. I thought lawmen were supposed to uphold the law, not *break* it.”

“Maybe I will have one more glass,” I responded, now getting interested in what this boy was saying. “They’re supposed to, Micah. What we saw this morning wasn’t the law. I didn’t know there was anybody else as bothered by it as I was.”

“Most of ‘em weren’t. From what I can tell, most the other deputies are just hired guns that Burns brought in from Wyoming. They’re as bad as he is. I’m thinking about goin’ back home.”

John E. Richman

“Where is it you come from?”

“Oh, I’m from Wyoming, too, but I’m no hired gun. I’m from Laramie, where my father runs a livery. Incidentally, it was your horse that first caught my eye. He’s a beauty. What is he? Doesn’t look like a regular mustang.”

“You’ve got a good eye, Micah. He’s not. Spirit’s got Steel Dust in him. I didn’t know ‘till I got to Texas, but folks down there spotted it right off.”

“How does he run?”

“Like no other horse I’ve ever seen, but not much need to push him around here, particularly in the snow. So, Micah... if working with Sheriff Burns doesn’t suit you, how come you’re doing it?”

“Burns and some of his men put an ad in the Laramie paper that he was looking for deputies to work with him up in Montana. I was tired of working at the livery and thought it might be a good opportunity to try something else...and it seemed like it was for a while. Then all this started. Most of what we do now is just collect taxes for the mayor, and that’s gettin’ harder to do every day. The ranchers and farmers don’t like it and I can’t blame ‘em. I was just about to quit when you showed up. I saw your face when Burns shot the cow and you looked like somebody I could talk to.”

“I’m glad you did, and I agree with you completely, but I want to stick around for a while

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and see if maybe I can help.”

“Help who?” Micah asked.

“Not Burns or the mayor. I’d like to help some of the locals. They’re in a real fix with this law working against ‘em.”

Micah scratched his chin and answered. “I think I’d like to join up with you, if you thought we could really help. That’d be more like the lawman work I was hoping to find.”

“I have some ideas, but we need to go slow and be careful. There’s lots of eyes and ears around here that’d be quick to turn us in to Burns. I’d like you to keep all we’ve talked about quiet and I’d like you to stay on the job for a while longer. I think I could use your help.”

Micah smiled and got up from the stool. “You can count on it. For the first time in a week, my headache’s let up. Just let me know what you want me to do. Hey, I forgot to ask...where are *you* from, Montana?”

“Texas. Fort Worth, Texas. At least that’ll have to do for now – okay?”

“Sounds good to me. Mighty funny name for a fella from Texas, though.” He winked his eye as he turned and walked out the door.

Interesting, I thought. Now I had Josh as well as one of Burn’s own deputies working with me. I was beginning to feel a little better about this whole thing. Maybe *my* headache would be clearing soon, too.

John E. Richman

Sheriff Burns never contacted me the rest of the day, nor the next morning. By eleven, I was getting real bored and decided to walk back down to the jail. When I got there, one of the other deputies told me the sheriff had left town for a few days and wouldn't be back until Thursday. That left me with nothing to do for the next day and a half, so I decided it was time to look up Josh.

I walked back down to the livery to find Spirit had broken out of his stall and found the oat barrel again. Just as I was about to surprise him, the liveryman, came around the corner and saw the same scene. "YOU GET OUT OF THERE RIGHT NOW BEFORE I SKIN YA AND SELL YOUR SKIN TO THE INDIANS!"

"Sorry about that, Mister Kopper. He's a fine horse but loves to eat. I wouldn't be surprised if he lifted the latch on his gate by himself."

I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and yanked him away from his lunch.

"He is a smart horse, young man, and he did, indeed, lift his latch. I'll have to chain him in from now on."

"Might be a good idea. In the meantime, I'm taking him out for a ride. Should be back tonight but could be the morning. Not sure yet."

"Fine with me. Might do him some good to get out of here for a while. A horse that smart probably sees this as a jail."

"You might be right, sir. And thank's for putting up with him."

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Mister Kopper walked back out the door to continue whatever he was doing. I found Spirit's blanket and threw it over him. "Spirit, what am I gonna do with you? I know you're stuck here more than you want to be, but I can't help it right now. In the meantime, if you keep giving Mister Kopper trouble, he might throw you out and it's mighty cold out there. It'd be a lot better if you settled down. You might even lose a few pounds."

Once saddled, I hopped on and out the door we went. Yesterday's snow hadn't melted and there was a new inch on top of that. I wasn't sure if there was ice under it or not but decided to take it slow and not risk Spirit slipping. We left town heading north and took it slow down the canyon trail. As much as I wanted to stop home, I wasn't ready for all their questions, so I headed right for Josh's place. I hoped he was there and not at our's.

I was probably half a mile from Josh's folks farm when I heard rifle shots. They were spaced far enough apart that I didn't suspect trouble, but I did wonder what was going on. Riding up the drive, I could see Josh setting up bottles on a fence rail. Must be he wanted some target practice. He hadn't heard me over his own noise so, about fifty yards from the house, I dismounted and Spirit and I walked in. By the time we'd gotten close, he was already back to where he was shooting from. Before he could raise his rifle, I took aim with my Winchester and splattered his first target. He

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turned to see me back another fifty feet behind him.

“EITHER YOU GOT BETTER AT THIS SINCE YOU LEFT HOME, OR THERE’S SOMEBODY ELSE WITH YOU!” he yelled.

“I DON’T KNOW IF I GOT ANY BETTER, BUT I’M STILL AS GOOD AS I ALWAYS WAS!”

Josh put his rifle down and headed over. “What brings you here out on this cold day? I hope you’re bringin’ news that it’s time to do something. I’m getting so jumpy I just needed to come out and shoot some bottles. I like to think of ‘em as Burn’s deputies, no offense.”

“None taken...I feel the same way.”

Josh took his last shot and threw his rifle over his shoulder. “Come on in then. Pa’ll want to see you.”

I tied Spirit off at the rail and we both walked in.

“Well I’ll be,” his father said as he saw me first to enter. “I heard tell you were down Texas way, Billie. It’s good to see you. Have a seat in front of the fire. When did you get home?”

“Thanks, Mr. Dillon,” I responded as I took a seat on the bench in front of the fire. “Sure is good to get out of the cold.”

“Josh told me you were home. I’m glad you stopped by. Get’s kind of lonely out here with just Josh and me now.”

“I heard about Mrs. Dillon’s passing last year, sir. I’m awful sorry.”

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“That’s alright, Billie. She was a fine woman and left a big hole in our hearts. But she’s in a better place. She suffered somethin’ fierce toward the end.”

“I’ll miss her sweet potato pie,” I answered, not knowing what else to say. Mrs. Dillon was a wonderful lady and a great mother to Josh. She lost one child when Josh’s baby brother died of the fever some years ago. Now she’s gone, too. Didn’t seem fair.

“Me, too!” said Josh, coming out of the back room. “Ma made the best sweet potato pie in the county...maybe the state! Well, to what do we owe this visit? Are we ready to do something other than sit and wait?”

“I think we’re getting close,” I answered. “Burns is out of town for a few days, so I thought it was a good time to pull a plan together. Josh, I have a job for you, but it’s a tough one. Are you up to it?”

“You’d be surprised what I’m up to.”

“I hope you’re right,” I answered. “I think we just might have the argument we need to put Burns, Kane and the rest of ‘em out of business. In the end, it’ll be up to Marshal Preston, but I think we have a chance.”

“What is it?” Mister Dillon asked. “They’re a barrel of rattlesnakes. This better be good.”

“I think it is. Yesterday, Sheriff Burns took all of us out to a ranch up in Hardin where a group of the local folks were meeting, apparently to try to figure a way to rid themselves of Burns and his

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taxes. We stormed into their meeting and Burns, being the bum he is, threatened all of them with being burned out if they didn't pay. One of the farmers asked what jurisdiction Burns had in Custer County? The question brought him a thump on the head, but it's a good one as far as I can see. I can't, for the life of me, figure how a mayor of Hillsboro, in Carbon County, gets to tax ranchers in Custer County. Seems illegal to me. I think it's just the kind of thing we'd need to get Marshal Preston's attention."

"I didn't know this tax thing had gotten that far north. Doesn't make any sense to me, either," Josh answered. "What do you want me to do?"

"We need to get this issue before Marshal Preston. That means somebody's got to go to Butte."

Mister Dillon squirmed in this chair. "Josh, that's a long, cold ride right now. I'd rather you wait until the weather improves."

"I'm more than up to it. Weather or no weather, this needs to get done. Billie, do you suppose any of those farmers in Hardin would testify in court?"

"Don't know for sure, but I'd bet my horse on it. Burns shot one of their cows on the way out, just to intimidate 'em. I'm sure some of 'em would testify. There might even be a paper trail if any of 'em actually do pay."

"Then it's settled. I'll leave for Butte in the morning."

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“Now hold on there, Josh,” Mister Dillon spoke up. “We just lost our mother and I don’t want to lose you, too. You might want to think a while on this.”

“Pop, I have thought about it. Billie came all the way from Texas to help us and I’ll be darned if I’m not going to help him. If you were me, you’d do it.”

“I suspect you’re right, but I just can’t stand the thought of losing any more kin. You’re all I have left.”

“I’ll step out for a minute and let you two talk,” I said, and got up from the bench.

“No need, Billie,” Mister Dillon answered. “He’s right. You both are. This valley needs help and I guess it’s up to you two. I’d help myself if I was a little younger.”

“Well, there isn’t much more I can say except thanks to the both of you. Incidentally, we may have one other helper. One of the deputies sees it the same as we do. His name’s Micah and he joined Burn’s gang thinking it was real lawman work. He’s promised he’d help us and I think we could use him. In the meantime, you need to get to Butte and hope Marshal Preston’s there. If not, you might have to wait him out.”

“No problem. I’ll leave in the morning. How are you doing with Burns and the rest of ‘em?”

“I have no idea what his plans are for me, but I think it’s better for me to stay one of his deputies for the moment. It puts me in the position to learn

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more about his operations. With any luck, I might be able to uncover more evidence.”

“Sounds like you’re right,” Mister Dillon added. “What do your folks think about it?”

“Truth is, Mister Dillon, they don’t know much about it. Father knows I’m working in town and trying to get more evidence against Kane and Burns. Mother and Mary don’t even know *that* much. All they know is that I found a job in town.”

“What are you going to tell ‘em?” Josh asked.

“That’s a good question. I hate to lie, but I don’t want to worry them, either. I guess I’ll think of something...soon I hope. I’m going there now.”

“How am I gonna to get back hold of you?” Josh asked.

“I’d suggest you don’t. Let me get hold of you. In the meantime, have a safe trip.”

Mister Dillon stood up and walked me to the door with Josh. “I want both of you boys to be careful. This is serious business. I’m proud of both of you for doing what you’re doing, but I guess I’m selfish, too. I want you both back home, safe and sound.”

“You can bet on it,” I answered as I walked out the door. I knew Josh felt the same and, for the first time, I felt like I was really home.

Chapter 9

It was almost an hour later when Spirit and I got to our place. The weak November sun had already given up for the day and the lamplight in our parlor was all that got me up the drive. I figured I better check in first before the folks got to thinking it was more of Burn's men prowling around the yard. I'd come back out to put Spirit away. I opened the door to see mother and Mary sewing in front of the fire. Father was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, look who finally decided to stop back home and say hello?" Mary said, as I shook the snow off my coat.

"I suppose I deserved that. Sorry I've been gone so long. I didn't want you to worry."

"Mothers are born to worry, William," mother answered, continuing to sew, or at least look like she was.

"So," Mary continued, "what kind of job did you end up with? Last I knew, winter jobs were kind of scarce in Hillsboro."

I knew I had to answer, but I mumbled the answer under my breath, hoping that would suffice.

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“It’s nothing big. I’m just working for the town for a while.”

But, Mary wouldn’t let it go. “What do you mean, for the town? What kind of job is that?”

Now, inspired by Mary’s questioning, mother put down her sewing and looked at me, awaiting my answer.

“OK, I’m working for the sheriff, but it’s not what you think.”

“I don’t know how it couldn’t be,” replied Mary, still taking the lead in the conversation. “You’re working for the man who had father nearly beat to death?”

“Listen, it’s the only way I can get the evidence we need to get Burns, Kane and the rest of ‘em out of there. Anyway, it has it’s advantages. I was able to convince them to release Kyle.”

Mother stood up. “William, I’ve left you a pretty long rope these past few days, but I have to tell you, I’m not happy with you’re working for those men, even if it’s for the reason you say.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be, mother, that’s why I’ve been gone so long. I wasn’t looking forward to this conversation. But, you have to believe me. It’s the only way we can get rid of Burns and Kane and protect ourselves and our neighbors.”

Mother sat back down and looked like she was giving my words some thought. “I noticed Josh hasn’t been around the past few days. I don’t suppose he’s working with you?”

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“He is, but not the way you think. I’m keeping him on the outside. He’s just been doing research. As a matter of fact, we think we found the key to getting Marshal Preston interested in paying us a visit. Josh’s riding to Butte in the morning.”

“Who’s Marshal Preston?” Mary asked.

“Matthew Preston is the new U.S. Marshal for this territory. His office is in Butte.”

I’d just gotten my words out when the bedroom door opened and father was standing there in his bedclothes, looking at the three of us. “I heard you through the door. What’s this key you’re talking about?”

“Sorry, father. I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“I *was* up. Too sore to sleep. I swear if I have to stay in that bed one more day, I think I’ll put a gun to my head.”

“Now Jacob, don’t you talk like that! Doc Fuller says you need your rest and I’m here to make sure you get it. There’ll be no more talk of guns and heads! If anybody’s to put a gun to your head, it’s likely to be me, putting up with the likes of you and your son!”

“Listen, I’ll fill you in, in a few minutes. I need to go put Spirit up first. I’ll be right back.”

I was glad I’d left Spirit out. It gave me a good excuse to get out of there and get some fresh air. I knew they wouldn’t approve, but in the end, I couldn’t lie.

I took a little longer than necessary to get Spirit set for the night. I hoped the crowd in the parlor’d

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thinned some by the time I got back. I was wrong. On coming back in, all three of them had positioned themselves in front of the fire and all waiting for me. I could see this was going to be a long evening.

Over the next hour, I explained to my family all that'd happened in the past three days. Mother was clearly troubled by it, so she turned in early and made Mary go with her. That left father and me.

“All right, son, now you can tell me the truth.”

“I already did,” I answered. “What *other* truth do you want to know?”

He looked down at the floor and answered, almost under his breath. “We’re worried about you, son. I know you’re trying to help us all, and God knows, we could use it, but your mother and I don’t want you to get in over your head.”

“Father,” I replied in the same soft voice, “I’ll be fine, and, if and when I need your help, I’ll not hesitate in asking for it.”

“That’s all I needed to know. Now, who all knows about this?”

I spent the next few minutes reviewing who my contacts had been over the past few days, agreeing with him that my biggest risk was somebody I know, talking to any of the sheriff’s men. We agreed there was little likelihood of that and I hoped we were right. After our talk, it was off to bed and a surprisingly good night’s sleep. Mother

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used to say that honesty was good for the soul. I figured she was right.

The next morning I rode back to town. The wind had started to blow again and was coming up from the south. Climbing the canyon trail, I was heading straight into it. I wondered if this all would be easier if it was summertime. At least the weather wouldn't be constantly fighting me. I also worried about Josh. By mid-morning he'd be well on his way west. He was in for near a hundred mile ride in the same weather, maybe worse.

I was nearly to town when Spirit suddenly slowed down. I knew it wasn't the weather that caused it, though that wind might slow your average horse. But Spirit wasn't an average horse and I'd never seen a wind that would slow him. No, this was something else. I let him make the decisions as we poked our way out of the last canyon pass and onto a more open piece of flatland. Up ahead, a wagon that looked to be coming our way, and a pair of riders next to it. As we got closer, I could see that there was a man and a woman in the wagon and the riders were two of Burns' deputies. I sped up and the riders turned in our direction. One lifted a pistol until the other one motioned for him to put it down.

"You shouldn't ride up so quiet, kid," one of them said, "you nearly got yourself shot."

"I guess I'm not used to getting shot for just riding. What's the problem?"

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“Earl and I were on our way out for some tax collectin’ and we just happened across one of our problem people.”

The couple on the wagon were old enough to be grandparents. While the deputy was talking, the man began to stand up from his bench.

“You better sit back down now, unless you want to be lyin’ face down on the trail,” the other deputy said.

The man’s wife tried to pull him back down, but he was having no part of it. I heard a hammer cock and looked over to see “Earl” getting ready to shoot.

“I told you to sit back down!” Earl repeated as he held out his .45, ready to fire.

With that, I pulled out mine and cocked it, aiming straight at Earl. “DROP IT!” I yelled.

Surprised by my move, both deputies turned toward me, Earl still with his pistol held out...now pointing at me.

“What’s got into you, boy? You’re one of us.”

“Not hardly...now I said drop it.”

He didn’t and I couldn’t keep letting him point it at me, so I pulled my trigger first. Crack! Earl’s pistol flew out of his hand. By this time the other deputy’d drawn as well. Crack! This time my aim wasn’t as sharp and he yelled as his pistol flew to the ground behind him. “YOU SHOT MY HAND!” he screamed, grabbing it with the other.

“YOU TWO STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE!” I yelled, and turned to the couple in the

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wagon. "I'd get out of here if I were you," I added. Without so much as a hesitation, the man dropped back to his seat and slapped his reins, moving himself, his wife and the wagon on down the trail.

"Burns is gonna kill you for this, Montana!" Earl shouted.

"From where I'm sittin', you boys aren't in any position to throw out threats," I replied. "I didn't want trouble with you or the sheriff, but I can't abide you're picking on helpless locals. If I wasn't the man I am, I'd drop you both right here. As it is, I'm gonna give you what you wouldn't give me...a chance. Slowly pull your Winchesters out of your scabbards and drop 'em. Now tie your kerchief around your wrist and ride ahead of me. Let's go see the sheriff. I'd be interested in what he'll have to say."

I holstered my pistol and we all started back to town. This was sure a mess. I'd wanted to keep on Burns' good side for a while longer but I'd had enough of the deputies bullying our neighbors. For all I know, they were about to kill that farmer and maybe his wife, too. Again, my reaction wasn't part of any big plan. I just had to do what I had to do. That meant the next step would be up to Burns. I suppose he *could* kill me, like they said. In fact, that seemed like a pretty good bet. On the other hand, if I explained it well enough, maybe I could stay in his good graces a while longer. Sure was something to think about on the way back to town.

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Some forty minutes later, the three of us rode into town, right to the jail, which, fortunately, didn't have many horses outside. If this didn't go well, I didn't want too many of the deputies around.

After ordering the two deputies to get down, I followed them into the jail. Sheriff Burns was in the outer office and looked shocked when he saw I had a gun on two of his men.

"What the devil's goin' on here? Put that gun down, Montana. What's this all about?"

One of my prisoners spoke up first. "Sheriff, this here kid stopped us from doin' our duty and shot us both. Shoot him."

"Montana, you better drop that gun," the sheriff replied, looking at me with those steely eyes of his.

"Not quite yet, sheriff. First I need to know if you support me or not," I answered.

"Support you for what? Shootin' up my men?"

"Support me for saving your rear end!"

"Now, how's shootin' up my men, saving me?"

"Sheriff, I ran across these two about to kill a couple of the locals, an old man and his wife, in cold blood. Now I was thinking about letting 'em do it, but it occurred to me that you were trying to avoid a war with the locals. They're already plum tired of payin' taxes on their land. It wouldn't take much to push 'em over edge, and I didn't want that to happen out on the trail and for no good reason. I didn't figure you'd thank me for stopping 'em, but it did seem that if I hadn't, the

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next farmer through would discover their bodies and that'd spark a fire that'd end up bringing you and the mayor more trouble than you'd want. If I was wrong, I apologize, but I just figured if and when you want to declare war against the locals, you'd prefer to do it in your own way, not theirs. Was I wrong?"

Sheriff Burns took his hand off his holstered pistol and sat down on a bench. "No, Montana, you weren't wrong. I'm fed up with these locals, too, but if there's a war to be fought with 'em, I'll be the one who starts it, not you two."

"Sheriff," Earl protested, "you're not gonna let him get away with this, are you? He's partial to these folks. He said so on the trail."

"That right, Montana? Are you partial to these folks?"

"Sheriff, I'm partial to doing things smart. Killing that old couple out of the trail just wasn't smart. I don't have any trouble with killing, but I'd just like doin' it smart. No reason to get myself hung for something stupid."

"Boys, I think young Montana here has a point. You were stupid and he stopped you. Case closed. Now follow me back to the cell."

"But boss...I mean sheriff. You're not planning to jail *us*? Are you?"

"Yeah, for now, until I have the time to think this through. Montana's right. I don't pay you to start trouble without my say-so. Maybe you need a day or two in the jail to cool down and see things clear.

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Montana, you stay here while I put these two away. I'll be right back to talk to you."

The sheriff then walked the two deputies through the door, into the cell area. I waited outside, wondering what his reaction was gonna be in private. He might just come out and shoot me. Then again, he might not. I was willing to wait and see.

A minute later the door reopened and Sheriff Burns came back through. "Listen, Montana, you may have done me a service by stopping those two idiots, but I can't have you going around shooting my men. I'm figuring they'll hold a grudge and you might just get back-shot sometime."

"I'll do whatever you want, sheriff, but there wasn't any other way to stop 'em. If I hadn't of shot the first one, he was a second or so from killing that farmer. I only shot the second one because he was fixin' to shoot me."

"Yeah, I know. You've probably guessed I picked these guys up without a lot of effort. Most of 'em knew one another in Cheyenne. That's why I expect 'em to stick together, so keep your eyes open and don't turn your back on 'em...any of 'em. In the meantime, let me decide who gets shot around here and who doesn't."

"One last question, sheriff...why are we shootin' locals instead of just letting a judge rule against 'em?"

"Not so much my idea. The mayor wants his taxes paid and he pays us to enforce the law. It's as

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simple as that. Anyway, these locals are all bull-headed. They've been told and told and some still refuse to pay. We need to get tough with some of 'em so the rest will fall into line, and I need all you deputies to be workin' together, not fightin' each other...understand? Now go back out there and lay low. I'll let you know when I need you again."

"All right, sheriff. I'll be around."

"See to it that you are," he gruffed, "and stay out of trouble."

After walking out the jailhouse door, it occurred to me that he'd made a good point about my gettin' shot in the back. Also, with Josh on his way to Butte, it was possible that he'd get lucky and bring the marshal back sooner than later. All of that meant that I'd need to speed up any evidence collecting I was gonna do. I'd sure love to get into the sheriff's desk...or maybe even Mayor Kane's...and I'd have to do it fast. *That's* where I'd find *real* evidence.

Chapter 10

Darkness came early as had been the case since I got this far north. I spent the rest of the day around the hotel, like the sheriff told me, but all that idle time got my brain working. I was more and more convinced that tonight had to be the night, and Kane's desk would be a bigger trophy than Burns'. But, any break-in to the mayor's office would require a look-out. I wondered if Micah could be trusted to help. It was risky. He said the right words and sounded sincere, but this was *my* life on the line. If I got caught, Kane and Burns would kill me for sure. I finally decided to take a chance. After dinner at the hotel, I walked back down toward the jail, hoping to find Micah. After some looking, I concluded he just wasn't around. I decided to let it go a while and drop by the livery to check on Spirit. He was already in his stall for the night. I'd picked up a few apples earlier from the hotel lobby and offered 'em to my old friend, for dessert. We don't get a lot of apples down Texas way and Spirit was real glad I did. I'd been there maybe fifteen minutes when I heard somebody walk in. It was already dark, so I

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couldn't tell who it was until I heard the familiar voice.

"That's it, old boy. Just let me get this saddle off and I'll get you your supper."

It sounded like Micah. Maybe the fates were finally beginning to favor me. "Micah...is that you?"

"Sure is. Is that you, Montana?"

"Yep. I'll be right over. I want to talk."

I finished up with Spirit and walked down to where Micah'd just put his horse up.

"What's up?" he asked, as I walked in on him.

"Micah, you told me that you'd help me get the goods on Burns and Kane. I've been thinking and if we're gonna get anything that would be useful with the marshal, we need to do it quick. I decided to get into Kane's office tonight and see what I can find. Are you with me?"

"If you think this is something a real lawman would do, Montana, I'm with you. What's your plan?"

"I don't have a good one. Kane's office is on the second floor of the City Hall building. I haven't been in it but I do know there's an outside stairway in the back. I figure if we wait until all the lights are out, I could get up those stairs and into his office. After that, I'll just have to grab whatever papers I can find, and go through 'em later. I'll need a look-out and we'll need our horses."

"Why the horses?"

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“If we’re caught, we’ll have to get out of town fast. Even if we’re not, we’ll probably have to leave, anyway. Once Kane finds stuff missing, it wouldn’t take Burns long to figure I was involved.”

“Where would we go?”

“Not sure of that, either, but I have places. Now if you’re not comfortable with this, and I understand why you might not be, I don’t have any problem with you stayin’ out.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m tougher than I look.”

“I’ll be countin’ on that. We probably have a few hours, so I think we should use the time to go back to our rooms and quietly get our stuff together.”

“Sounds good, I can leave my horse here and be back in an hour.”

“Me, too,” I offered. “Make sure your horse is fed and your guns are loaded.”

I didn’t want for us to be seen leaving the livery together, so I sent Micah out first. As I watched him walk into the night, I hoped I’d made the right decision on bringing him in. A few minutes later I followed him out and a little less than an hour later I walked back into the livery with my saddlebags and bedroll over my shoulder. The livery was almost pitch dark except for the dim lantern light coming from the area of Micah’s horse’s stall. I walked into it, to see him stuffing oats into his saddlebags.

“Any trouble?” I asked.

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“Not yet...I see you’re still wearin’ that star Burns gave you. Do you think that’s a good idea, under the circumstances?”

I’d forgotten all about it, but when Micah pointed it out, I looked down on my chest and saw it shine in the lamplight. “Hadn’t thought about it, but I think it might be a good idea. We may be about to burglarize the mayor’s office, but we’re not burglars. We’re real lawmen stuck in a crooked department. By breaking into the mayor’s office, we’re enforcing the law, not breaking it. Yeah, I think I’m gonna keep it on.”

“You make a good point, Montana. I think I’ll put mine on, too.”

We sat around and talked a while and about an hour later we walked the horses over to the rear of City Hall. Fortunately, the wind had been dropping since sunset and the weather wasn’t too bad. When we got there, the building was dark.

“Micah, if you see anybody coming, rap on the stair rail and move the horses away. I’ll hide here until it’s clear.”

Micah nodded and I dismounted, handing him Spirit’s reins. Carefully and quietly, I started up the stairs. The door at the top was locked, but it moved a little when I leaned on it. It seemed more like a wood latch than an iron one, so I leaned harder and it opened. On entering, I quickly found myself in near perfect darkness. I felt my way along both walls until I found a door on the right. Again, I

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pushed it until it opened and looked in to see nothing. It was like being in a coal mine at night. I took one step inside and my boot hit a bucket. I put my hand out and felt a mop handle. I was in a closet!

I backed out into the hall again and continued feeling my way down it. I finally reached the end and felt another door. I turned the handle and, to my surprise, it was unlocked. As I walked in, there was the slightest bit of light comin' from the building across the street. It wasn't much, but it was enough for me to find a lantern and, after dialing down the wick, I lit it. Even at that, I had to keep my hands around the glass to keep it real dim.

I looked around the room to see a big desk in the middle and a big wooden file cabinet on the back wall. I tried the desk drawers, but they were locked. I then tried the top drawer of the file cabinet and it, too, was locked. I could see this job gettin' messier. I looked all around for something to force either the desk or the cabinet open. There wasn't much that looked like it could help. I went back to the desk and picked a few papers out of a basket. Something in the basket shined in the dim light and a closer look showed it to be a small key. I found a keyhole on the side of the desk, but the key didn't fit it. I then turned to see that each of the four drawers in the cabinet also had keyholes. I tried it on the top drawer, and it turned. One pull and the drawer was open. I did the same to the second one as well.

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I held the lantern over the top drawer and saw that it contained a .45 in a holster, but few papers. I got luckier on the second one. I opened it to find a bunch of hanging folders, chock full of papers. Keeping with my plan, I grabbed about half of 'em and unlocked the third drawer. It looked pretty much like the second, so I grabbed about half of those as well. My problem was, I couldn't carry all those folders and the lantern at the same time. I decided to douse the lantern and move out the same way I went in...in the dark. I hoped it would be easier this time, because I kind of knew where I was going. I'd just closed the door behind me when I heard Micah's alarm. *Knock, knock, knock.* Three in a row. Either someone was coming or I was hearing my knees knock together. I didn't have a lot of choice, now. I made my way to the inside of the door at the top of the stairwell and waited, hoping that, whoever it was, wasn't coming up. A few seconds later I heard footsteps on the stairs. I hoped it was Micah, but the chances weren't good. I moved the folders to my left hand, squeezing them between by arm and body. That freed up my right hand to pull my Colt out of my holster. I hoped I didn't have to use it.

When the footsteps stopped, I froze. Suddenly a sliver of light entered the hall as the door began to swing open. Then, whoever it was, turned and held a lantern out in front of him...right in my face.

“Hey, what the...what are you doin' here?”

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He spoke before he could see the folders under my arm. As the lantern light filled the hallway, I could see it was Ed, one of the deputies. By the time I got a good look at him, he'd seen the folders. In one quick motion, he dropped the lantern he was carrying and reached for his gun.

Right then, I lifted my Colt and brought it down on top of his head. Thud! He dropped to the floor. I then had to kneel down to pick up the lantern, before it set fire to the whole building. A little of the kerosene had leaked out and caught fire, so I grabbed the downed deputy and pulled him back over the small flame. As I hoped, his big wet coat put out the flames. I continued to drag him into the hallway until I could close the door behind me and start back down the stairs. What rotten luck! I'd picked the absolute wrong time for the break-in! I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, but there was no Micah. Then I saw him coming out from behind a shed next door.

"Micah, get over here quick. I need a rope."

"What happened?" he asked. "Who was that..."

"Deputy Ed is up there on the floor and I need to tie him up, to buy us some time. Give me my rope."

When Micah saw the pile of folders I was carrying, he grabbed his rope, dismounted and ran up the stairs himself, disappearing through the door. A minute later he came back out and closed it behind him.

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“Ed’s not gonna be a problem for a while,” he said as he jumped back on his horse.

“Thanks, let’s get out of here.”

“Did you get what you needed?” he asked.

“Not sure, but there’s a pile of papers in my saddlebags. I only hope there’s something in there we can use. But things have sure changed. We’re outlaws now, until we can get to Marshal Preston – and we’re on our own. As soon as Ed comes to, they’ll put a posse together and come after us. We can’t go to my place. We’ll have to hide out for a while. For now, let’s just get out of town.”

“Your place?”

I heard Micah’s last question just as I nudged Spirit to get moving. He didn’t know I had a “place” here, and it was just as good, for now, that he didn’t. Instinctively, I headed north, toward the canyon trail. Seemed crazy to be heading north, what with cold and all, but we didn’t have much choice. I knew the territory better up there and, cold or not, I could see this was setting up to be a real test. I didn’t have much advantage over a posse, but wanted to take advantage of whatever little I had.

After almost an hour of hard riding, I remembered there used to be an old hunting cabin in a small canyon about ten miles west of our place. If the snow didn’t give us away and the cabin was still there, it’d be a good place to hide out for a few days. I even think it had an old stove in it. So, as soon as we hit the flat land, we took the left trail

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and headed west. It was cold and dark and the wind had started up again...enough so, that my breath was freezin' to my face. I was sure Micah was just as uncomfortable. Through the sting, it occurred to me that I really didn't know him very well. He'd proven useful so far, but this was gonna to be a test for him, as well. I hoped he'd pass because the last thing I needed was more problems.

On we rode through the wind and snow for another hour, until the blind canyon I was hoping to find, finally appeared in dim light. I turned into it and five minutes later we got to the cabin. It was still there! Too cold to say a prayer of thanks, we quickly found shelter for the horses under a big white pine, grabbed our saddlebags and entered the cabin through the half-connected door. It was like walkin' into a coal mine. I left the door open for whatever light we could muster and felt around for a candle or lantern.

"How's this?" Micah asked just as the room lit up. I turned to see he'd just lit a candle with a match.

"Where'd you find that?"

"My saddlebag...never travel without one."

"Micah, I like your style! Now let's see if we can find a lantern and get a fire goin'."

Over the next ten minutes we did both. Thankfully, the previous tenant had left some dry wood for us. As soon as we were able to settle down I wanted to go over the papers I'd picked up

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and see if there was anything in them that would help us justify the break-in, but first things first.

“You get that fire higher and I’ll be back in a minute,” I said as I headed back out the door.

“Where the heck are you goin’?” Micah asked.

I brought some oats in my bags, too, and I know the horses are hungry. I’ll be right back.”

A while later, and colder than ever, I came back in...this time to a much warmer, brighter room.

“How are they doin’?” Micah asked.

“They’ll be fine. Your horse only picked at ‘em, so I left some for when he gets hungry. Spirit wasn’t so polite. We’ll have to find them more food tomorrow.”

“You take good care of that horse of yours, Montana.”

“I suppose, but he’s always taken good care of me, so I guess that’s just fair. Were you able to look at any of these papers?”

“Not yet but the fire’s in good shape for a while. Let’s do it.”

I divided the stack in half and we each started picking through each stack, one page at a time.

“What exactly are we lookin’ for?”

“That’s the hard part. I don’t rightly know, except that somebody as crooked as Mayor Kane must have a paper trail. I’d look for anything that looks to be about taxes or a land deal.”

My first twenty or so pages seemed to be pay records and sign-off sheets for the town payroll – lots of numbers but not much else.

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“What’s this?” Micah spoke up.

“I don’t know, what is it?”

He turned the page around and it looked like a letter with a big letterhead at the top and, half way down, a map.

“Big Sky Railroad Company” I read aloud. “Seems to be a railroad map of some kind.”

Micah stepped closer to the lantern and I looked over his shoulder. “Isn’t that where we rode out to, the other day?” he asked, pointing to a spot on the map. “Funny, I don’t remember crossing any tracks.”

I took a closer look. “We didn’t...because they aren’t there. This is a map of a *proposed* rail line. I never heard of Big Sky Railroad, either. Must be something new. Were there any other papers with this one?”

Micah walked back to the table and his pile. “Lots of ‘em, but I’d have to look to see if any were about a railroad.”

“Bring ‘em over. I’d like to know more about this.”

We spent the next hour pouring over some thirty pages that included letters and contracts, all addressed to Mayor Kane and all about a new railroad that he appeared to be part owner of. The other owners were from Omaha, Nebraska, and seemed to be in an awful hurry to get started. In one letter, Kane assured them everything was on schedule and that he’d have all the land rights by spring. I took another look at the map and the

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planned route took it right through our farm! A closer look showed that it also went through the Baker place, where it turned north and went up into Custer County, where it turned east again, and headed back toward Dakota.

“I’m starting to get it,” I said. “Kane’s usin’ his office to tax some of the owners of these parcels out of their property. When they can’t pay their taxes, he’ll use the law to have Hillsboro foreclose on the land and his bank will be charged to re-sell it. I suspect he’ll buy the foreclosed parcels himself and, after that, sell ‘em up to the railroad.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble,” Micah responded. “Why not just buy what he needs from the farmers?”

“Some wouldn’t sell, and he needs *all* of it along the route. It wouldn’t do to get most of it and not all. This way, he can get all of it, for sure. So, that’s his game. I’ll bet Burns doesn’t even know all this.”

Micah sat down on a cot and wiped the sweat that’d formed on his brow. “I wondered why we were always harassing only some of the farmers and never some of the others. Didn’t make sense to me that we were just collecting from *some* of the farmers. So...what do we do?”

“If the U.S Marshal knew this, he’d see the motive in using the Carbon County Sheriff’s office to enforce land taxes all the way up into Custer County. This is plumb crooked through and through. I think we have what we need. Now we

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have to get it to the marshal. I hate to say it, but we ought to start out in the morning and see if we can catch Josh.”

“Who’s Josh?” Micah asked.

I forgot that Micah didn’t know about Josh or the marshal in Butte. He didn’t even know that I was one of the locals, myself. I guessed it was time to sit him down and fill him in.

“Micah, there are a few things you ought to know. First, I’m a local, myself. My folks and sister live on a flatland farm, about an hour north of town, right where that new railroad would go through. Second, I’ve been workin’ with my friend Josh to put Kane and Burns out of business and in jail, where they belong. They’ve been terrorizing my family as well as some of our neighbors for long enough. I heard about it while down in Texas and came home to help. I took the deputy job to get inside their operation so we can present the U.S. Marshal with enough evidence to put ‘em away. And, most important, I brought you in because I thought I could trust you.”

Micah waited a moment before he spoke. “Montana, that’s a lot to chew on, but one thing’s for sure...you can.”

Chapter 11

It took us another hour to go through the rest of the papers and make sure we didn't miss anything. Tired as we were, Micah never questioned what we were doing, nor why. I was glad that I confided in him, and glad to have him with me. I wasn't sure what the next few days would bring, but I suspected it wouldn't be pleasant.

When we finally got some shut-eye, I slept hard...harder than I wanted to. It didn't seem like anybody could have followed us all the way out here, but that fresh coat of snow worried me. I hoped it'd snow some more and cover our tracks. It was still dark when I got up and went outside to check on both the weather and the horses. Through the pre-dawn light, I found good and bad news. The good news was that the horses had spent a quiet night and appeared to be comfort-able and well rested. The bad news was that it never snowed again after we got here, and a blind man could have tracked us.

Micah heard me moving around and got up, too. I came back in and started working on the fire

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to see if we could get some heat back in the cabin before we ventured out again.

“Mornin’, Montana. Why don’t you let me tend this fire while you clean up the papers. I’m not sure how you want ‘em stacked.”

I turned back toward the table we’d worked on last night and saw Micah’s point. I was so tired I’d left ‘em in several piles and I wasn’t even sure, myself, how I wanted it organized.

“Mornin’ yourself, Micah. You’re right. We might have to leave in a hurry so I better get these together.”

“Why a hurry?” he asked. “I thought you said nobody came up this way, much.”

“That’s right, but it stopped snowing sometime on our ride last night and our tracks are plain as day. At least they are, here. Wouldn’t take Burns much to follow ‘em, and I suspect that’s just what they’re gonna do.”

“In that case,” Micah responded, “we better have some kind of plan...in case we get split up.”

“I’m putting one together, but first I want to put the papers back in my saddlebags and get ‘em back on Spirit. By then, if you had some coffee made I’ll let you know what’s next.”

Micah nodded in agreement and began shufflin’ through the cupboards, looking for something to heat water in. I went to work on the papers, and eventually got ‘em back in my bags. A few minutes later I put my slicker back on, grabbed the bags, and headed out. By that time, Micah’d found

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a pot, filled it with snow and was well on his way to heating it up.

When I got outside, I noticed that Micah's horse had shaken loose his tie and wandered over to the side yard. He didn't appear to be goin' anywhere, so I proceeded to saddle Spirit back up and strapped my bags and Winchester back on him. When I was done, I walked around the backside of the cabin to fetch Micah's horse. I didn't see him at first, but then found him looking for grass a little way down a small ravine. I headed down that way and had just reached him when I heard the first shot. CRACK! Then, two more. CRACK! CRACK!

“YOU IN THERE, COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP OR WE'LL BURN YOU OUT!”

I quick-tied Micah's horse to a small tree and worked my way back up the ravine to see what was goin' on. From where I was, behind and off to the side of the cabin, I could see five men on horseback with rifles pulled. One of 'em had Spirit's reins! They had my horse and with it, all the papers I needed...and my Winchester! All I had was my Colt in my holster and, maybe, six or eight rounds in my belt. It wouldn't be enough.

I crawled off to the right side to get a better look. I think Spirit saw me, but, for now, nobody else did. It was Sheriff Burns and four of his deputies. One of them was Ed, the one I tangled with at Kane's office. I guess he healed just in time to join

the posse and, what's more, it was Ed holding Spirit.

“THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE, MONTANA, BEFORE WE START THE FIRE.”

Then I heard the front door open and, though I couldn't see, it was immediately clear that Micah'd been caught.

“Keep those hands up! Micah...what the blazes you doin' here? Are you teamed up with that Montana kid?” Burns yelled, surprised to see one of his other deputies in this predicament.

I guess Micah didn't answer, because Burns spoke again. “Get on your knees and keep your hands on your head.”

I crawled around a little further to see the sheriff and one of the deputies standing over Micah, now kneeling on the snow. “Where is he? Where's Montana?”

“I don't know,” Micah answered. “He left a while ago. I don't know for where.”

“If he left on his own, why'd he leave his horse with you?” another one of 'em asked.

“I didn't know he did,” Micah answered, still talking toward the snow. “His had a limp last night, so I guess he thought mine would ride better.”

It was time for me to get scarce. They probably weren't about to believe Micah and would start searching the area real soon. Micah's horse left some nice clean tracks and, by my figuring, they'd be down my throat in a matter of seconds.

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I crawled back out of sight and ran back down the ravine to where I'd left Micah's horse. Unfortunately, he only had a bridle on. No saddle, no rifle. I walked him down another twenty yards and jumped on, wrapping my legs tight around him and holding on for dear life. I hated riding bareback. We used to do it when I was a kid, but it never gets comfortable as a saddle. Since there are no stirrups, every time the horse takes a stride, your body jumps up and slams down, with no way to cushion the fall. And, I had to ride fast. I knew they'd be coming for me and they had saddles... and rifles. It felt funny riding from the law. Made me feel like a criminal. I guess, to them I was a criminal, but I knew I wasn't. They were the criminals and they had my horse...and my new friend.

I was glad I'd grabbed my slicker when I went out because here I was, running for my life, bareback on a horse I'd never ridden before, armed with only a six shot revolver and a handful of rounds.

I also knew if I didn't move fast, I'd be trapped in this blind canyon. I didn't know if Burns or his men knew that this *was* a blind canyon, but I did. The only way out, was the way we came in. Thus, to escape, I had to circle back around the canyon edge and double back on the men who were chasing me. Also, this darned weather was no help. The sun was coming up and, for a change, the sky was clear. The snow that'd fallen overnight was

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just enough to keep our tracks clear and fresh. Tracking us would be easy as pie.

Now slamming down on the horse's back with every stride, I decided that if I got out of the canyon alive, I'd head back east. That'd at least get me near home or to neighbors where I could trade my ride for a horse with a proper saddle. I might even find myself a coat and a rifle, or at least some more rounds for my Colt.

I worked my way over to the right, until I reached the canyon wall and then followed the bare brush toward the entrance. I could hear the pounding of hooves, but most of 'em sounded a ways back, so it looked like I might make it out. Unfortunately, Ed had hung back, holding onto Spirit's reins while another one of 'em worked Micah over. I saw him just about the same time he saw me. CRACK! He took a shot...and missed.

The sound put a jump into Micah's horse and he picked up speed. Out the canyon opening we flew and headed east. We ran for a good fifteen minutes before I looked around. We were being chased by one rider, maybe two-hundred yards back. Another hundred yards behind him, came three others. I figured the other two were probably back at the cabin with Micah. I hoped he was okay.

I wanted to increase my lead, but wasn't sure Micah's horse could do it. I wish I'd had Spirit. There'd be no contest then.

On we rode for another hour. I'd peek back occasionally to see that I'd gained a little more

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ground on that single rider, but not a lot. I was freezing, too. The slicker was good in the rain, but wasn't very warm in the cold, and it was cold... probably twenty-five or so. As we approached the Bighorn Lake shore, I was just south of our farm, but as tempting as it was to head that way, I knew I couldn't. I'd be bringing trouble home and that was just the opposite of what I wanted to do. I knew what I had to do. Just south of our farm, the lake narrowed and turned back into a river just before it started to cut through the canyon that separated our flatland from the plateau. I figured I could cross there, but it'd be mighty cold. If Micah's horse could make it, I figured I could.

Another half a mile and I found the spot I wanted. We waded right in without hesitation and I had to let him slow down to pick his own footing. The water *was* cold. There was ice on the pools at the edges, but the middle was moving too fast to freeze. It wouldn't be that way on my legs.

Soon after we reached the other side, the water froze to my trouser legs and it felt like I was wearing stovepipes. But that single rider was still behind me and was nearing the river on his own...so we kept riding.

If I was on Spirit, I know I could outlast him, but I wasn't so confident on Micah's horse. He was tired and could pull up at any time. I had to have a plan.

I looked back to see if the others had closed the gap but I couldn't see 'em -- only the one behind

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me. I figured it was Ed. He'd be the only one mad enough to keep this up. But, even though I'm sure he had a Winchester with him, I still had my Colt and, if I kept the range close, I might just beat him in a shoot out. It was beginning to look like I'd have no choice.

We rode another half hour on the flatland before we came to the hills. With the hills would come the pine forest. I hoped I could lose him in the pines. If we kept going east, the hills would continue to get bigger 'til they turned into small mountains. After that, the hills would turn into real mountains, and they'd be too big and too cold to climb. I couldn't let it come to that, so I reckon I had about an hour before I'd have to make my stand. I just needed to find the right spot. A Colt is no match against a Winchester out in the open. I'm a good shot, but no pistol can beat a rifle at a hundred yards.

As slippery as the snow was and as tired as he was, Micah's horse and I rode another hour into the pines. I'd turn occasionally to see the rider still on our heels. I was getting the feeling that his horse was the stronger of the two and that it wouldn't be too long before my pace would lose out to his. It was about then that we topped a big hill to see a strange sight below us. In the dim light of the afternoon I could see the valley below was all stumps. All the pines had been cut off some three feet off the ground and taken away. If we continued in our present direction, I'd lose most of

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my cover. If I stopped, the rider'd be on me in no time. I'd need to pick up the pace and fast, but Micah's horse was finally running out of steam. There was nothing to do but keep pushing him, but I was bein' taken over by a bad feeling.

With Micah's horse now gasping for air, we crossed the next ridge to see the remains of a giant bonfire. When we got close enough, we saw a pole stuck in the ground and a sign on it. "Dawkins Lumber." I didn't know who Dawkins was, but if he was in the area and had a rifle or two, I could sure use the help. We just past the still-smoldering wood pile when Micah's horse pulled up to a walk. He was done and I reckon I was too. My fingers were near frozen to the reins and my eyes were near shut from ice. The cut pines would offer me no cover, but I could just make out a small shed near the top of the next hill. If I could make it, it'd at least give me *some* cover from Ed's rifle. At that point Micah's horse gave it up completely, and stopped. I jumped off and he lay down in exhaustion. God bless him...he'd given me all he had and then some. I knew Spirit would have given me more, but you have to deal cards you have and Micah's horse had done himself proud. I hoped he'd survive it.

The shed was still a ways up the hill and I could see my pursuer only seconds behind me. I put my right hand on the handle of my Colt to keep it in the holster and started running. The cold air, combined with the high altitude, made my chest

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hurt, but I had no choice. I had to run with all the strength I had left. I was closing the gap to the shed when, just off to my right side, the snow jumped. An instant later I heard the familiar crack of a Winchester. He had me in his sights and his first shot missed by five feet. I knew the next one wouldn't.

I was ten feet from the shed when I heard the next bullet slap the wood wall. This time the sound came faster. He was closin' in on me. I stumbled just as I reached the shed and another bullet zipped just over my head. Good thing I fell, I thought, or that one might've taken my head off.

He tried to stop me before I got there, but I beat him. As soon as I got there I crawled around the corner and out of the line of fire. Then I stood back up and raced to the other side, peeking around to see where my stalker was. The light wasn't good and my eyes were near frozen shut, but I could see him. He was still on his horse and about thirty yards below me. This time I had the advantage. The cut pines offered *him* no cover. I thought things might be finally going my way when I felt a cold barrel up against my neck and a hammer cock.

"Hold it right there, mister. Who are you and why is that man shootin' holes in my shed?"

I slowly turned and was staring right down the bore of a rifle. It wasn't a Winchester but it had a long barrel and a big bore. Just beyond it was the grim face of a man, apparently expecting answers.

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“Now drop it before I drop you,” he said, in that same serious tone.

“I’ll do that if you want, mister, but understand...that man down the hill shooting at me will likely continue to do so, whether you’re here or not. We might be better off taking care of him, first.”

“Maybe...who is he? And who are you?”

“Name’s William Ritter, sir, but most folks just call me Montana.”

“Well, Montana, you’re in Wyoming now and on private land. Who’s that comin’ up the hill?”

“Not sure, but he’s gonna tell you he’s a deputy from Hillsboro. I suppose he is, too, but not an honest one. It’s really a longer story than I can tell you right now, but it’s a fact that I’m the good guy, here. He’s the bad guy and might just shoot both of us to get his way.”

“Son, I got to tell you that I’m mighty partial to the law. If that man’s a real deputy, then I’ll guess you’re a criminal of some kind. If that’s all true, don’t count on much help from me.”

“I understand, but just remember what I said. I’m the good guy here and if you don’t believe me, you’re putting your life at risk, too.”

“MONTANA! YOU BETTER COME OUT NOW. I’VE GOT THIS WINCHESTER AIMED RIGHT AT YOU AND WON’T HESITATE TO USE IT. NOW DROP YOUR GUN AND COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP.”

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It was Ed, all right. I could tell that voice anywhere. Just then, my captor put his finger to his lips as if to say, don't answer. I didn't, and there we sat for what seemed like a long time.

"I JUST PASSED YOUR HORSE AND HE'S DONE IN. YOU AREN'T GOIN' ANYWHERE. NOW COME OUT BEFORE I COME GET YOU!"

The man with the rifle on me continued to be quiet and I did the same. I wondered if I'd made an impression on him. He then quietly removed the Colt from my hand and backed off, slowly moving around the far side of the shed. Just after he disappeared around the corner, Ed came around the other, with his Winchester trained on my face.

"No gun, huh? Too bad. You might have made a fight of it. As it is, I'm decidin' if it'd be easier to carry you back dead or alive. Ed looked like he was ready to pull the trigger when the other man came around behind him and put him in his sights.

"You'd do better to just drop your gun, mister. There'll be no killin' here unless I do it."

Ed's eyes got as big as saucers. He looked even more surprised than I'd been. He also didn't drop his rifle.

"I don't know who you are, mister, but you're interfering with the law. You drop your gun and I'll forget about it, but I'm takin' this boy in."

"I told you to drop your rifle, and I mean now," the man repeated.

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Ed turned to see him and did as he was told. The man picked up his rifle and threw it off in the snow behind him. "Now both of you, real slow like, walk around this side and in the door. No funny stuff or I'll shoot you where you stand."

This had taken a strange turn. For the past four hours, Ed had been chasing me with every intention of shooting me. Now he finally caught me and we were both prisoners of somebody else, who obviously didn't trust either of us.

I was the first to enter the shed. It was small and dark but there was a lantern and a cot. When we all got inside, the man closed the door behind us and told us to sit together against one of the walls.

"I told you I was the law," Ed repeated, "and you're gonna be in as much trouble as this boy is, if you don't drop that gun right now."

"Maybe you're right," the man said, but how do I know you're really the law – that tin star? Heck, anybody can put on a star. You got any other identification?"

"Only this," Ed answered, and pointed to the bump on the side of his face. "That little thief blind-sided me last night and I'm here to arrest him and take him back to jail."

The man with the rifle held up the lantern with his free hand and looked at Ed's face. "You got a nice bruise there, for sure. Son...did you do this?"

"I'm afraid I did sir, but I had good reason."

Chapter 12

A long half hour followed, during which the logger, who later introduced himself as Hal, quizzed both Ed and me over why we were here and why we were fighting. He kept us sitting on the floor while he talked and listened, all the while holding that big rifle on us. We thought he was just hearing us out, to decide which one of us to believe. Turned out we were wrong. After a good long while, we heard a wagon pull up outside.

“Hal...you in there?” a voice called out.

“Yeah, and we got some company. Come in slow.”

A moment later the door opened and in walked an older man with a gray beard. “What the devil is goin’ on here? Who are these two?” he asked.

“Montana, Deputy Ed, I’d like you to meet Mister Dawkins. He’s boss around here and I’m leaving it up to him which one of you to believe. Now you two sit right still while I fill him in.”

Hal gave Mister Dawkins a quick summary of what we’d told him and Mister Dawkins took it all in. When Hal was done, Mister Dawkins asked him to step out and help with the horses. I thought it

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odd. Help who? It occurred to me that there was somebody else outside. I was getting real concerned how this all was gonna turn out.

“Men, I don’t know who’s right or who’s wrong here and it probably doesn’t matter to me, anyway. Montana, Hal tells me you broke into that office in Hillsboro because you needed proof that the Mayor’s a crook. In the course of doing so, you popped this deputy on the head, and now he’s after you for burglary and assault. I’d like to believe you did it for good reason, but I’m partial to the law and until you prove what you did was right, I’m sidin’ with the deputy here.” Then he picked up Ed’s Winchester and tossed it across the room to him.

“You made a good decision, mister. Now I need to tie my prisoner to his horse and get goin’ or we’ll be riding all night.”

Ed leveled the rifle at me and motioned for me to get up. I had serious doubts I was going to live through the night.

We walked out of the shed into near darkness and I felt the cold wind hit me again. This was gonna get ugly. Mister Dawkins wagon had been moved over to a small pond about fifty feet behind the shed and there were two men over there breaking ice for the horses. Hal was one of ‘em. I had no idea who the other one was. About then they must of broke through the ice because they both stopped hacking and headed back toward us.

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I'd been wondering how I was gonna ride anywhere with Micah's horse out of commission. I wasn't even sure if he was still alive. I guess Deputy Ed was having the same conversation with Mister Dawkins, all the while still holding the barrel of his rifle on me. I decided to keep quiet and save my strength. I had a feeling I'd need all of it I could muster. Then I heard the voice.

"MONTANA! WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU DOIN' WAY UP HERE? AND WHY'S THAT MAN HOLDIN' A GUN ON YOU?"

The voice was familiar and I turned to see Jesse, the fella I'd met out on the trail.

"Well, I'll be! Jesse, good to see you. My reason for being here is too long a story for this weather, but why are you here?"

"I work here. This is my father-in-law's company. Remember, I told you Martha's father offered me a job up here? Mister Dawkins is Martha's father. Now it's your turn. Why's this man with a badge got a gun on you?"

Apparently, Hal hadn't had a chance to fill him in. "It's all a mistake, Jesse. Remember why I told you I was coming north? If you remember, tell your father-in-law, so he doesn't think I'm a complete liar."

"Mister Dawkins," Jesse said, "Montana is the boy I told you about when we got to your place. He's the one who saved our lives on the trail. Without his help, we'd of probably not made it at all."

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Ed had no idea what was going on and was looking more than a little nervous as Jesse spoke. It was just then that Mister Dawkins interrupted him.

“Deputy...I think it’s time you drop your rifle.”

Ed turned around to see that Mister Dawkins had his rifle fixed on him and had a real serious look in his eye. “You can’t make me. I’m a lawman and you’ll get in trouble, too.”

“I don’t worry so much about trouble, mister, and as far as you’re bein’ a lawman, I think you said you were a deputy in Hillsboro? Turns out, we’re not *in* Hillsboro. *Shoot, we’re not even in Montana!* You crossed the border into Wyoming about five miles back. You have no jurisdiction here, so drop your rifle now before you’re the one with the trouble.”

For the second time in the past hour, Ed dropped his rifle and Hal picked it up.

“I don’t rightly know what all this is about,” Mister Dawkins said, “but I’m beginnin’ to think young Montana here might just be on the right side of it. Let’s all just take it easy and walk over to that wagon. We’re all going for a nice ride. Deputy... you’ll ride up with me.

Years ago, when I first left home, I remember my mother telling me to make sure to be nice to the people I met...that being nice wasn’t just the right thing to do anyway, but it was a good investment in the future. Those words never meant more to me than they did right now.

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We all rode off to the northeast in what must have looked like a small wagon train. Micah's horse had regained his feet but was too weak to carry a rider, so they tied him off the back of the wagon and hoped he could keep up. Mister Dawkins drove the wagon and had Ed up on the bench next to him. Hal and Jesse rode alongside. Hal with his hand mostly on his rifle butt, just in case Ed started anything. It was a long ride up and down icy hills, through both cut and uncut pines, until there was finally a light up ahead. As we got closer, I could see it was a big three story house, surrounded by four or five smaller buildings. Even in what little was left of the light, I could see we were in the middle of a good sized saw mill. Mister Dawkins and Jesse were home.

The wagon stopped in front of the house and I was told to come in with Jesse, while Hal moved Ed off somewhere else. My first impression was light...my second was heat. Boy, was I cold. Jesse dropped his coat and took me right into their parlor. It seemed like one whole wall was a giant fireplace, and it was going strong.

"Jesse, who do we have here?" asked a lady I suspected was Mrs. Dawkins. Before Jesse could answer I jumped to me feet and introduced myself.

"Ma'am, I'm William Dean Ritter, but most folks just call me Montana. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"This is the boy that saved us out on the trail," Jesse added, "and now he needs *our* help."

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“You come right over here, Mister Montana,” Mrs. Dawkins directed. “Sit right here while I go get you some dinner. You are hungry, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I don’t want you to go to any trouble. I just need to warm up and borrow a horse.”

“You’re not going anywhere tonight, young man. Not until you’re warmed up and properly fed.” Mister Dawkins walked in behind us and made it clear that I was in no hurry to leave.

“Jesse, how’s Martha? I take it the baby hasn’t come yet?”

“Not yet, Montana,” he answered, taking up the seat next to me. “The trip was awful hard on her and when we got here, the Doc put her right to bed rest. She’s probably asleep, upstairs. There’s no baby yet, but the Doc thinks bed rest will help and he thinks the baby will come within a few weeks. We’re just keeping our fingers crossed for now.”

“I’ll do the same, Jesse. I’m sure it’ll all turn out fine.”

Mister Dawkins poured himself a drink and offered me one.

“No thanks, sir. I’m not much of a whiskey drinker. It’s not that I don’t approve...just that it gives me an awful headache.”

“OK now, Montana -- tell me again what’s behind all this and tell me nice and slow-like, so my cold ears don’t miss anything.”

“Well, sir, it all started a few weeks ago while I was working my job as foreman of the Circle-of-

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Fire ranch, outside Fort Worth. I'd been away from home for near three years when I received a telegram from my sister, over in Bighorn Lake. All it said was they had trouble and I needed to get home to help out. When I ran into Jesse and Martha on the trail, that's still all I knew about it. After I got home, I found my father'd been beaten by some of these 'deputies' out of Hillsboro. Now, my folks own a big piece of bottom-land off the Bighorn and never broke a law in their lives. Turns out, my father wasn't the only farmer that'd been beat up, either. A number of our neighbors had trouble as well."

"What was the reason?" he asked.

"Land taxes. Sheriff Burns works for the mayor of Hillsboro, a fella named Kane. Both of 'em are fairly new to the area. Kane came into Hillsboro a few years ago as the new owner of the bank. After he got elected mayor, he started this land tax business and expects a lot of the county's farmers to pay 'em, just for living on their own land!"

"I don't mean to interrupt, Montana, but land taxes aren't exactly a new idea. Some of us are paying 'em even out here."

"I understand that, sir, but there's something fishy about these. First of all, he's not taxing everybody. Also, he's doing the same thing to some folks in the next county. He doesn't even have jurisdiction to do that, and if they don't pay, his man Burns uses his deputies to terrorize 'em. Since none of 'em knew that I was from around

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there, I took a job as a deputy with Sheriff Burns just last week. I wanted to get closer to their operation to see if we could gather some evidence of criminal activity for the U.S. Marshal in Butte.”

“Were you able to?” he asked.

“I think so. Last night me and one of the other deputies, the only other honest one, broke into Kane’s office and took a bunch of papers. We had time later to go over some of ‘em and discovered that Mayor Kane wasn’t just a banker. He’s some kind of partner in a new railroad that’s planning on laying track through all the farms and ranches he’s taxing. I’d guess his plan is to tax those folks out of their farms and turn the land over to his railroad for tracks, water stations and all. So, yes, I had the evidence.”

“So how did you end up out here with the deputy chasing you?”

“While we were in Kane’s office, deputy Ed came by and caught us. He pulled a gun so I knocked him out and we got away, but they sent a posse out after us and found us early this morning, holed up in a hunting shack out in the back-country. They got Micah, the deputy who helped me, my horse and all the papers. I barely got away on Micah’s horse. All I had with me was my Colt. A few of ‘em chased me out of the canyon we were in, and Ed was the only one who held up the whole chase. I was about to take him on with my Colt when your man stopped me. Given Ed wore a badge, Hal was partial to his story and that’s when

you joined us. I suspect Ed had no plan to take me all the way back to Hillsboro. If it hadn't been for you, I'd have probably been dead in the snow by now."

Mister Dawkins stayed silent a minute and poured himself another drink. "That's some yarn, Montana, and if it wasn't for the fact that Jesse knew you, I might have turned you over myself, but I know my son-in-law and I trust his judgment. That means I'm on your side."

"Well, Duke, you simply have to help him," said Mrs. Dawkins, who'd taken a seat nearby while I was talking. I guessed Mister Dawkins was "Duke."

"You don't have to worry about that," he replied. "We owe this boy and it seems like a good time to repay him."

"You don't owe me anything, sir. I only did what anybody'd do out on that trail. I'll only ask that you loan me a good horse, a rifle and maybe a warm coat. I can do the rest."

"I like your spirit, son," he answered, "but this sounds like one of those times in your life when you could use a hand. Under the circumstances, I think it best that we all get a good night's sleep and start out for Hillsboro early in the morning. In the meantime, we'll keep the deputy on ice. No sense in letting him add to the problems."

There didn't seem to be any point in arguing with Mister Dawkins and, as anxious as I was to get back to Hillsboro, I suspected he was right

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about waiting until morning. But, truth is, I was more worried about Spirit than any of the rest of it.

Chapter 13

For the first time in a long while, Micah was worried. After the shooting had started, he looked out the shack's window and saw his new friend riding *his* horse out the north side of the canyon. He hoped Montana made it, but had no way of knowing if he had. As for the rest, he didn't see how he could win a gunfight, so he just sat at the cabin table until they called him out.

After forcing him to the ground, it was soon clear to Sheriff Burns that Micah wasn't going to talk. "I don't know what got into you boys to ransack the mayor's office, but I'm mighty disappointed. Get on that horse and follow us back to town. Any funny business and you'll get yourself shot."

Just about the time Burns put Micah up on Spirit, one of the deputies saw a horse and rider taking off through the brush behind the shack.

"There he goes!" he yelled, and he and two of the other deputies began the chase. Burns could hear the gunfire as they circled around and seemed to head out of the canyon in the direction they'd all come in, but quickly lost them in the higher brush.

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Burns and the other deputy, with Micah still atop Spirit, stopped what they were doing until the other horses were well out of sight. After waiting another few minutes, Burns decided he and the remaining deputy would start back to town.

Spirit was uneasy at first, with a strange rider on his back, but soon calmed down and the three of them began their long ride back. Some time later, while they were starting up the canyon, the three riders separated a little and let Micah and Spirit stray off to the right side of the trail. Not far, but just enough so Micah, unseen by the others, could reach his right hand back to the saddlebags. When his hand entered under the flap, he could feel that the papers from the mayor's office were still there and none of Burns men seemed to suspect anything about them...yet. Micah knew, on arriving back in town, somebody would be assigned to take Spirit over to the livery and there they'd find the papers. It wouldn't be easy, he thought, but those papers would have to disappear before they got back. It was still morning and the late November sun was low. He thought if he could just untie the saddlebags from the saddle, he might be able to slip them off and, if he picked the right moment, they might not see them drop. He stayed on the right side of the posse as long as he could until they passed through a narrow part of the ever-rising trail. There, big boulders had been pushed aside or blown up, to permit the trail through. He gently pulled back on Spirit's reins and fell off to

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the right even more. Before anybody was the wiser, he reached back and snapped both rawhide stings with his right hand. Then, with a single motion, he grabbed the bags and tossed them behind one of the boulders. He told himself he'd remember where.

When they got back to town, Burns had one of the deputies take Spirit away and, without a word, walked Micah into the jail and into one of the cells, leaving him to wait out whatever was going to come next. Micah laid down on the bunk and said a short prayer for his new friend...and himself.

Morning came early, dark and cold, and being so high up in the hills, it also came with snow. Montana peered out the bedroom window and thought it was just about everything he'd hoped to avoid when he came north. He hadn't slept well, anyway, worrying about Micah and Spirit. Early as it was, he came downstairs in the hope of finding something to drink. The kitchen was already lit up and Mister Dawkins was standing over the wood stove.

"Mornin', Montana! How about a coffee before we get the rest of the boys up?"

"I'd be obliged, sir. I didn't think I'd find anybody else up this early."

"The lumber business isn't an easy one, Montana. I've been at it now for some thirty years and I start each day early. Gives me a chance to

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clear my head before the duties of the day kick in. You might call it my quiet time.”

“I’m sorry if I interrupted you, sir. I’ll be glad to go for a walk and leave you to it.”

“No need. Tell me about your folks. You say your father was injured by the sheriff’s men?”

“Yes, sir. The doc told him to rest in bed until he healed some, but when I got home, he was already up and around...or at least tryin’. I was told they knocked him down pretty hard and hurt his back. I’ve seen some of it and it’s all scarred up.”

“I’m sorry. A man needs a strong back... particularly a farmer. How are they getting along?”

“With me gone, it was more than my mother and sister could handle, so they hired on one of my friends – a neighbor boy named Josh. He’s been helping with the heavy stuff. As a matter of fact, he’s helping me, too. Just before we visited the mayor’s office, I sent Josh to Butte to bring back our new marshal...a man named Preston.”

Mister Dawkins lit up his pipe. “I take it you haven’t heard from him?”

“No sir, and I’m plenty worried. Josh is strong enough, but the weather out there on the prairie can be brutal this time of year.”

“So what was your plan, had it not been interrupted by the deputies?”

“I didn’t have much of one...at least until we sorted through the papers and found out about the railroad deal. After that, I planned on heading out in the morning toward Butte, and hoping to run

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across Josh and the marshal before they got to Hillsboro. I guess it wasn't a very good one at that."

Mister Dawkins poured himself some coffee. "It may not be a good one, but since this Burns fella and the mayor have the law on their side, it was probably the only move you could have made. I think we need to saddle up a few of my hands and head for Butte. If I'm not mistaken, about half way between Hillsboro and Butte is the Bozeman Pass. I figure we could make it in a good day's ride. If your friend *is* successful in bringing the marshal back, they'd have to ride through that pass on their return. With any luck we might just run into them."

"That would be great, sir, but it might not happen right away. We'd need some protection from the weather."

"Years ago, my brother and I took down a pretty good sized forest over there. Back then, there were a number of trapping cabins around the pass. If any of them are still there, they'd do just fine."

"Sounds good to me with only one reservation."

"What's that, son?"

"When Burns and his men got my horse, they also got my saddlebags. Whether or not they know it, the papers I need are in those saddlebags. It won't do us much good to find the marshal unless I can show him some of the evidence. I think we need to make a stop in Hillsboro, first."

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Mister Dawkins looked up at me and scratched his whiskers. “Sounds dangerous...let’s wake the boys up and be on our way.”

An hour later, we were all on the trail, heading west toward the flatland. I was in the lead on a big Appaloosa and Mister Dawkins, Hal and another hand named Cody, were right behind. Jesse wanted to come but Mister Dawkins told him he needed him to stay and run the operation. Jesse objected to staying, but Mister Dawkins wasn’t to be swayed.

We had no wagon, so each of us brought a bag of provisions strapped to our saddles. It looked to me like Mister Dawkins wasn’t exactly new at this. I didn’t ask, though...I was content that we were heading back and would do our best to pick up Spirit along the way.

It was mid-day when we reached the Bighorn River. When we got to the trail on the other side, we turned south, up the canyon, toward town.

“Montana,” Mister Dawkins yelled as he pulled up along side of me. “Montana, at this pace we’ll get to town in full daylight. I figure you don’t want to do that, so we need a plan. It’s pretty clear that you can’t just march into town. I’m thinking we leave you and Cody outside, somewhere, and Hal and I go in for a visit on our own.”

“I suppose you’re right. I think I know a place,” I answered. As much as I wanted to go in, myself, I knew he was right...I’d be spotted in no time and probably end up in a cell, or worse. I remembered

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there was an old barn next to a burned out house on the north side of town, just before the main trail started down the canyon. I'd been by a few times in the past week and hadn't seen any activity around it. I figured it to be a good place for Cody and me to wait. We might not be able to build a fire, but, hopefully, we wouldn't be there long enough to need one.

When we got there, I could see that, unlike the house, the barn was still in fair shape. I dismounted, pushed open the sliding door, and we all walked in. There were even some feed sacks left there for the horses.

Mister Dawkins dismounted and was first to speak up. "OK, Montana, what can you tell me about your horse?"

"I'm not sure where he'd be exactly, but the jail is near the middle of town and the main livery is just south of it, probably fifty yards or so. There's no sign that I remember, but you can't miss it. It's a two story building with a big corral behind. If I'm right, they'll put Spirit up there until they decide what to do with him."

"This Spirit of yours...how am I going to find him?"

"You can't miss him, either. He's as big as this Appaloosa, but he's honey-brown with a long mane. Look for the oats and you're likely to find him. He likes to eat and usually finds a way to do it. Once you find him, my saddle is red leather with the letter 'R' in the middle of a circle, burned into

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it. The bags have silver-looking studs on the flaps and should be with the saddle.”

“Okay...you and Cody should be ready to ride when we get back. We might bring company. Incidentally, what was the name of the deputy who was holed up with you?”

“We’ll be ready,” I answered, “and his name’s Micah. If they didn’t already shoot him, I suspect he’s in jail, so there’s probably nothin’ you can do for him, but if there’s any way to find out about him, I’d sure feel better about it.”

“Not sure it’s possible with a stolen horse in tow, but we’ll see what comes up.”

Mister Dawkins motioned for Cody to re-open the barn door and he and Hal rode out into the light snow. I felt pretty helpless watching them head out, comforted only by the thought that I might soon have my horse back.

Chapter 14

By the time Duke and Hal got to town, the weather had turned foul again. The afternoon sun was already low and, what little there was, was mostly soaked up by the snow. The wind had started up, too. Duke knew they didn't have a lot of time before the weather would drive them back out of town. It'd been more than a year since he'd been in Hillsboro but, even in the dim light, it looked somewhat familiar to him. They rode right down Main Street, past the jail and kept an eye out for the livery. When Duke's horse stopped, he raised his hand and pointed.

"Just like the boy said, Hal, there it is."

The livery was exactly like Montana had described it. The front doors were closed so they rode around the side, next to the corral. There were no horses in the corral and no lights on in the barn. Looked like nobody home. Just as well, thought Duke, as he dismounted and tied his horse to the corral fence.

"Let's see if that back door is unlocked," he said to Hal, who had just joined him. They two hopped

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the corral fence and walked over to where the corral connected to the building.

“This side’s open,” Hal replied, as he quietly pushed one of the sliding doors open. Not wanting to surprise anybody, Duke yelled out. “Anybody here?”

There was no answer.

“It’s too dark in here, Duke. We need to find a lantern or we’ll never find our way around.”

Just as Hal finished, Duke answered. “Found one. Got a match?”

Lamplight filled the barn and they could see a row of stalls on the left. There were horses in them, too, and they were a little restless.

“Settle down, boys,” Duke urged, as they walked down the aisle and looked into each stall.

“How’s this?” asked Hal, as he peered into one.

“He’s a beauty, for sure. I can see why Montana is so fond of him. Hey, Spirit, how about a nice hello?”

“On hearing his name, Spirit walked over to the two strangers. He probably smelled his owner on them. Hal began to stroke his face while Duke took the lantern and looked around the stall for a saddle. He found it, hung over the side rail. Duke put the lantern up close and saw the “Circle R” that Montana had told him about...but there were no saddlebags to be seen. He looked around the adjacent stalls and still, no saddlebags.

Duke returned to where Hal was still stroking Spirit. “Looks like the bags are gone, but this is his

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saddle. Let's saddle him up and get him out of here."

Hal grabbed a blanket off a nearby hook and threw it over Spirit's back. "How are we gonna find anything out about Montana's friend?"

Duke threw the saddle over the blanket. "I'm not real comfortable stealing this horse and riding up to the jail, but it's dark enough that we might be able to get close. When Spirit was saddled, they doused the lantern and walked him out the back door, into the corral. They found a gate at the rear of the corral and opened it to let Spirit out, then roped it back shut again, just like they'd found it. They got back to their horses, and, with Spirit in tow, started up the street. When they got to the saloon, they tied off the horses on the dark side of the street. Hal stayed with them while Duke walked back across the street and into the saloon.

The saloon was crowded as Duke walked up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. By the time the bartender served him, he'd already spotted a deputy, sitting just a little further down the bar. As Duke watched, the man who'd occupied the stool next to the deputy got up and left. Duke saw his chance and walked over.

"Anybody sittin' here?" he asked the deputy, who by a count of the glasses in front of him was on his third whiskey.

"Naw, he just left," the deputy answered.

"Much obliged," answered Duke, who took a seat. "I see you're one of the local lawmen," he

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added, pointing to the star. "Are you one of the good ones or one of the bad ones?"

The deputy recoiled. "What do you mean?"

"Relax...just kidding, deputy. It's just that word's out *one* of deputies is behind bars. Sorry, I guess it was a bad joke. I didn't mean anything by it."

The deputy settled back on his stool. "That's all right. I guess it is a little strange. You heard right. One of the boys turned bad and he'll be payin' for it."

"Too bad. Seems a shame when a law man turns bad. What'd he do, if I can ask?"

"I guess they got him for stealin'," he answered, "all I really know is that he's in a heap of trouble with the sheriff. At least that's what the sheriff said. Where'd you hear about him?"

"Oh, I just got into town and heard a few of the fellas talkin' out on the street. I'm a part-time writer and I'm always on the lookout for such characters. You don't suppose I could talk to him, do you? I just started a new story and could use a colorful character."

"I don't know that, either. You'd have to go over to the jail and find out. They might let you, then again, they might not."

Duke decided then and there, to see it through. He tossed down the rest of his whiskey and got up. "Been a pleasure. Have a good night." Seconds later he was out the door and headed for the jail. Hal was still across the street and watched silently

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as his boss was walked toward the jail, but he'd been instructed to stay put and that's what he did.

Duke saw a light on in the jail and walked on in. He found one man inside, sitting behind the desk, looking over some papers.

"Howdy," he said, not knowing if this was the famous Sheriff Burns or one of his deputies. The man was slow to look up and slower to respond.

"Yeah, what do *you* want?" he finally answered in an already bothered tone.

"Name's Dawkins. I'm a lumberman by trade, but write stories about the west for fun. I hear you got a lawman prisoner. I'd like to talk to him, if you could see your way to allowin' it. Seems like he might give me some ideas for my next story."

"Word travels fast," the man behind the desk replied. "I think I'll pass. Yeah, we got such a prisoner, but he hasn't been tried yet and I don't think it'd do anybody any good to give him any more publicity than he already has."

"I understand your point," Duke answered, "but I'm not plannin' any publicity. I haven't even sold any of my stories, yet. Maybe someday when I'm old and retired... In the meantime, is there anyway I could ask Sheriff Burns? I hear tell he's a pretty fair man."

"Not sure where you're getting your information about me bein' a fair man, but I guess you could spend a few minutes with him, so long as I don't hear about it either in the paper or on the street. Like I said, he's not been tried yet and I don't want

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any stories leaking out about what he says. He may not even want to talk.”

“I apologize, sheriff. I didn’t realize it was you I was talkin’ to. I’d sure be obliged. I’d only take a few minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll let you in, but aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Oh, sure,” Duke answered, as he reached under his coat and unbuckled his holster and handed it to the sheriff.

Sheriff Burns picked the key ring off his desk and walked back through the door to the cell area. Duke followed. When they got to Micah’s cell, the sheriff stopped, turned and started back out toward the door. “You got five minutes,” he mumbled, as he closed the door behind him.

Micah was up and watched the two enter the room, then watched as Sheriff Burns left. He remained silent, not knowing who this man was or why he was there.

“You awake?” asked Duke, as he walked up and put one of his hands on a cell bar.

“Who’s askin’?” replied Micah, figuring this was either another of Burns boys, or maybe a lawyer.

This time Duke responded in a real low voice, almost a whisper. “Name’s Duke. You Micah?”

“Yeah, what do you want?”

“I’m here on behalf of a friend of yours. A young fella...calls himself Montana.”

“Are you really here for Montana? How do I know you’re not here for the sheriff?”

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“If I was to tell you I have Spirit outside with a Circle R brand on his saddle and no saddlebags with no papers from the mayor’s office, would you begin to believe me?”

Micah remained suspicious, but wondered how Burns’ men would know Spirit’s name and about the missing saddlebags. “If you’re here for Montana, tell me where he is and how you come to know him?”

“When he got separated from you yesterday morning, he got chased east and right onto my property. Right now he and one of my men are sitting inside an old barn on the edge of town, waiting for me to bring his horse back to him. He’s also looking for those saddlebags with the papers he needs. We found the horse but not the bags. Won’t do him much good to meet up with the U.S. Marshal if he doesn’t find those bags.”

On hearing that, Micah was convinced that this man *was* telling the truth. “Where’s *my* horse?” he asked.

“Back at my ranch, up in the hills. That long ride plumb tuckered him out and we left him there to get his strength back. Montana near killed him trying to stay ahead of that deputy.”

“Okay, I believe you. What’s your plan? Are you here to break me out?”

“Hardly...I’m afraid you’re in for a while. Montana sent us to find the horse and bags and we only have a few minutes. Does the sheriff have the bags?”

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“No. On the way into town, I was able to drop ‘em off on our way up the canyon trail. I threw ‘em off the west side of the trail, just after we started up. With any luck, they’re still there, papers and all.”

“Good thinking, son. We’ll look for them on the way down. Can you tell me anything more about where to look?”

“About a hundred yards after the trail starts to rise, there’s two columns of red rock on the right side. They’re about six feet apart and I threw the bags right in between them. They’re not in very far, but likely far enough that somebody else comin’ up the trail wouldn’t spot them.”

Just then they heard the handle on the door to the office turn. “SO, DID YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE AN OUTLAW?” Duke asked back in his normal voice.

“I’M NOT SAYIN’ ANYTHING TO YOU OR ANYBODY ELSE UNTIL I SEE A LAWYER. SHERIFF, GET THIS GUY OUT OF HERE AND LET ME SLEEP. I’M NOT TALKIN’ TO ANYBODY UNTIL YOU GET ME A LAWYER.”

“Shut up. You’re lucky I don’t turn you loose and let the deputies take care of you.” He motioned for Duke to come out and held the door. “Didn’t say much, did he?” the sheriff asked, sitting back down in his chair.

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“No, I guess it was a stupid idea. Didn’t help me at all with my story. I thank you, anyways. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Duke responded.

“Well, you can’t say I didn’t warn you. He’s a hard one,” the sheriff answered. “You’re gonna have to hit the trail, now. I need to lock up for the night.”

Duke was half-way out the door when he turned back. “Thanks anyway, sheriff. You don’t have to worry about publicity. I don’t know anymore about him now than I did when I went in.” Duke turned and started back up the walkway until he heard the door close behind him. He then changed course and headed into the darkness across the street. Neither of them spoke as Duke mounted his great horse and he and Hal started down the street with Spirit in tow. They were well out of town when Duke finally spoke up.

“I got to talk to that boy, Micah. Sheriff let me talk to him in private, and he told me where he hid the bags. With any luck, we might be able to find them on the way back down the canyon.”

Hal wondered how his boss had worked all that, but chalked it up to another one of his various talents...when Duke puts his mind to something, it generally happens. They picked up their pace to try to salvage what was left of the light. Unfortunately, when they got near the bottom of the canyon trail, darkness had crept in and they couldn’t even find the twin rock columns that Micah’d referred to.

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“Not much point in our continuing to look in the dark,” Duke finally admitted. Let’s get on back to the barn. We’ll spend the night there and try again at first light.”

Chapter 15

Cody didn't seem to be at all worried at when his boss wasn't back by sundown. I, on the other hand, was. From my limited experience, I knew both the mayor and sheriff were outlaws...the worst kind. The kind that used the law to their own purpose. As we sat there in the cold, dark barn, I wondered what Sheriff Burns was getting out of this. It was pretty clear what Kane was. He was either getting money from the railroad for getting the rights to those farms or, more likely, he'd be a part owner of it. Sheriff Burns, on the other hand, couldn't have *that* much claim to it. I suspect he was just getting paid off by Kane, with maybe some promise of land when it was all over. I remembered something that I'd read in one of mother's books. It was that "money corrupts." I guess it was true. Those were sure some corrupt folks.

I was just putting those ideas away when Cody and I heard horses. We doused the lantern and both went to the door and peeked out the crack to make sure who was there before we welcomed anybody in.

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“OPEN UP!” yelled Duke. On hearing his voice, we backed off. Cody pulled one side of the door open while I re-lit the lantern. As soon as they got inside, my heart jumped. There he was, my best friend in the world!

“YOU GOT HIM! I can’t thank you enough,” I yelled as I ran up and grabbed his bridle. I put both hands on his face and let him get a good whiff of me. “That’s it, old friend. You’re home. Well, not really home, but close enough.”

Spirit was glad to see me, too. He shook my hands off and nuzzled me so hard he near knocked me down.

“He’s a beauty, all right,” said Hal. We found him right where you said and he never balked once. I guess he smelled you on us. But that’s just some of the news.” Hal turned to Duke, who’d just dismounted, to finish.

“We got good news and bad news. The bad news is, we couldn’t find the saddlebags. The good news is, I got to talk to your friend Micah and I think I know where the bags are, papers and all.”

“Is he okay? Where do they have him?”

Duke pulled the saddle off his horse and threw it across a stall rail. “We’ll get to all that, but let’s get a fire going, first. The weather’s so miserable, there’ll be nobody pokin’ around here tonight. Seems no need for us all to freeze to death. Your friend’s fine, but let’s find some wood before we don’t have enough light to even do that.”

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It was nearly dark now and a good thing the barn still had some old straw laying around. We cleared a small area in the middle of the dirt floor and Cody started a small straw fire. That gave us enough light to find some kindling. The kindling gave us enough light to break apart a few of the boards that were laying against one wall. It took us twenty minutes or so, but, pretty soon, we had a nice warm fire going. Hal got some grub out of his saddlebags and it wasn't long until we were all dining on biscuits and beans. It wasn't much, but nobody was complaining. We got back to talking while we ate.

“Like Hal said, we found your horse in the livery, right where you said. Nobody was home so we came in through the corral door. Your saddle was in the same stall, but we couldn't find the saddlebags. On the way back out of town, I stopped in the saloon where I ran into one of the deputies at the bar. I got to talking to him and asked about the lawman who'd gone bad. He admitted that there was such a boy in the jail. While Hal kept the horses in the dark, I visited the jail and met your Sheriff Burns. He was just finishing up for the day and, when I told him I was writing a story and would like to be able to talk to the deputy, he agreed and gave me five minutes with him alone.”

I shouldn't have interrupted, but I did. “How was he? Did they beat him up?”

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“He looked pretty good, considering. He didn’t want to talk to me, at first...thought I was another one of Burns’ boys. When I told him about runnin into you, he started to trust me and opened up. Told me that he cut the saddlebags loose on the way into town. He said he waited until they’d started up the canyon trail and threw them behind a couple of rock columns, just off the right side of the trail. Hal and I looked on the way down, but it was too dark. I suspect they’re still there, with all the weather and all, but we won’t be able to see clear enough to find them until morning. That’s just as well as we couldn’t get far in this weather tonight, anyway. Also, it may be a few days before we find accommodations as good as these, again. I suspect it’ll be morning before they find Spirit gone. By then, we need to be well out of here.”

“Mister Dawkins, I feel bad about getting you involved in all this. Kane and Burns are crooks, all right, but for the moment they have the law on their side and...and that makes us the criminals.”

“Montana, don’t you worry yourself about that. This isn’t my first rodeo. That lumber company I own didn’t build itself. My family had to fight long and hard to build it and protect it. Sometimes we fought Indians, sometimes bad guys, and on some rare occasions, what passed as the *law*. What you learn is that all men have an evil side. Good men keep it in check, but a badge doesn’t necessarily guarantee a good man behind it. No, this country is getting better every year, but there are still fights

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that have to be fought...and this looks like one of them.”

“Well, I don’t know how to thank you...”

“No need. Anyway, we’re a far cry from getting all this worked out. Best thing we can do tonight is get our sleep and find those bags early tomorrow, before we get too much company from town.”

I guess that said it all. None of us knew what tomorrow would bring, but, for the first time in quite a while, I felt like I was ready for it. Hal agreed to keep the fire going for a while and the rest of us bedded down in the straw. It was awful good getting Spirit back. That, alone, made this all worthwhile.

We all slept well and got up early, before the light. The barn was a good six or seven miles from the canyon trail and Mister Dawkins wanted us to get back there by sun-up. He said we could eat later. So, we broke camp and headed back out into the cold and dark. It wasn’t that bad, though. For the first time in a few days, the wind had let up. It was cold, but no snow and no wind. That made the riding a lot easier. Normally, we could have covered the distance inside an hour, but riding in the dark over unfamiliar ground takes longer. It was all of two hours before we came to the trail, and we timed it about right. The sun wasn’t up yet, but there was enough light for us to see the river below and the canyon above us.

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“Micah said it wasn’t far up. We need to keep on the lookout for two red rock columns off to the right,” Mister Dawkins said, as we started up the trail. Cody had taken the lead but didn’t recognize them as he passed by.

“Hold it!” I yelled, staring right at two rock columns about twenty feet off the right side of the trail.

“Wow! How’d I miss that?” Cody asked as we all turned toward them. I wasn’t sure they were the right ones, because all we saw was snow. Then Spirit walked over to a spot just under the left one and put his nose down to the ground. Then he kicked the snow with his right hoof. There they were! At first, only a few strands of rawhide over the snow, but as he continued to paw, the bags appeared. I jumped down and lifted them out of the snow.

“Here they are, just like he said!”

I quickly untied one of the bags and stuck my hand inside. Papers! “They’re still here!”

“Good job, Spirit,” Mister Dawkins said, beating me to it. “Now let’s get those strapped on and get out of here.”

I threw the bags over Spirit’s back and lashed them to the saddle. I wasn’t only glad we found the bags, but I was glad Micah had told us the truth. I’d been right all along...he was a good man. Now we had to do what we could to get him out of that jail.

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When the bags were secured, we all headed back down the trail, toward the flatland. It was going to be another cloudy day, but at least there was light enough now to see the ground in front of us. We'd already gone five or so miles when Mister Dawkins pulled up next to me.

"Montana, you know this area a lot better than I do. If we're gonna head off west to that pass, you need to tell us where."

"No problem, Mister Dawkins. The trail we want splits off another mile north. With any luck, we ought to be able to make the pass sometime tomorrow, but we'll have to find shelter out there somewhere, tonight."

"Sounds like a plan," he answered, "and stop calling me Mister Dawkins. Name's Duke."

"Okay, Duke...I'll do that."

Seemed funny to me to be calling a man Mister Dawkins' age by his first name, but it was his call. I just hoped I'd remember.

The further west you go from the Bighorn River, the more mountains you run into. Hills, really, but if you keep on heading west, they'll become the mountains you'd just as soon avoid, particularly in winter. It'd been a long time since I rode this area but I remember it well. Back when I was just old enough to hold a rifle, my father brought Josh and me out here on a hunting trip. We were supposed to be hunting mountain goat, but never saw one. Instead, we got a few elk and one real mean bear.

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But, that's another story. Anyway, I still remember the trip and knew enough to head north as much as the trails would allow. At one point Duke asked why we kept taking north-west trails and I explained to him that, by doing so, we could stay on the flat land longer. He seemed fine with that and on we rode throughout the day. When we finally got what I considered north enough, we changed to a more western heading. By five o'clock it was near dark and we were still a long ways from the Bozeman Pass. I knew it was about time to find a place for the night. We'd just crossed a small stream that hadn't froze over yet when we saw lights up ahead.

"Montana, what do you make of that?" Duke asked.

"Not sure," I answered. "It's been a long time and I'm not exactly sure how far west we are. Could be a big ranch, but they got an awful lot of lanterns on if it is."

"We better find out. I don't think it'd be wise to keep pushing tonight. It's been a long day and we need to rest the men and the horses."

I knew Duke was right, so we headed toward the lights. As we got closer, it was clear that this was no ranch. It was more like a small town. There was one big building with a lot of little ones attached to it. Then there were other medium sized ones nearby. Our questions were partly answered when we rode up and saw the sign..."Hunter's Hot Springs Lodge."

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“What’s a lodge?” asked Cody.

“I reckon it’s a special kind of hotel,” Duke replied, still looking the place over. “Probably a fancy one too, by the looks of it. Under the circumstances, it might be a little *too* fancy for us. Let’s move on up the street and see if there’s somewhere a little less conspicuous.”

It was real dark now, and we were real cold and tired. Didn’t matter to me where we put up, but Duke seemed to have something on his mind and I already trusted his instincts. We’d ridden almost to the other end of town when we spotted a livery. It was a big one, too, at least for the size of this place. Lights were on and, late as it was, it looked like somebody was home. We pulled up at the rail and dismounted. Duke went in first and the rest of us followed. When we got inside, we got quite a surprise – it was warm! Most liveries weren’t heated much but this one was an exception, and a welcome one. Some of the heat was coming from a regular heat-stove. Some of it was coming from the forge. A blacksmith was pumping on the bellows full-out when he looked up. You could see the surprise on his face.

“What is it I can do for you boys?” he said, continuing to pump up the flames.

Duke answered, “We’re passing through and need a place to bed down...some feed for our horses, too. Can you help us?”

“I’d like to, boys, but I’m runnin’ late on this job and if I don’t get it done soon, I could be here all

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night. Darned bellows failed me this afternoon and put me hours behind. Do any of you know how to put proper shoes on a horse?"

Duke looked back at us and we all nodded. A lot of our horses didn't wear shoes, but it seemed like, from the nods, that most of us knew how.

"Sure thing, mister," Duke answered. "What's the problem?"

"Do you see that team over there?" he pointed over toward the rear of the barn where there were three of the prettiest black horses I'd ever seen, tied to a rail. "They all need shoes and they need 'em tonight. My son hurt his ankle a few days ago and can't even stand on it. If you boys could help me out, I think I could see you spendin' the night here, feed and all."

"That sounds like a good deal. What do you want us to do?" Duke answered.

He finally stopped pumping and walked over to us. "Four of you, huh? I need to get the old shoes off those three stallions and fit new ones. I've already got three done, but that was when the bellows broke and stopped me cold. If you boys are as good as you say, you could start pullin' shoes. I could use one of you on the bellows while I pound a few more out. Incidentally, they call me Pa. What do they call you?"

"I'm Duke. These folks are Cody, Hal and Montana, and we're all good with stock. Hal, you three go get those old shoes off while I help Pa,

here. Hey, Pa, do you mind if we bring our horses inside?"

"You better," Pa answered. "Wasn't a bad day but the weather's turnin'. Not a fit night for man nor beast out there."

This was working out just fine. We had a warm place to stay, the horses would be taken care of and all we had to do was shoe a few of his horses. I was glad I trusted Duke's judgment.

We got right to work and were done in less than an hour.

"Well, that's the last of 'em," Pa said, when we put the last one back in the stall. "I surely appreciate the help. You boys feel free to bed down up near the fire and have your way with the feed. How are you fixed for food?"

"We're okay, thanks Pa," Duke replied. "I got a question, though. Those horses look like kin. Who's are they and why was it so important that they keep you here all night working on them?"

"I see you boys aren't real familiar with this place. Hunter's Hot Springs isn't just a hotel. It's a hunting lodge. Doc Hunter built it some years ago and it's become a favorite for rich easterners. They come here to hunt and Doc has a crew that takes 'em out. It's gettin' to be quite a business."

"We rode by it on the way in," I offered. "Looked mighty fancy."

"Oh, it is. Doc's got more than twenty rooms there now. It's more popular in the summer but two lawmen from Dakota pulled in about a week

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ago for a hunt. They got back to the lodge this morning and met up with another fella just pulled in from Dakota, himself. He brought word of a terrible snowstorm back that way. Says it killed a lot of stock. As soon as the lawmen heard, they decided they had to get back by Thursday. That means they have to leave in the morning. One of 'em, a fella named Bullock... Seth Bullock, stopped by here around three, and told me his partner wanted the horses re-shod before they left. It didn't look like much of a job until the bellows broke. When you boys rode in, I was planning on spending most the evening here. Now I can go home and see the wife. I'm much obliged."

"It's us that owes you, Pa. We're on our way to the Bozeman Pass and been ridin' all day. You were our light in the forest, so to speak."

Pa threw a bucket of water on his forge and headed for the door. "Might see you boys in the mornin'...then again, might not. Either way, it's been a pleasure. You can keep that stove lit all night with the lumber over in the corner. Have a good night."

With that, Pa disappeared out into the dark and we hit the hay.

Chapter 16

By the time I opened my eyes, Duke was already up and had a pot of coffee brewing on the stove. I reckon it was his “quiet time” again. It wasn’t long, though, before we were all up and raring to go. We were almost saddled up when the big door slid open and in walked two men, each carrying the prettiest saddles I believe I’d ever seen. They weren’t exactly the same, but were both shiny-black with silver studs all around the sides. Looked like real silver, too. I’d seen saddles kind of like them before, down in Fort Worth. I was told they were Spanish with real Spanish leather. When the two men headed over to the three black horses, we figured they were the lawmen Pa had talked about last night.

Duke was first to speak. “You two must be the Dakota law men Pa told us about. I hope you find your horses shod to your pleasure.”

The smaller man walked over to one of the horses, lifted a foreleg and took a good look. When he’d seen enough, he put the leg back down and walked over to Duke with his right hand extended.

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“Didn’t know it took so many to do it, but they look fine. Couldn’t have done better myself. Name’s Theodore, but I go by Teddy.”

“I’m Duke, and these are Hal and Cody who work for me. The young one there goes by Montana.” Duke then turned to the taller of the two. “I reckon then you must be Mister Bullock. Nice to meet both of you. We’re just passin’ through, ourselves. Came on Doc last night right after he’d repaired his forge. He was running late on your job and we offered to help for the warmth of his barn. You’re both welcome to what’s left of the coffee. It’s not much, but it’s hot.”

“Name’s Seth and we thank you for your good work and your offer, but we’ll have to pass this time. We got word there was a devil-storm back east and we need to get back there. I’m county sheriff and Teddy helps me out from time to time. Bad storms make for unhappy people and when they get unhappy, we get busy.”

“You men did us a service and we won’t forget it,” Teddy added. “If your travels ever take you back Deadwood way, make sure to stop by. Seth’ll see to it you’re taken care of.”

“Much obliged,” Duke answered. “I’ll do that. You all have a safe trip.”

Then, kind of a funny thing happened. While Sheriff Seth continued preparing their horses, Teddy walked over to Duke, shook his hand and then, in turn, shook each of ours. It wasn’t one of those sissy handshakes, either. When he came to

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me, he grabbed by hand hard and shook it like a man whose life we'd just saved. He looked straight into our eyes, too. I could tell because he wore big, round glasses that magnified his. Just seemed funny. That was a handshake I'd remember. When he was done, he went back over and helped his friend with the horses.

"We're off in the other direction," Duke said, as he cinched his saddle on his horse. "Let's hope that storm heads off north. Weather's bad enough for this early in the season and we've got a long ride ahead of us."

The two finished before we did and, with their third horse in tow, bid us goodbye and left as quickly as they'd arrived. A few minutes later we were ready ourselves, when the door opened again and Pa walked in.

"How was the night, boys? Did my old stove keep the ice off?"

I answered. "Sure did, Pa. The horses appreciated it, too. We want to thank you for helping us out."

Before Pa could answer, Duke joined in. "Yes, sir. Montana speaks for all of us, Pa. We're much obliged."

"I see you met the two owners of those horses we shod. I saw them headin' out, on my way in. Funny pair, aren't they?"

"Seemed pleasant enough," Duke answered. "Said they had to get back to Deadwood due to the storm. They were in some hurry."

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Pa continued, "After I left you all last night, I stopped by the lodge for a nightcap and ran into both of them. We had a nice chat. Turns out the tall one is Sheriff of Deadwood. The other one's from back east...New York. Lost his wife a few years back at childbirth and came west to ranch. But somethin' was eatin' at him because he said he'd had enough, and needed to get back east. He's got a daughter back there -- reckon he misses her. Name's Roosevelt. They're both interesting fella's. I'm glad you all had the chance to meet. What did they think of our work?"

Again, Duke answered. "Teddy took a close look and tipped his hat to all of us. I don't know much about his problems, but he knows his horses."

"That he does," replied Pa. "I see you boys are on your way out, too. If you come back this way, feel free to stop by again. I might be able to use the help."

"We'll remember that, Pa. Same to you if you ever end up back Bighorn way. I have a lumber camp southeast of there and we could always use a good smithie."

We said our goodbyes and were off too, into the dark, cold morning. I figured we'd make Bozeman Pass by noon. As the cold wind bit my face I got to thinkin'. The west sure was big. Ever since I left home I'd met some of the most peculiar people. I can't imagine wantin' to leave it...but I hoped Teddy finds his peace back east.

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The cold wind was blowing from the west and right into our faces all morning. It was near noon when we finally spotted the pass up ahead. The small hills that we'd been riding through were about to give way to some real mountains. Anybody riding to or from Bozeman would have to use the pass to get through, and I was counting on that. None of us wanted to ride all the way to Butte, so I stayed hopeful that we could catch Josh, and maybe Marshal Preston, as they came through. Of course, that meant we had a choice to make. Either camp out in the pass itself, or stay in the nearby town. Clark City was just east of there and would be the town they'd stop into for supplies or to spend the night.

"What's that town up ahead, Montana?" Duke asked as we closed in on it.

"I think they call it Clark City, Duke," I answered. "The railroad put it up a few years ago when they started building the tunnel. Wasn't done yet when I was last here, but I see it's grown a lot since then. Duke, we have to decide whether we camp out in the pass or wait 'em out here. I suspect they'll stop by after they ride the pass. It's the last civilization they'll see for a while."

"What's the alternative?" Duke pressed.

"It's not good. The pass is high, rough and probably windy. Settin' up camp in it would be miserable. Also, I heard the railroad finally finished their tunnel. Given how high the pass is, the tunnel's got to be a long one, but if a horse

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could get through it safe, a smart rider might take it instead of goin' over the top. That means we could be on top while Josh and the marshal use the tunnel, and pass by right beneath us. Same thing if we watched the tunnel. They might go over the top and we'd miss 'em that way.

Duke took his hat off and scratched his silver hair. "Sounds like Clark City *is* the place to catch 'em. Might be warm, too."

The last time I was out this way was almost five years back. Back then, Clark City was a tent city that the railroad used as a base for digging the tunnel. I guess they couldn't get a steam engine over the pass, so they had no choice. By the looks of it, things had sure changed. Riding in, we found ourselves in a real town. The main street had a dozen or more buildings on either side. We counted two hotels, two saloons and even a bank.

"I thought you said this was Clark City?" Duke said, looking at the sign over the bank. It read, "Livingston, Montana."

"This is the same place, Duke. They must have changed the name."

We rode up to one of the hotels and dismounted. "Let's see if we can get some rooms and some information," he mumbled as he tied his horse to the rail. We did the same, and followed him in.

Once in, there was a short hotel counter with a little silver bell on it. Duke pushed the button on top and it dinged. He continued to do so until the clerk came through a door.

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“Can I help you gentlemen?”

“Would you have two rooms for us? We need to stay a few nights and don’t mind doublin’ up,” Duke asked.

“We do. That’ll be fifty cents a night...per room.”

“Kind of expensive,” Duke muttered. “I assume that’ll cover bedding down the horses, too?”

“Well, normally, no, but since you asked, you can put them up in the shed behind the hotel, but I’ll need to charge you twenty cents a day for feed, though...if that’s all right?”

“Sounds like a deal,” Duke answered, as he put four dollars on the counter. “Start with this and I’ll even up with you if we stay longer. I got a question for you, though. Would you know if the U.S. Marshal ever comes around these parts?”

“He does, but I can’t tell you when. You’d have to check at the jail. Tom Mitchell’s our sheriff and he’d be the one to ask.”

“Much obliged,” Duke said as he headed us back to the door. He threw me one of the keys. “According to these keys, we’ve got rooms two and six. Let’s get the horses taken care of and meet up in one whichever is the larger. I’d like to take a closer look into those saddlebags. We’re banking a lot on what’s in them and I’d like to take a peek before we get any further into this.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I answered as I headed out the door.

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An hour later we'd fed, watered and bedded the horses down in a better-than-expected shed. Not knowing much about the town, I brought my saddle and bags up to the room with me. I've heard that saddles, particularly good ones, have a tendency to get stolen in some towns and I didn't want to risk it. To my surprise, Duke picked me for a roommate, leaving Hal and Cody to bunk together. I was a little surprised because the three of them seemed pretty close. Fortunately, our room had two beds. I wasn't sure what Hal and Cody's room was like and didn't ask. After I freshened up, I put the saddlebags up on my bed and moved a little table with one of the lanterns on it, closer. It was just then that Duke, who'd disappeared for a few minutes, stuck his head in the door.

"You go ahead and start sorting through them, Montana. I'll be most interested in the ones that tie your mayor to the railroad. I have a short errand and should be back in fifteen or twenty minutes. If Hal and Cody show up, put 'em to work."

Duke disappeared again and I began sorting back through the papers. It seemed like a long time since Micah and I'd done the same thing.

I made three piles. One, for papers that didn't seem to relate to much of what we were looking for. A second pile would be those that talked about land or the railroad, and the third would be anything that specifically tied Kane to the railroad, taxes, or land. I noticed that the one's I'd been through the other night still lacked any particular

order. On the other hand, those that Micah had reviewed had been separated out, not unlike the way I had in mind. Apparently, he'd done a better job of it than I had.

I'd been working on the bed some fifteen minutes when there was a knock on the door. "COME ON IN!" I yelled, and Cody and Hal joined me. I explained what I was doing and handed them each a small pile to sort through.

"Where'd Duke go?" Hal asked.

"Not sure...said he had some errands and that he'd be back in a few minutes. I was hopin' we could get a lot of this organized before he got back." I guess they agreed, because we all went right back to work.

It was another half hour before Duke got back.

"I see you're all being productive. How's it going?"

"We're near done with the first sort," I answered. I then explained my process to him.

"Sounds good – while you boys are sorting the remainder of that pile, let me take this one over to the other light and get familiar with it." He picked up what I called pile number three – the real important ones, and walked over to the other bed. We worked the next twenty minutes in silence until Cody, Hal and I finished the sort.

"That's it," I said, as I got up and walked the last of pile three over to where Duke was working. He didn't look up at first, but when I held out the

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small handful of additions, he turned and took them from me.

“Montana, I think you’ve really got something here. I think I found something you missed, though. He held one page up to the light flicking, looked at it and handed it to me. “You might not be able to read it in this light, but it’s a letter from the president of the Big Sky Railroad Company to your Mayor Kane. It congratulates him on becoming a officer, and that with the expansion through the Bighorn Lake corridor, they’ll be able to partner up with the Northern Pacific...and that will make them all wealthy men. I don’t know what’s on these new pages, but this single letter is enough to prove that the Mayor of Hillsboro is a compromised man, bought and paid for by the Big Sky Railroad Company.”

“Now comes the hard part,” I answered. “We have to find Josh and Marshal Preston and convince him that these documents show Kane and his bought-and-paid-for sheriff, are crooks. I just hope we can do it before anybody else gets hurt.”

Duke said we should all go to bed early, get as much rest as we can, and meet up downstairs in the morning.

“I’d sure like to do that,” I answered, “but I don’t want us to miss Josh if he happened to pass through during the night.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Duke responded. “I think I’ve taken care of that. Let’s go to bed and I’ll explain at breakfast.”

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I hadn't known Duke for much more than a day, but something in his voice gave me real comfort and I completely agreed with what he'd said, though I was curious about what he'd been up to.

I must have slept like a log because the first thing I was aware of in the morning was sunlight coming through the window. Given the terrible weather we'd been having, it was as strange a sight as it was welcome. It also meant that I slept well beyond my normal wake-up time. I looked over at the other bed and Duke was gone. I got dressed fast and made my way down to the little restaurant off the lobby. There I found Duke and Hal having their coffee.

"I thought you up and died during the night," Duke said. "If you hadn't come down when you did, I was thinking of calling for the doc."

"Sorry, Duke. I don't know what got into me. I'm usually up before the chickens."

"I'm kidding, Montana. I suspect this has been a tough week for you and figured God was giving you the rest you needed."

Embarrassed, I wanted to get right down to business. "Duke, I'm still curious about what you did to prevent us from missing Josh? Can you share it with me?"

"Sure, Montana. Like I said before, I'm fairly new to this area, but not new to the trail. I figured if you were right and that your friend brought the marshal through the pass, day or night, he'd be

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sure to check in with the local sheriff. Now I realize our current status doesn't afford us that same luxury, because until such time as somebody determines your mayor and sheriff to be criminals, *we're* wanted men. Thus, that wasn't an option."

"I must not be getting it," I responded.

"Hush, boy. I'm gettin' there. When we came in last night, I noticed there was only one livery in town. I also figured the marshal and your friend would need to tend their horses and would have to stop by. When I left you boys in the room, I went over to that livery and had a nice talk with the smithy. I told him there was five bucks in it for him, if the marshal was to stop by, to tell him we needed to see him right away. Said he might be traveling with a boy named Josh. He said he'd a done it for free, but could sure use the money, so we have a deal. So settle down and drink your coffee."

I suppose I'd of thought of that eventually, but was glad I didn't have to. The more I saw of Duke, the more I liked him.

Chapter 17

We spent the rest of the day hanging around town and laying low. I looked forward to spending a little time with Spirit as he and I'd been through a lot and I was just getting over the thought of nearly losing him. The hotel corral had been okay for the first night, but with it so cold, later in the morning we moved the horses down to the livery. Hal accused me of having "ants" because I couldn't sit still long. Maybe I *was* a little nervous, but I had good reason. Duke and his men had been a big help, but I really didn't know if and when Josh would be coming back this way. If I was right, it wouldn't be too long, but with all the hard weather, it occurred to me that I might not be right. What if it was another week...or more? I couldn't ask Duke and his men to stay here forever. What would we do then? At some point I guess I'd have to start out for Butte, myself. I hoped it didn't come to that.

By mid-afternoon I'd already been down to the livery and back a few times. It was also getting colder and starting to snow again. I felt a little guilty about being put up on a warm hotel while

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Josh was out on the trail, and Lord knows what manner of havoc Kane and Burns were up to back in Hillsboro. My last visit to the livery lasted about an hour when I decided it was time to get back to the hotel to see if there'd been any word on Josh or the marshal. I made it back there and found nobody home. I figured they'd wandered over to the saloon next door for a drink, so I headed over that way. I'd just made it up the saloon steps when somebody grabbed me by the coat-tail and pulled me back out of the doorway.

"Hey! What's goin' on?" I spun around with my arm pulled back, ready to throw a punch.

"Shhhh...quiet and come here." It was Cody!

He continued to pull me down the walkway until we made it around the side of the building.

"Cody...what's this all about? What's goin' on?"

"Duke told me to stop you before you made it in the door...seems you have a guest at the hotel," he replied, still whispering.

"A guest? Did Josh finally show up? I've been down at the livery and he didn't stop by there."

"No, this fella wears a badge. Name's Burns. He told the clerk he was lookin' for a boy who goes by Montana. Fortunately, the clerk didn't know your name, so he said he didn't know of any such boy. There's another deputy with him, too. They're cold, tired and mean lookin'. Duke saw 'em come in the saloon and recognized him from his visit to the jail. He figures he's lookin' for you. He probably doesn't know that we're together yet, but

it might not take too long for him to figure it out. Duke just said to keep you out of there.”

“Shoot...they must have been trailing us since we left town. How’d they know we....”

Hal interrupted, “Doesn’t matter now, Montana. Right now you’re in big trouble and if that sheriff figures out we’re traveling together, we’re all in trouble. Let’s get you back to your horse. I suggest you head out toward the pass for the night. We’ll try to find you in the morning. In the meantime, grab some blankets from the livery and don’t be too obvious. If they’ve followed you this far, they must know you have the mayor’s papers and they’re likely to keep at it.”

“Thanks, Hal. I’ll do that. You tell Duke I’ll be on this end of the pass and keeping an eye out for you in the morning. Don’t worry about me...I’ll be okay.”

The words were easy to say, but I knew they weren’t true. The weather was turning foul again and I had no light to travel by. At least, I thought, with the new snow falling, they wouldn’t be able to track me.

Fifteen minutes after my encounter with Cody, Spirit and I were already clear of town, headed west. Recalling Hal’s suggestion, I was able to find a few horse blankets at the livery and grabbed them. Looked like I was going to need them, too. I’d only been up this way once before but I remember it gained elevation fast. Actually, there wasn’t much of a trail, given the amount of snow

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that'd fallen over the past few hours. I'd been in near perfect darkness before, but never in the snow and wind. If it hadn't been for Spirit, I think I might have headed back and tried to hide out in town. Spirit didn't know the area at all, but he could smell where the other horses had been and seemed to move forward with some sense of direction. I know we started out heading west, but it'd be easy to get turned around and, for all I know, we might have. But, Spirit continued to move ahead... curiously certain of where we were going. Once again, my life was in his hands...or legs. I suspect any normal horse wouldn't have left the livery.

We rode for maybe half an hour when I couldn't take it anymore. If we were really on a trail, it took us by a small grove of trees. I shifted Spirit over into them, hoping to find some shelter. We hadn't gone far when I spotted what looked like a shed. The wind whipped my eyes as I opened them as wide as I could to figure out what this was. I dismounted and walked Spirit closer. I was right...it had *been* a shed of some kind, but wasn't any more. Just two walls and half a roof.

“Well, Spirit...I guess this is a good as it's gonna get. Let's get inside and see if we can, at least, block the wind. It looks like it's gonna be a long night.”

After a few minutes of rearranging old wood panels, I was able to partially block the wind, and we actually had a little bit of a roof over us. Wasn't

much and a fire was out of the question, but it'd have to do. I shook the snow off some nearby pine boughs and covered our "floor." I then had Spirit lie down under the roof and curled up next to him, pulling the blankets over my head.

Back in Livingston, things were beginning to heat up. After Hal had stopped Montana at the door, he returned to Duke and Cody's table. While the piano played over the voices, Hal whispered to Duke that he'd turned Montana around and that he'd be spending the night up at the pass.

"Good work," Duke whispered back, as he poured another drink from the bottle on the table. He purposely avoided looking at Burns and his deputy, preferring to be surprised if Burns recognized him. It didn't take long.

"Hey you! You're the writer who visited my jail yesterday, aren't you? What brings you out these parts?" Burns asked as he started moving toward the table.

"Oh...sheriff...I didn't recognize you. I could ask you the same thing. We're a long, hard ride from Hillsboro. What are you...following us?" Duke answered with a laugh, trying to keep the conversation light.

Now standing right over them, the man with the badge continued. "You can stop the act, now. I know you've been traveling with that young deputy of mine. Where is he?" he asked as his

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voice grew stronger and his right hand fell to his holster.

“Now hold up a minute sheriff, if you need to know, me and my boys came out this way to do some hunting. We weren’t out of Hillsboro an hour when we were joined by a young man, goes by the name Montana. He wasn’t wearing a badge so I don’t know if he’s who you’re looking for, or not. He asked if he could ride with us and did until we got here. We stayed, he didn’t. Said he had business up north. We didn’t ask any more than that. If it’s him you’re looking for, you’re probably five or six hours behind him. Where, up north, I don’t know. Say, you’re not sheriff out here, too, are you?”

“Funny guy. No, I’m not sheriff out here, but it won’t take me long to find out who is. I’m not done with you boys yet, so stick around. We’ll be talkin’ again.” Burns backed away to rejoin his deputy, then they both headed out the door.

Hal spoke first. “I can see why Montana doesn’t like that man. Can’t say as I do either.”

“Where do you think he’s going?” Cody asked, “Down the get the sheriff?”

“I doubt it,” answered Duke. “He doesn’t know where Montana or those papers are, and bringing the local sheriff into it at this point would likely end with him learning about all that’s in those papers. There’d be no purpose served by Burns doing that. I do worry about Montana spending the night out in the cold, though. But I think the best

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thing for us to do, for now, is just sit tight and keep to our story that we just ran across him and don't have any idea where he went."

The three of them remained in the saloon for another hour. When that time had passed and neither Burns nor his deputy showed back up, it seemed to confirm that he hadn't gone to the sheriff. That, however, left the question of if, when and how he planned to re-engage them.

"Why don't we get back to our rooms and see where all this takes us in the morning. Come sun-up, at least one of us is gonna have to go out to the pass to find our young friend."

Duke, Hal and Cody left the saloon and walked through the new snow, the short distance to the hotel. As the three passed the clerk's desk and started up the stairs, they heard boots in the upstairs hall. Duke held his hand out, stopping his two men and put his finger to his mouth to signal "quiet." Duke slowly drew his pistol from his holster and pulled the hammer back. He then re-started up the stairs. When he got to the top step, he carefully stuck his head around the wall and peeked down the hall. When he saw the hall was empty, he waved his left hand at his men, to follow. By this time, they each had their pistols drawn as well. When Duke got to his room, he motioned Hal and Cody to stop, grabbed the door handle with his left hand and, giving it one quick turn, jerked it open. The room was dark and it appeared nobody was in it. Hal and Cody followed

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him in. Just as Cody started to speak, they heard the boots again – this time behind them. Together, they turned around to see both Burns and his deputy standing there with guns drawn.

“DROP ‘EM...NOW!” Burns said, with his eyes squinted tight and some real anger in his voice.

Duke felt like a fool. He knew something wasn’t right and allowed himself and his men to be bushwhacked. They each dropped their pistols, as directed. “What are you up to, sheriff? I though we already made it clear that we don’t know where that boy is...and that you aren’t sheriff in these parts.”

“I don’t need any local law to take care of this business. You boys move on down the hall until I tell you where to turn in.”

He led them two more doors down the same hall and then stopped outside one of the doors near the end of the hall. The deputy opened it.

“Now, nice and peaceful like, go on in and sit on the floor.”

Under normal circumstances, Duke would have tried to jump them, but knowing that Burns was likely a gunfighter, he wisely determined that he probably wouldn’t be fast enough. They entered the room and sat.

“Now,” Burns said with his pistol right on Duke, “I’m gonna ask you one more time...where did that boy go?”

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Duke responded, "Look sheriff, I'm not hankerin' to get shot and would tell you if I knew. The plain fact is that I don't."

Burns was getting angrier. He was quiet for a few seconds, then shifted his pistol to Cody's head. "You tell me that one more time and I'm gonna put a bullet through this boy's head. If you don't believe me, I'm counting to five. One..two..three..."

Duke was about to say something when Hal jumped in. "Don't shoot! I'll tell you what I heard."

"Fair enough," answered Burns, and moved the pistol to Hal. Duke stared at him, with more than a little anger beginning to show on *his* face.

"While he was riding with us, I asked him where he was headed. Said he had kin at a camp up north of Clark City. Later, he told me this place was Clark City. When we rode in, I saw that it wasn't Clark City, so I'm not sure he even knows where he was going. That all we know."

Burns thought a minute and pulled his pistol away. "That boy is a charmer, so I figure you'd lie for him. You say he headed up north? Doesn't figure...if he was headed up north of here, he wouldn't have come here in the first place. He'd have angled up there from forty miles back. So...if you're lying, why would he come here? If I eliminate 'north', that leaves three other directions. I can eliminate east, 'cause that's where he came from. That leaves south and west. I don't think it's

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south because, again, he'd have turned a ways back. So, he went west. Probably through the railroad tunnel. I don't know why, but I'll bet he's out there somewhere, hiding. How's that for logic, mister writer? Isn't that the way you'd write that story of yours?"

It was quickly obvious to Duke that Sheriff Burns was no fool. Evil, maybe, but no fool. He couldn't blame Hal, either. Hal's story made sense too, and might have saved Cody from getting shot.

After that, Burns decided that he and his deputy would tie up Duke and his men and take turns watching them through the night. Duke wasn't sure what would happen then, but expected that at least one of them would disappear in the morning. Duke, Hal and Cody looked forward to a very uncomfortable night and, more than that, worried about Montana, somewhere out there in the cold.

Chapter 18

I didn't sleep much at all. Sometime around dawn, if there was to be a dawn, I got up and shook a good two inches of snow off my blanket. Spirit got up, too, but I tried to keep him in our little shelter as long as I could. The temperature was way below freezing and, while the wind had let up some in the night, it seemed to be starting up again. The next few hours were to be some of the most uncomfortable I'd ever experienced. With the little bit of brightness coming from the east, I could finally get my bearings. We'd done pretty well last night in the dark. We seemed to be on south wall of the entrance to the pass. That put us in pretty good shape to see anybody coming from either direction. We spent the next few hours fighting the cold and watching the pass, but nobody came through. I knew it was early but I hoped with all my might to see Duke, Hal or Cody...or anybody for that matter.

It must have been near ten in the morning when I gave up. I decided I'd rather take my chances with Burns and company back in town, than freeze to death up on this darn mountain. I saddled up Spirit

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and started down toward the trail. When we got to the trail, I saw the tracks...railroad tracks. I figured as bad as the weather was, we could follow them back to town. Then it occurred to me we could also follow the tracks west, up into the pass. If the tunnel was as done, as it was suppose to be, it might provide enough shelter where we could wait it out a little longer. Given that Spirit doesn't speak English, we couldn't really discuss it, but I'm sure he agreed, so we turned around and headed further up the pass. We'd gone about half a mile when I saw the opening. When we got closer I could see that they'd widened the opening before it narrowed down to be just train-wide. That wider area looked like it could hold us. It wouldn't help with the cold, but it might block the wind and snow. We might even be able to build a fire.

When we got there, I dismounted and pulled Spirit in with me. The opening was some thirty feet across and littered with old railroad equipment. Unfortunately, it was all iron. Nothing to burn. We spent the next two hours in there, waiting. I guess we were waiting for any number of things that might happen. With any luck, Josh and Marshal Preston could ride straight out of the tunnel behind us. More likely, a train would come through. Duke and his men could show up, too. As I thought about it, lots of things *could* happen. Of course, another possibility was that none of those things would happen, and Spirit and I might just freeze to death.

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Sometime around noon, I reckon, a lone rider came into view, coming up from town. I hoped against hope that it was Duke, Hal, or Cody. I'd had about enough of this tunnel, too.

As he got closer, I wanted to jump out and wave him in, but I held back. I had no way of knowing who he was, friend or foe, and if I didn't recognize him at all, jumping out and making a fool of myself would just be stupid. So, I waited as he continued toward the tunnel. It wasn't long until I could see it was none-of-the-above. This rider wore a long, black leather slicker that covered his legs right down to his boots. With his collar up and hat pulled down, it was hard to tell, but his horse gave him away. That big black stallion belonged to Sheriff Burns...and he was alone. That was unusual. I'd never seen Burns go out alone and, given the distance we were from Hillsboro and the weather and all, this was a real unusual sight. I guessed the only thing that would put him out here, was me. I don't know if he was planning to take me in, or just kill me, but it had to be one of the two. I hoped for the former. My options seemed just as limited. I could continue to hide from him, with some likelihood of success, or show myself.

While I was thinking all this over in my head, I also wondered what had happened to Duke and his men. I knew that they were together last night and I also knew Duke would never have given me up. So, how was it that Burns was out here, hot on my trail? He must have been told I was out here

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because he couldn't have tracked me through the new snow. Who told him...and why?

I decided it was time to take matters into my own hands, before he did it for me. When he was close enough to hear, I jumped up on Spirit and we walked out into the open. I also took my gloves off and pulled out my Winchester. If Burns was spoiling for a fight, I was ready to give him one.

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, SHERIFF," I yelled, across the wind.

He either heard my words or just my voice, but in either case, he stopped and stared.

"THAT YOU, MONTANA? I'M HERE TO TAKE YOU IN. YOU BETTER DROP THAT RIFLE." With that, he started toward me, again.

"I SAID HOLD IT. WHAT I MEANT WAS, HOLD IT OR GET SHOT. IT'S YOUR CALL."

Continuing to walk his big horse toward me, he answered. "I NEED TO TALK TO YOU, MONTANA, AND I'M COMIN' IN. IF YOU SHOOT ME, YOU'LL HANG, AND YOU'RE SMART ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT."

"THEN COME IN SLOW AND KEEP BOTH HANDS ON YOUR REINS," I answered. He had made a good point about getting hung for shooting at a lawman...even a crooked one like him.

When he got within fifty feet, I held my Winchester up and spoke again. "*Now* stop, or I'll stop you."

He stopped, keeping both hands on the reins. "Montana, I've come to know a little bit more

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about you the past few days. I learned that you're a little closer to those Bighorn sodbusters than you let on. Also, that your folks have tax trouble. Now if you don't want more trouble for *them*, I suggest you put the rifle down and come in nice and quiet-like. Otherwise, I can't guarantee that your farm won't catch on fire. You wouldn't want that, would you? The mayor sent me to find and you and you put up a good chase, but find you I did, and I plan on bringin' you in...dead or alive. Which will it be?"

I was ready to fight him until he mentioned the farm. If they knew about that, I could pretty well trust that they'd have no problem in burning it down, and maybe killing my family in the process. The thought made me mad, but killing Burns, even in a fair fight, wouldn't prevent Kane from taking it out on my family. In fact, it'd pretty much guarantee that he would. My best and only option was to give up and go back with him. Josh was still out there somewhere, hopefully with Marshal Preston. The only difference would be, instead of me finding them, they'd have to find me.

"What if I do? What if I come with you? What've you got in mind? Are you planning on shooting me along the way?"

"Montana, if I planned on shooting you, would I have ridden right in? I'm arresting you for breaking into the mayor's office and stealing papers that don't belong to you. It's that simple. If you want your family to stay safe, you better put

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that rifle down and come with me. Otherwise, I can't be held responsible for things that might happen back there."

"You're already responsible for things that happened back there. You or your deputies beat my father so bad, he can barely walk. All for not payin' off your boss, so he can get his railroad through. You're not in this to serve the law. You're in this to break it, along with your boss and the rest of your gang."

"You think what you will but I'm duly appointed sheriff of Hillsboro and I'm taking you in for breaking our law. That's all I know."

I stared back at him for a few seconds, then put my Winchester back in my scabbard.

Burns moved up, now ten feet away. "Now put your hands behind your back so I can tie them."

"No. I'll come back with you, but I keep my hands free. That's my deal. I'll need 'em to ride, anyway."

"Have it your way," he answered, "but give me your guns. You are under arrest."

I didn't want to do that, but, from his point of view it made sense. I pulled the Colt from my holster and gave it to him...my Winchester, too.

"Now let's start back. It's cold and miserable out here and I'm tired of fooling around with you."

It was an easier trip down the icy grade to town than it had been coming up in the dark, but along the way I continued to wonder what had happened that brought him out after me, alone. I couldn't ask

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about Duke and his men because for all I know, they weren't involved and Burns might not even know that we'd teamed up.

As Duke had predicted, it was a long night. Burns had left a lantern on, and Duke, Cody and Hal were left on the floor in the small hotel room. Burns took the first watch and at some point, switched with his deputy. It was just beginning to get light out when Duke looked over and noticed the deputy's eyes were closed.

"Hal...wake up," he whispered, while gently poking him with his elbow.

Hal stirred and looked over to see Duke nod his head toward the deputy. During the night, Duke had continued to wiggle his hands enough to loosen the short rope that bound them. While Hal watched, he rolled back into a sitting position and turned his back to Hal's.

"See if you can untie me," he whispered. Without the need for a response, Hal wiggled his fingers until he was able to grab Duke's bindings. Duke had loosened them some and hoped Hal could finish the job. After a few minutes of fumbling, one of Duke's hands pulled free. He was able to free the other, himself. With both hands still behind him, he took a closer look at the deputy. Still with his eyes closed, the deputy's right hand continued to grip his Colt, which was on his lap. Duke wondered if he'd be fast enough to

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cross the five feet that separated them and grab the gun before the deputy woke up. The difficulty was the distance, so Duke began to quietly slide closer. All at once, with speed that surprised Hal, Duke jumped up and toward the deputy. In an instant he'd grabbed the Colt and turned it on his captor.

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!" he yelled. The deputy opened his eyes, saw the gun and froze. "Now you be a good boy and untie my two men. Badge or not, one false move and it'll be your last."

Still shaken, the deputy walked over to Hal and knelt down to untie him. "You'll hang for this," he said.

"Maybe...but not until I see you and your bosses in jail. Now be quick about it and shut your mouth," Duke replied.

When both Cody and Hal were untied, Duke had Hal tie up the deputy. "Put a towel in his mouth, too. I don't want him making any noise while we're gone," Duke added. Duke, Hal and Cody then got their coats and guns from their rooms and raced down to the livery. They didn't know if Burns was asleep back in the hotel somewhere or already heading for the pass, but it didn't matter. Dark and cold as it was, they needed to find Montana...and hoped he had made it through the night.

Chapter 19

We'd been on the trail for half an hour when it began to flatten out. That meant we were half way back to town. The cold that had now worked its way into my bones, didn't bother me as much. Maybe it was the moving around or maybe it was worrying about what was waiting for me in town. I figured Burns never hooked up with the town sheriff or he wouldn't be out here on his own. That meant I didn't have the real law to protect me, or Duke and his men for that matter. Whatever had happened to them, it seemed we were all at the Burns' mercy – and from what I could tell, he didn't have much.

Between the clouds and the snow, visibility was still bad. We'd just crossed a log bridge over a frozen stream when I thought I saw a rider way up ahead. Burns must have seen him too, because he stopped the both of us and stared. When our eyes adjusted, we could see *three* riders heading our way. They must have seen us about the same time, because they appeared to stop, as well. My heart began to pound because I knew it was Duke, Hal

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and Cody coming to get me. They *were* safe, after all.

“Those you’re friends, up ahead?” Burns asked, keeping his eyes fixed ahead.

“Can’t tell from here if I know ‘em at all,” I answered, not wanting to give him any more information than he already had.

“Well, whether they’re with you or not, I can’t take the chance. Get down off your horse and move over behind that tree. If you run, I don’t have a problem with shootin’ you in the back.”

“I’ll bet it wouldn’t be your first time,” I answered and stepped off Spirit.

Burns dismounted as well and moved over behind me. “Get down on the ground and stay there,” he ordered and slapped Spirit’s rear, to move him back behind us. Spirit knew something was wrong.

Seeing us get off the horses, the riders started coming toward us again, but now were fanning out. One stayed on the trail while the others took opposite sides. As they approached I could see the big horse still on the trail and knew it was Duke. Burns put his Winchester to his chin and continued to watch. When they were thirty yards out, Burns stood up.

“HOLD IT, BOYS! I’M BRINGIN’ THIS OUTLAW IN, AND YOU AREN’T GONNA STOP ME. I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU DID TO MY DEPUTY, BUT I WANT YOU TO GET BACK TOGETHER, DROP YOUR GUNS AND

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TURN BACK. IF YOU DON'T, I'LL START PICKIN' YOU OFF, ONE BY ONE."

"YOU'LL NEVER GET US ALL!" Duke yelled back. "YOU'RE WAY OUT OF YOUR JURISDICTION, AND WAY OUT OF YOUR LEAGUE. IT'S YOU WHO'LL BE DROPPIN' HIS GUN, DEAD OR ALIVE."

About then, the rider on the left disappeared behind some brush. Burns wasn't planning on getting ambushed, so he twisted to his left and fired a round off where he thought the rider would be. At the sound of the shot, Duke jumped off his horse and fired back. CRACK...CRACK! Two more shots rang out and I lost track of who was shooting at who. Burns was four or five feet behind me and I was as low as I could get in the shallow snow.

"Get up," he said, at the first pause in the shooting. "Stand up, now."

I had no choice but to do what he said, even though it put me right in the line of fire.

"MISTER WRITER...MY NEXT SHOT'S GONNA BE THROUGH THIS BOY'S HEAD. IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO ME. IF YOU WANT HIM ALIVE, THOUGH, YOU PUT YOUR GUNS DOWN RIGHT NOW AND SHOW YOURSELVES."

I couldn't tell if I was going to get shot from the front or the back! Seemed mighty like it was going to be one or the other. I knew I had to do

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something, but what? Lacking any other move, I put my right hand to my face, two fingers in my mouth, and whistled as loud as I could. “Whewwww!” and again, “whewwww!” Burns must have thought I’d gone loco. He just started to say something when I heard the thud. I turned around to see him flying past me. Fortunately, he dropped his rifle along the way. Spirit had saved me again! While Burns remained focused on the men in front of us, Spirit answered my whistle by ramming his nose right into Burns’ back. I picked up his rifle and, now, held it on him.

“You just stay still, sheriff. Don’t make me use this. HEY, DUKE! COME ON IN. I GOT HIM.”

“What happened?” asked Duke, as he walked up. “One second I saw he had the rifle on you, and the next, I saw him go flying.”

“That was my view as well. I knew Spirit was back there somewhere, and I hoped he’d answer my whistle. As usual, he did.”

Hal and Cody came in together and Cody made it right over to Spirit to pat his nose. “I hope you didn’t hurt yourself, boy. That was some move. You might have saved some lives.”

“Montana,” Duke interrupted, “lets get Burns wrapped up and head back to town. I’m already cold and I’m not the one who spent the night out here.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself, Duke.”

It took us the better part of another hour to get Burns cinched up and make the ride back. We

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came into town careful-like, because we didn't know if Burns' deputy had gotten free or not. If he had, either he or he and the local sheriff might be waiting for us. On arrival, we headed straight up to our rooms at the hotel. There didn't appear to be any activity there so we slowly opened up Burns' door. When we did, we found the deputy right where we'd left him. The next thing was to check in on Duke's and my room and make sure those papers were still where we'd left them. They were. Apparently Burns was so fired up about capturing me, he never checked the rooms.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Duke asked as we regrouped in Burns' room.

"Sure did, Duke...now what?" I answered.

"I think we'd do well to get ourselves and our guests out of here," Duke replied. "I know you need to wait out your friend, but with Burns and his buddy here, things just got a little more complicated. I don't look forward to the ride, but I'd feel a lot better about waiting you and the marshal out back at my place. It'd be safer for us and we could do a better job of keeping these two occupied. As I recall, we've got another one back there already."

"I think you're saying I should wait here...aren't you?"

"Montana, if you're right and your friend comes through with the marshal...well, that'll be great. But that might not happen – at least, right away. If they *don't* show up in a few days, you might want

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to head out their way. I know the weather's bad, but we can't wait forever. Not with us holding half of the Hillsboro sheriff's department."

"You're right, Duke," I'll stay behind and if they don't find me in two more days, I'll start out for Butte."

So, we had a plan. Maybe not the best one, mind you, but it was a plan. Duke wanted to leave right away, without drawing too much attention, so it was agreed we'd all meet down at the livery in half an hour and get the deputy's horse. They'd use the time to put some grub together for themselves and the horses. An hour later, Duke, Hal, Cody, Burns and his deputy were gone and I was left alone to keep watch for Josh and the marshal. I went to bed that night hoping Josh would show up soon. I really wasn't looking forward to going after them, and then there was that possibility that I might miss them, altogether.

The next morning I woke up to a real surprise. The sky was clear and you could see the sun come up. It was still cold, but clear for a change. I hoped it was a good omen. I had flapjacks for breakfast at the hotel and walked down to the livery to check on Spirit. I figured he deserved some special attention after saving me yesterday. I got there so early the smithy wasn't in yet and the forge was cold. On my way down to Spirit's stall, I heard a noise. It sounded like somebody snoring. Two stalls short of Spirit's, I peered over the gate to see

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two men bedded down in the straw. My heart jumped six feet in the air. It was Josh! I opened the gate. Actually, it wasn't Josh who was doing the snoring...it was the other fella. Even under his blanket I could see he was a big man, and they were both fast asleep. I crept over the big one and touched Josh's shoulder. He jumped and looked straight into my eyes.

"Montana...is that you?"

"Sure is, my friend. Is this who I think it is?"

By that time, the big man was awake and staring at the both of us.

"Marshal Preston, let me introduce my friend, here. Montana, this is Marshal Matthew Preston."

I held out my hand and, even from his awkward position, he grabbed it. "Nice to meet you, boy. I hear you all got some trouble down Hillsboro way. Pardon me while I shake the bugs out."

I turned back to Josh and shook him as hard as I could. "You made it and you got the marshal! Tell me how you did it."

"In time, in time. We rode most the night coming through that darned tunnel. It's going to take me a few minutes, too."

"Take all the time you need. I got to tell you what happened here yesterday. We got Burns!"

"Who's *we*?" Josh answered.

"I ran into some friends after you and I separated...it's kind of a long story. Does Marshal Preston know about the papers?"

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Josh was upright, now. "I told him. He wants to see them. I hope you still have 'em. I think he's still trying to figure out who to arrest."

"Surely do. Listen, I don't mean to make things worse for you two, but turns out that while we were coming to meet you, Burns and a deputy followed us, and nearly got us. My friends left here late yesterday with Burns and his deputy in tow and are headed back to Bighorn. We need to catch up to them as soon as we can."

Marshal Preston interrupted. "As U.S. Marshal for these parts, I insist on a good, warm, breakfast before we head out in that blasted weather again. Can you fix us up, son?"

"Yes, sir," I answered. "There's a saloon just this side of the hotel and they serve pretty good food. How about I meet you both there in twenty minutes?"

"You have a deal, son. And bring some of those papers young Josh keeps talking about. It's time I see what you to boys have gotten me into."

Two hours later they'd had a warm meal and we were well on our way east. I'd brought the papers to breakfast and Marshal Preston looked a few of them over. Most particularly, the ones I wanted him to see. After that I think he felt a little better about what we were doing and both Josh and I felt a lot better about that. We rode hard, so there wasn't much time for talk. The sky stayed clear and, cold as it was, conditions were a lot better

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than when we came west. We'd been on the trail another hour when the marshal stopped and pointed at the ground.

"You say there's four riders, Montana?"

"No sir...five. The folks helping me are Duke, Hal and Cody. They're taking Sheriff Burns and a deputy back, so there's five."

"Good, because there's five sets of tracks here. I just wanted to make sure we were tracking the right folks."

"Oh, we are, marshal. On our way out here we spent a night helping a smithy catch up on his shoein'. When we were done, Cody put new shoes on his horse and I see one set of tracks with new shoes. They're deep in the snow, too. Cody's a big guy and he rides a big horse. That's him, alright."

Later in the day I had the chance to tell the marshal how we'd spent the night at Hunter's Hot Springs. Marshal Preston said that he doubted if Duke and his men would stop there again. "It'd be one thing if they were riding back alone, but they're dragging two men with badges with them and I'm sure your friend Duke would just as soon avoid trying to explain that to the folks at the Hot Springs. I'm figuring they'll pass by there and, when night comes, look for a shelter somewhere on the trail."

I'd been thinking the same thing, but it sounded smarter coming from the marshal.

We rode all day until the dark began to set in. I was surprised Duke was so far ahead of us. I was

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beginning to wonder if we'd catch them at all, when we spotted a fire up ahead. We probably wouldn't have seen it at all, except for the darkness. It was maybe half a mile off the main trail. Hoping it was Duke, we rode in slow. When we got close, the marshal motioned for Josh and me to hold up, and he went in alone. About half way between us and the fire, he stopped and yelled.

"RIDER COMING IN...DON'T SHOOT!"

"NAME YOURSELF..." was the response from the camp.

"U.S. MARSHAL MATTHEW PRESTON... NOW, DO THE SAME."

"DUKE DAWKINS AND MY MEN. WE'VE BEEN LOOKIN' FOR YOU, MARSHAL. COME ON IN. I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU'VE RUN ACROSS A BOY ALONG THE WAY, GOES BY MONTANA."

At that point the marshal disappeared from our view and we couldn't hear what was being said, but I suspect he put Duke's mind to rest. Josh and I wasted no time in following him in.

As we pulled up, they were spread around a campfire with Burns and his deputy sitting on the ground – tied up together by one arm and one leg.

"Sure is good to see you, marshal," Burns spoke up. "These people are criminals and they've got me and my deputy tied up for God knows what evil they have in mind. If I were you, I'd arrest them. Untie me and my deputy, and we'll help out."

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“If there’s any arresting to be done, it’ll more likely be you two that get arrested. I’d shut up if I were you,” Marshal Preston answered.

“But, marshal...I...”

“I TOLD YOU TO SHUT-UP, BURNS, AND TAKE THAT BADGE OFF YOUR COAT. FROM WHAT I HEAR, YOU’RE A DISGRACE TO THE OFFICE. YOU AND YOUR MAN JUST SIT THERE AND KEEP QUIET, OR I MIGHT LOSE MY TEMPER.”

“I see Montana or his friend here, filled you in already,” Duke continued. “Seems like this Burns fella and his boss have taken over Hillsboro and are putting a pretty tight squeeze on some of the farmers. Montana and his friend are on the run for taking the mayor’s private papers, but when you read some of them, you’ll see that it all amounts to a land-grab by the mayor and the railroad.”

“I’ve already had the pleasure of reading some of it, and I’d agree. From what Josh and Montana have told me, I could charge the bunch of ‘em.”

“So...,” Duke asked, “what’s next?”

“As you can see, Duke, I’m kind of a one man show out here. I’d like to ride straight into Hillsboro and put Kane and his phony deputies under arrest, but I don’t like the odds...at least at this point. Montana tells me there’s near fifteen of them. I don’t even think I have that many bullets. I’ll need help.”

A big smile came over Duke’s cold face. “That’s what *we’re* here for.”

Chapter 20

After a cold night and a lot of talking around the fire, we decided the weather was too dangerous to delay the trip to Hillsboro until more men could be rounded up. We were getting used to the miserable weather, but it was clear the marshal didn't much like it. Duke offered to head back to his ranch and get more men but, after getting to know us better, Marshal Preston changed his mind and now wanted to move faster. It was finally agreed that we'd head straight back to Hillsboro. If we were careful, we might catch the mayor off-guard and arrest him, too. With both the mayor and Burns in custody, the marshal figured the rest of the deputies would take to the trail. It wouldn't have been my plan, but, given the weather, it made some sense. My only concern, which I mentioned to the marshal, was that I didn't know if any of those other deputies had any real loyalty to Kane or Burns. If they did, they might not give up so easy. But, again, the marshal didn't seem to be too concerned.

It took most the next day to get to Hillsboro and that probably worked out to our advantage, being it

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was almost dark by the time we got to the edge of town. Tired as we were, Marshal Preston was now determined to ride straight in and see how fast we could locate the mayor and get him over to the jail. As we rode in, the snow started back up and visibility was getting worse by the minute. In fact, by the time we got to the mayor's office building, it was hard to even see across the street.

Marshal Preston stopped us out front and looked over to me. "Montana, you go around the building and let me know if there's any lanterns on inside."

I nudged Spirit and we did just that. When got around the building I was surprised to find a horse tied up and a few of the second story windows aglow with light. I came back around and told the marshal what I'd seen.

"OK, I'll bet he's in there. Duke, you take Burns and the deputy and head around back with your men. Montana, grab your rifle, hide the horses across the street, then come with me. Josh, you take Montana's saddlebags and head around back, too, and...Burns...if I hear a peep out of either of you two, I'm authorizing Mr. Duke here, to shoot you dead. Do I make myself clear?"

Burns wouldn't answer, but hung his head as if he understood.

Duke grabbed the rope that tied Burns and the deputy together from Cody, and walked them back around the building. I grabbed the marshal's reins and took Spirit and his horse across the street, just out of sight, and tied them to a rail. It was real dark

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now, and getting ever-harder to see what was going on. By the time I made it back to the front door, Marshal Preston had just pushed it open. We both headed up the stairs and started down the dark hall toward Kane's office.

"Who's out there?" came Kane's voice.

"The U.S. Marshal...open up."

Then Kane did a stupid thing. He opened his door about two inches and peeked around the side. The hall was so dark, he could probably only see our outlines. A split second later, Marshal Preston reached back and pushed me to the floor. Then a flash. CRACK! In the same instant, another CRACK...this time from Marshal Preston's pistol. Kane screamed and fell.

"Are you okay?" the marshal asked.

"Yes, sir. I'm fine. How about you?"

"I'm fine, too, but I think your mayor won't be holding a pistol for a while."

While we were getting Kane back on his feet, we were joined by the others.

"Here," he said to Kane, offering him a small piece of cloth that'd been on the desk. "Wrap up your hand and stop whimpering like a girl."

"You won't get away with this, Marshal," Kane yelled back. "Breaking in and shooting this town's honorable mayor! I don't know what this boy told you but he's an outlaw and wanted in Hillsboro."

"I've read a few of your *official* documents, mayor and I have some real doubts about your 'honor.' I'd also be careful about who I called an

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outlaw. You'll get your chance to explain it all in a proper court. For now, just sit there and try not to bleed to death."

"What happened?" Duke asked. "We heard two shots."

Marshal Preston returned his long Colt back to his holster and turned back to face Duke. "Kane figured we weren't his men and fired a shot down the hall. He missed, but his muzzle blast gave him away. Good thing for him he was holding his pistol off to the side."

"Pretty impressive, Marshal," Duke commented, picking up the small Derringer that'd fallen under the desk. "The trigger guard's split. Looks like you shot it right out of his hand."

"Something like that. Either way, it was a short fight. Now all we need to do is see if it draws a crowd. Montana, can you and some of the boy go back down and cover the doors for a few minutes? If nobody shows up in ten, fetch the horses."

"Sure thing, marshal," I answered, hoping the wind noise covered the shots...and that all this was finally over.

Josh and I took the front door while Cody and Hal took the rear. It was quiet for a few minutes, then we saw two rider's coming up the street, toward us. "Josh, get the marshal. Looks like we got company."

They dismounted a ways down the street and made the last twenty yards on foot. "WHAT'S ALL THE SHOOTIN' ABOUT? MAYOR...ARE

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YOU IN THERE?" As they got closer I could see the one yelling was the deputy they called Wade.

Marshal Preston came up behind me. "Do you recognize 'em, Montana?"

"I know one goes by Wade, but I'm sure they're two of Burns' deputies.

Just as Marshal Preston moved in front of me to open the door, Burns yelled out from upstairs.

"DON'T BELIEVE HIM. THEY GOT US TIED UP. GET HELP!" he said. Then there was a thud like something dropped on the floor. I guessed it was Burns. But, the damage was done. They both turned and disappeared back into the dark.

"I HOPE YOU SHUT HIM UP!" yelled the marshal.

"I DID, BUT IT WASN'T FAST ENOUGH... SORRY," answered Duke.

"Well," the marshal mused, "it was bound to happen at some point. Let's get ready for a fight. Montana, if you have any more guns or ammunition on those horses, now's a good time to get it."

"We grabbed it all on the way in, marshal. We're pretty well stocked," I answered.

"Then everybody grab a rifle, some ammunition, and take a window. I don't know how many of 'em want to fight, but we're in this alone and it could take some time."

It hadn't really occurred to me yet that we were pinned down. We quickly laid out all our guns and

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ammunition and everybody grabbed something, and took a window.

“Montana,” Marshal Preston said, “you and I are going out. Bring that Winchester and you take that side of the street. I’ll take this one. It’d be better if we could stop them before they get here and box us in. Josh, you go upstairs with Duke and douse the lanterns. They can’t hit what they can’t see.”

The marshal and I went out the front door and took our positions on opposite sides of the street. I don’t think either of us had great cover but we’d be hard to see in the dark. As I stood there, my heart started to pound. If this was going to be a gunfight, I hoped we’d get on with it. It was cold out and I feared my fingers wouldn’t stay limber very long.

It didn’t take long for them to return. They looked like a dozen or so as they came into view. Just what we’d hoped to avoid. They were all on foot and spread out from one side to the other. When they got close enough, I could see they each had either a pistol or rifle out. I remembered what the marshal had said only a few minutes ago, about his shooting Kane where he saw the muzzle blast. I figured I’d only be in the dark until my first shot. It gave me a chill.

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, BOYS!” The marshal yelled from the shadows. “I’M THE U.S. MARSHAL FOR THESE PARTS AND I’M ORDERING YOU TO STAND DOWN. I HAVE YOUR MAYOR AND SHERIFF IN CUSTODY AND WILL PROTECT THEM AT ANY COST.

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UNLESS YOU WANT TO DIE ON THAT STREET, TURN AROUND AND GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM. THIS FIGHT IS OVER!”

“NOT HARDLY!” one answered, and the shooting commenced. A sudden flurry of muzzle blasts lit the street, each freezing the falling snow. It would have been pretty if it wasn’t so serious.

I fixed on one of the blasts closest to us and fired at it. I heard a scream and the flashes stopped. Marshal Preston was doing the same thing and there was plenty of return fire coming from the windows behind us. The deputies scattered into the shadows and the shooting continued.

“MONTANA, THERE’S TOO MANY OF ‘EM...FALL BACK,” the marshal yelled. I agreed. If we could hit their flashes, they could hit ours. We stopped shooting and, using the shadows, moved back into the office building.

“Stay low,” Duke yelled, as he covered one of the front windows.

“WHAT’S THE REAR LOOK LIKE?” Marshal Preston yelled.

“NOT MUCH BETTER!” Hal shouted back. “Looks like they got us surrounded.”

“This didn’t work out the way I’d hoped,” the marshal mumbled, reloading his Winchester. “I hope they don’t decide to burn us out.”

That thought hadn’t crossed my mind either, but now that he’d said it, I had that too, to worry about. After a while, the gunfire from both sides began to

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slow and it seemed like we had ourselves a good old-fashioned standoff.

Cody was manning one of the upstairs windows when he yelled loud enough for all to hear. "HERE THEY COME, MARSHAL...AND THEY GOT TORCHES!"

That's just what I didn't want to hear. I looked out my window and there they were, three of them carrying torches. Fortunately for us, the torches lit them up as well. I'd just emptied my Winchester and had to grab my Colt from my holster. I took careful aim at one of the men and fired. He dropped, as did his torch. There were two left and they were now running at us. Duke got one of them about the time the third one threw his torch at the front of the building. It disappeared from sight but we figured it landed on the front porch. Now there were two more torches coming out of the shadows.

"IF THIS PLACE CATCHES FIRE, WE'LL HAVE TO SHOOT OUR WAY OUT!" yelled Duke.

"I'm afraid you're right," answered the marshal.

Just as the two new torch carriers were about to let them fly, a single shot rang out from somewhere up the street, behind them. One of the torches dropped. Then another shot and the second torch dropped. Then, more muzzle blasts from the far end of the street. Immediately, the deputies turned around and returned fire. Now *they* were in a crossfire! They scattered, and the street was quiet again.

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Somewhere from the shadows down the street came a lone voice. "MONTANA! YOU CAN COME OUT NOW! LOOKS LIKE THEY TOOK OFF!"

I recognized Micah's voice before I saw him. "MICAH! HOW'D YOU GET OUT OF JAIL?"

"I LET HIM OUT!"

Another shape had now taken to the street. This voice was real familiar. I squinted to see who it was. I almost dropped from surprise. It was my father!

"Pa! How did you get involved in this?" I shouted, still amazed to see him walking toward me, his Winchester still gripped in his right hand. When he got close enough, I grabbed him and gave him a hug. "Well, you sure are a sight for sore eyes,"

"It's good to see you, too, Billie. With all the shooting going on down here, the deputies left the jail empty. I stopped in there and heard this boy call out from the back...said he heard the shooting too, and wondered what was going on. Also said he knew you and that was good enough for me."

Duke and Marshal Preston walked up and I introduced them both.

"Mister...you've got one heck of a boy, here," Duke said as he shook my father's hand.

"I'll second that," added the marshal. "Looks like he got the goods on your mayor and sheriff."

"I may have the goods on 'em," I answered, "but I'm not done yet. There's still a dozen of his

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deputies running around out there somewhere and I won't rest easy until we're rid of 'em all."

"Don't you worry none about them, son," the marshal replied. "With their bosses in jail, I expect most of them will high-tail it out of here. Those that don't, will have to deal with me. Remember, I get paid to take care of folks like that. Get me a hot meal and a good night's sleep and I'll make sure this town is cleaned up good and proper. Now, Mister Montana, where is it an old man can find a drink in this town?"

"Ritter...Jake Ritter, and follow me. I'm buying. Come on Mister Duke...and bring your men. We owe you folks more than I can say."

Chapter 21

We spent the next hour in the saloon with everybody getting to know one another. Turned out that earlier in the day, Josh's father had made a trip out to our ranch to find out where he was and what was happening. My folks didn't know any more than he did, but father was feeling better and, later, decided to come into town on his own. He heard the shooting on his way in, stopped by the jail and teamed up with Micah. Drawn to the gunfire, they'd worked their way mostly down the street, trying to determine who was doing all the shooting. When Micah spotted the deputies throwing torches at the town office building, they didn't know it was us holed up inside, but just didn't like the idea of it.

I was glad that Duke, his men and the marshal had the chance to meet my father. Micah, too, for that matter. They say in his day, father could stand toe to toe with any man in the territory. Up 'till now, I'd always thought that an exaggeration, but not anymore. And, to think of all the time and hardship that Duke, Hal and Cody endured to help

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us out. Father invited them all to stay the night at our place, but Duke politely declined. He said they'd better stay the night in the hotel and head out early in the morning. I asked him to give my best to Jesse and Martha.

Marshal Preston appointed Micah as temporary Sheriff of Hillsboro and promised to stick around for a few weeks to see that he got off to a good start.

We said our goodbyes and half an hour later, father, Josh and I were on the trail. On our way back to the ranch, I offered to spend the winter home, to help out until father was fully recovered. As much as Josh liked the idea, father didn't.

"Son, you've been gone three years now and in that time, you've grown up. Like it or not, you're an adult, now. You have responsibilities to that ranch down in Texas and, as much as your mother and I would like to have you back here, we know that you need to move on with your life. We'll be fine. You spend a few more days with us and when the weather clears, you be on your way. Josh is here if we need anything."

I wanted to argue the point but, in the end, I knew he was right. For whatever it meant, I'd made my choices. Josh said he'd come down to see me after the spring planting. I told him he'd always be welcome.

I knew the hardest part of the whole thing would be explaining it all to Mary. Mother would understand, but I knew Mary missed her big

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brother and, truth is, I missed her and all the good folks in Bighorn Lake.

As we worked our way down the canyon trail toward the flatland, I gave Spirit a pat on the neck and dropped my head close to his ear. “Spirit, old buddy...looks like we got this one about wrapped up. You get a good rest over the next couple of days and get your strength back...you’re going to need it.”

