

BLOODY HILLS

Charles G. West



A SIGNET BOOK

BLOODY STREETS, BLOODY HILLS

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Chapter 1

William Raymond Blevins knew from a young age that he wasn't likely to be a big man when he was full grown. As soon as he was old enough to consider such thoughts, he took a look at his daddy—short and skinny as a hay rake—and knew he was destined to be the same. But Billy Ray, as the townsfolk of Dry Fork called him, was born with a mean streak and a total distain for weakness in any form. Being an undersized child, and one who did not cotton to backing down to anyone, he always carried some form of equalizer in case he was challenged. He attended six years of classes in the one room school at the south end of town before being permanently expelled for using a pocketknife to carve up one of his classmates. Not being particularly fond of school in the first place, Billy Ray didn't mind being kicked out. In his opinion, the three saloons in the little town offered a much more practical education for a young man of his ambitions.

At the age of thirteen, Billy Ray counted himself fortunate to gain employment in the Lucky Spur Saloon when his predecessor accidentally stepped between two angry card players and suffered an eight-inch double-edged blade to his abdomen. Making fifty cents a day, with a cot to sleep on in the storeroom out back, Billy Ray was well on his way toward what he reasoned to be the good life. Due to his slight physique, however, he fully realized that he would never gain respect in that rough saloon life with his fists—and no young man ever had a stronger need for respect. So he saved every cent he could until he had enough to purchase one of Samuel Colt's popular Peacemakers.

From that moment when he first held the shiny new pistol, he knew that he must dedicate himself to the mastery of the weapon. The cool, heavy feel of the metal in his hand gave him an immediate sense of lethal power, a feeling that commanded respect. He continued saving his money, spending most of it on cartridges for daily target practice. Long hours were spent far out on the prairie, where he practiced drawing his pistol in a split second. He filed the front sight down to further facilitate his speed in pulling his weapon from the holster.

Billy Ray's dogged practice paid off—so much so that before he reached his seventeenth birthday he was regarded as the fastest gun in the territory. And he had what he most wanted—respect—although it came solely from the saloon riffraff who inhabited his world. Along with his notoriety for being a fast gun, he developed a nasty arrogance that seemed to cause him to constantly seek fights. With the solid weight of his six-gun riding on his thigh, he feared no man. While he thoroughly enjoyed the fact that no one was willing to provoke him to the point of a showdown, there was still one thing to prove. He had never killed a man. That one fact began to plague him to the point where the few friends he could claim at the Lucky Spur became quiet in his presence and avoided him whenever possible. Soon he found himself a belligerent loner, always spoiling for a fight, looking for an excuse to carve that first notch on the handle of his Colt .45. The only person who genuinely solicited his friendship was Sonny Demry, a simpleminded teenage boy who raked out the stalls at the livery stable. Billy Ray tolerated him because he enjoyed the unconcealed hero worship. Sonny would always look in the Lucky Spur whenever he passed that way to see if his hero was seated at the back corner table, isolated in his belligerent bearing, always alert to the opportunity to demonstrate his mastery of

his six-gun. The time would not be long in coming.

It was a rainy night in Dry Fork with the kind of cold rain that chills a man to the bone—the kind of rain that makes a man thirsty for a drink of the burning rotgut whiskey served for a quarter a shot at the Lucky Spur. Consequently, Dry Fork's most notorious saloon was filled with thirsty customers seeking warmth and companionship on a raw night in early spring. At his usual spot at the back table Billy Ray propped his chair against the wall, a bored scowl upon his face as he nursed a drink of Willett Burns's cheapest. His practiced smirk attracted the notice of a young stranger at the bar, a cowhand from a nearby ranch.

"Who's the cocky-lookin' dude eyeballin' everybody at the back table?" the cowhand asked.

"You must be new in town," Barney Tatum replied. "That there's Billy Ray. He's the fastest with a handgun that you'll ever see."

"Is that so?" the young man responded, the liquor in him stimulating his competitive impulses. "I'm pretty fast gettin' my pistol outta the holster myself."

This sparked Barney's interest. "Think you're faster than Billy Ray? I've never seen you draw, young feller, but I'd bet against it. Billy Ray's like lightning."

The cowhand was intrigued by the challenge. He was not without reason to feel confident. No one on the spread he rode for could match him when it came to clearing his pistol and popping the head of a rattlesnake. "Maybe he just ain't run into no real competition yet."

Hearing the young fellow's comment, Barney was even more interested in what might shape up to be a right entertaining contest. He flagged Willett Burns down at the end of the bar. When Willett came down to see what he wanted, Barney said, "Young feller here says he can draw faster than Billy Ray."

"Is that so?" Willett asked, directing his question to the cowhand.

The young man shrugged. "I might," he replied, unconsciously reaching down to ease his pistol a little to make sure it was riding light in the holster.

"Well, there's one sure way to find out," Willett said, grinning at Barney. "We can set up a little contest right now. Some of the boys might wanna lay a few bets on it." He looked back at the cowhand. "Whaddaya say, young feller?"

Tossing the rest of his drink down to bolster his confidence, he said, "Wouldn't hurt just to see who's the fastest, I reckon."

"Well, then," Willett crowed, and raised his voice so he could be heard above the noisy din of the saloon. "Boys, we got us a young man here who says he might be faster with a six-gun than Billy Ray over there." His announcement brought an immediate response. The saloon grew quiet for a few moments while all eyes turned to the smirking young man at the back table. "What about it, Billy Ray?" Willett asked.

There was never a moment of hesitation in Billy Ray's mind. "I reckon," he said, and lowered his chair to the floor. With a studied swagger, he walked to the front of the bar to stand before the cowhand, looking him up and down in his familiar sneering fashion.

The noise returned immediately with calls for bets echoing back and forth across the packed saloon. "I'll lay a little money on Billy Ray," one voice could be heard. "Put me down for five dollars," another voice said. "How fast is that young feller?" someone wanted to know. Willett took charge of the betting, and when all the money was down, he said, "Come on, everybody back up and give these boys some room." There followed some pushing and shoving as his patrons attempted to clear a small area in the middle of the floor.

Billy Ray stood, still sizing up his challenger, one foot slightly ahead of the other, as if he was about to step forward, his head tilted slightly down, peering at the cowhand through his eyebrows. He said not another word until Willett stated the rules, and prepared to drop his hat as a signal to draw.

Then Billy Ray spoke. "I ain't got enough room."

"Let's take it out in the street so these boys'll have plenty of room," Willett said.

Following the two contestants, the crowd spilled out into the muddy street, elbowing each other for position on the board walkway, ignoring the rain that continued to fall. Still in charge of the formalities, Willett directed the young men to stand approximately twenty yards apart. Facing each other, with the rain beating unmercifully in their faces, they did as he instructed. When both men were in position and ready, Willett raised his hat high above his head, holding it there while he gave one last instruction. "The boys here will be the judge and jury on which one of you gets his gun out first. You both ready?" Both men nodded, then waited, poised, for Willett to drop his hat.

The brim of Willett's hat had barely left his fingertips before Billy Ray's Colt was in his hand and leveled at his adversary. The young cowhand was fast, but he was no match for Billy Ray, who had spent countless days off in the prairie practicing the smooth motion that was almost quicker than the eye could follow. With just a hint of a grim smile upon his face, he seemed to purposely wait a second for his challenger's pistol to clear the holster. In the next instant, the crowd of spectators was shocked into stony silence as Billy Ray pulled the trigger. The young cowhand dropped his pistol, and, clutching his gut, sank to his knees in the muddy street, his face contorted into a mask of stunned disbelief. Not one of the spectators moved for what seemed a long moment, as shocked as the wounded man. Like the young cowhand, they had all assumed they were betting on a simple contest of speed. No one had counted on Billy Ray's intent.

When the cowhand crumpled facedown in the mud, the spectators finally broke the pall that had descended upon them, and rushed to give what aid and comfort they could. It was too late. The young man was dying, gut-shot, in the filthy quagmire of wagon ruts and horse droppings. Seemingly oblivious to the disturbed state that now enveloped the crowd, Billy Ray stood, transfixed, apart from the chaos he had caused.

"I reckon somebody better go wake up Sam Ingram," Willett said with a helpless sigh.

After the incident, there was a lot of talk in private conversations about the blatant murder of the innocent young man. Sheriff Ingram was hell-bent on hanging Billy Ray for the dastardly deed, but Billy Ray maintained that he had been under no assumption that it was supposed to be a harmless contest. The man had pulled a gun on him, he insisted, and he had feared for his life, and acted in self-defense. A jury could not deny the fact that the cowhand had pulled a gun, and there was no way of knowing whether or not he intended to use it. Much to Sam Ingram's disgust, Billy Ray was allowed to go free.

* * *

It was a fine spring morning in Dry Fork. Remnants of an isolated shower from the night before were already drying up, leaving only a few puddles here and there in the dirt street. Billy Ray leaned back in a chair in front of the Lucky Spur, his feet propped on the rail. He was soaking in the warm sun, seeking to dry out after a night of heavy drinking. Because of the nagging headache accompanying his hangover, he was in a bad mood. His eyes almost closed due to the bright sun, he squinted at the familiar rotund figure of Sheriff Sam Ingram coming his way. *Fat old fart*, Billy Ray thought, knowing the sheriff would have something to say to him. He always did after the showdown with the cowhand several weeks before, and Billy Ray wasn't in the mood to hear one of Sam Ingram's mealy-mouthed lectures. The thought caused him to consider the possibility of moving on. On this early May morning in the year 1875, two months shy of his twenty-first birthday, he figured that he had outgrown Dry Fork. There was no one left in the little settlement to challenge him. His confidence was such that he was certain no man was faster with a gun—anywhere in the territory. An

he was ready to expand his reputation. Maybe, he was thinking, he ought to ride up in Dakota territory. If there was as much gold in the Black Hills as folks talked about, he might as well take his share—and he wasn't thinking about using a pick and shovel.

"Mornin', Billy Ray," Sheriff Ingram said with a noticeable lack of cordiality, a tone Billy Ray was used to. The sheriff stopped and waited for Billy Ray to remove his feet from the railing so he could pass. Billy Ray made no effort to accommodate him. Making no attempt to disguise his irritation, Ingram scowled and said, "I hear tell you raised a little fuss in the saloon last night."

"Is that a fact?" Billy Ray answered, a contemptuous smile spread slowly across his face. "Was there an official complaint from somebody?" He knew the answer without asking. Nobody had the guts to file a complaint.

Ingram frowned, his disgust with the young hooligan blatantly apparent. "No," he replied after a pause, "but you're gonna have to change your attitude. You're startin' to worry some of the good citizens of Dry Fork."

"Is that so? Well, maybe I'll just go have a little talk with some of your good citizens—see what the problem is." Billy couldn't resist taunting the sheriff. It had the proper effect on Sam Ingram.

The sheriff responded immediately. "You do, and I'll lock you up for disturbing the peace."

Billy Ray laughed. "Now, Sheriff, you know I wouldn't do nothin' to rile the good folks of Dry Fork."

Exasperated, Ingram shook his head in disgust. "That attitude of yours is gonna land you in my jail one of these days." He walked around behind him and went on about his business, unwilling to waste any more time on the belligerent young troublemaker.

"If that day ever comes," Billy Ray called out after him, "you'd best bring that hayseed deputy of yours, 'cause it's gonna be a full day's work for both of you."

Sam didn't even bother to look around. "One of these days," he muttered to himself, and continued on toward his office, convinced that the day was not far off when Billy Ray would manage to get himself in real trouble.

Pleased with himself for getting Sam Ingram's goat, Billy Ray shifted his chair so as to have a view of the other end of the street. The warm sunshine almost made him doze, and after a few minutes, he opened his eyes wide in an effort to rouse himself from his sleepy state. It was then that he caught sight of something that always captured his attention. Revealing just a glimpse of stocking Rachael Andrews was in the process of climbing out of her buggy when her gingham skirt snagged on the corner of the seat. The young wife of the new schoolmaster had caught Billy Ray's eye on the first day of their arrival, some three months before. She was a shy girl who favored everyone she met with a timid smile, averting her eyes as she passed. On several occasions, Billy Ray had attempted to make eye contact with her, but she had always avoided it.

He lowered his chair back to the board walkway and stood up to watch her progress. After freeing her hem, she turned in the direction of the general store, angling across the dirt street, dodging the few puddles. Billy Ray openly appraised the young woman, admiring the slender waist and the dainty way she carried herself. *Like she had something precious to protect*, he thought. *She's too damn fine for that sissy schoolteacher she's married to.* He decided that it was time to introduce her to a real man.

Her eyes focused upon the ground before her feet, as was her habit when crossing before one of the three saloons in town, Rachael Andrews was unaware of the man until she almost bumped into him. Looking up then, she was startled to confront the sneering countenance of the town's bad boy. Excusing herself immediately, she attempted to go around him.

"Whoa there, honey, I came out here to help you across the street," Billy said, grabbing her by the arm. "I wouldn't want you to get your pretty little feet dirty in one of these mud puddles." She tried to pull away, but he held her fast.

Frightened, she nevertheless attempted to remain calm. “I thank you for your concern, sir, but I can manage on my own.”

His sneering grin still in place, he pulled her up close to him. “Ah, now, no call for you to be so snotty. I just wanna get to know you a little better. I think you and me could have a lotta fun when you get to know me.”

Appalled, she jerked her arm free of his grasp. “Sir, I am a married woman.”

“Hell, I ain’t gonna hold that against you.” Before she could step away, he suddenly swept her up in his arms. “I’ll carry you across all these mud puddles.”

Terrified, Rachael screamed and struggled to free herself, all to no avail, and to Billy Ray’s great amusement. Laughing at her futile efforts, he pressed her even closer, feeling her softness against him as he carried her to the opposite side of the street. Once across, he set her feet down on the board walkway, but held her tightly by her arms. “Now I think I ought to be rewarded for being such a gentleman,” he said and attempted to kiss her. She pulled her head away, but he persisted until, finally, in frustration, he slapped her hard across the face. Stunned, she froze for a moment. He was quick to seize the opportunity, kissing her hard on the mouth while he held her head still with one hand, the other groping her body. When she finally was able to pull away from him, she staggered back a few steps, humiliated and frightened, tears now streaming down her cheeks. Unable to speak, she spat in his face. He reached for her again, but she stepped quickly back, turned about and ran toward her buggy, sobbing openly. He stood there, at first angered by the spittle hanging from his chin, but then laughing at her shame. He called out after her, “That was just a taste of what I’ve got for you. Just like a taste of whiskey—you don’t never know you’re a drunk till you’ve had your first taste of whiskey.”

* * *

Sheriff Sam Ingram looked up when the door opened, and Pete Svensen burst into his office. “Sam, you and Lon better git down to the Lucky Spur right now!”

Never one to get excited, Sam remained seated. “Lon’s gone huntin’. Why don’t you calm down a minute and tell me what’s got you so lathered up?”

“Billy Ray!” Pete blurted. “Will Andrews called him out, said Billy Ray made a play for his wife.”

“Damn,” Ingram uttered under his breath. He knew it was bound to happen. It was just a matter of when. Billy Ray had been itching for somebody to challenge him for too long. The sheriff wasted no more time. Getting to his feet, he took a rifle from the gun rack behind his desk and checked to make sure it was loaded. “Where are they?” he asked as he rounded the desk and headed for the door.

“In front of the Lucky Spur,” Pete replied, the urgency in his tone told Ingram he’d better hurry. “Will came down to the saloon lookin’ for Billy Ray. He didn’t have no gun. Billy Ray drew down on him, and told him he’d better go git one. Will borrowed Tom Leary’s pistol, and the two of ’em went out in the street.”

“Damn!” Ingram swore. “Why didn’t you come get me sooner?” He bolted out the door with Pete right on his heels. “By God, I’ve got him this time. He ain’t gittin’ away with it again.” A face-off between Billy Ray and Will Andrews amounted to no more than simple murder. Will had no chance against Billy Ray. The young schoolmaster didn’t even own a gun. Ingram broke into a trot in an attempt to reach the two before Will sacrificed his life for the sake of his pride.

It had been a long time since Sam Ingram tried to run anywhere. He was already puffing before he had trotted halfway down the street toward the crowd gathered to watch the confrontation. He could see the two combatants facing each other in the middle of the wagon track that served as Dry Fork’s main street—Will Andrews with a borrowed gun stuck in his waistband; Billy Ray, his back toward

the sheriff, standing confident, his hand hovering over a low-slung holster.

“Hold on!” Ingram shouted, but it was too late. Will made a move toward his pistol. In a fraction of a second, Billy drew his pistol and pumped two shots into Will’s belly. While the spectators gasped, Will doubled over, still trying to pull Tom Leary’s pistol, which was caught in his waistband. Another bullet in the chest finally dropped him lifeless to the ground.

Feet widespread, pistol still pointing at the fallen man, Billy Ray stood as if in a trance. The blood was pumping wildly through his veins, triggered by an overpowering feeling of euphoria at the sight of his second kill. The pounding of his heartbeat in his ears almost drowned out all other sounds that surrounded him. Totally captured by his moment of conquest, he did not hear Sheriff Ingram’s command to drop his weapon. When Billy Ray failed to respond, Sam fired a shot in the air as a warning. Snapped back to his senses by the sound of the rifle, Billy Ray whirled around and emptied his pistol of the remaining three cartridges. It happened so fast that he wasn’t even aware of what was happening until he saw Sam Ingram lying mortally wounded in the street. The sudden barrage scattered the crowd of spectators into nearby doors and alleys. Those who froze long enough to see the shooting later reported that the only apparent reaction from Billy Ray was a slight curling of his upper lip as he sneered at the sheriff’s body.

After a few minutes had passed, Billy Ray calmly reloaded his weapon, looked once again at Will Andrews’s body, then back at Sam Ingram’s. Then he walked toward the Lucky Spur with a slight swagger to his step. Once he had disappeared inside the swinging doors, the spectators emerged from their holes and gathered around the bodies. It was too late to help either victim. “Somebody better go tell Sam’s wife and Rachael Andrews,” Pete Svensen said.

“Somebody better go find Lon,” somebody else said.

* * *

In the course of a few minutes time, Billy Ray had dealt a crippling blow to the little town of Dry Fork. He had eliminated over half of the law enforcement capability of the settlement—most folks didn’t figure Lon Fortson to count for much more than Sam’s helper—as well as killing the town’s one school-teacher. No one knew where Deputy Lon Fortson was, only that he had gone hunting and wasn’t expected back for several days. The question before the leading citizens of Dry Fork was what to do about the brazen killer holding court at the Lucky Spur.

“We can’t tolerate his kind in this town any longer,” John Castleberry stated. “We’re gonna have to do something about Billy Ray, and I mean right now.” The mayor of Dry Fork had called the special meeting of the city council at his home, one mile south of town, in order to keep the meeting secret.

“Ain’t much we can do till Lon gets back,” Wilson Greenwell commented.

“Who knows how long before that fool gets back?” Castleberry shot back. “Meanwhile Billy Ray hangs on the bar at the Lucky Spur bragging about what he did.” He paused to look around him at the other five men seated at his kitchen table. “Word gets out that a young hothead can brazenly gun down our sheriff and one of the towns leading citizens, and nothing is done about it—why, it’ll be an open invitation for every outlaw in the territory.”

“What are you proposing we should do about it?” The question came from Walt Collins, a man of few words, large stature and burly appearance who owned the stables on the north end of town.

Castleberry turned to meet Walt’s steady gaze. The mayor already knew that Collins would support any call for action. “I don’t ordinarily condone any type of vigilante activity,” the mayor replied. “You all know that. But sometimes it might be necessary in order to protect the progress we’ve already made in Dry Fork.” He permitted his gaze to sweep the other faces around the table. “Now I know we all stand for law and order. But let’s be realistic about the situation we’ve got here.

Lon Fortson means well, and you can't help but like the man, but the only reason he was hired as a deputy was so Sam could have somebody to play checkers with. And that's about it. Besides, there's no use in Lon going up against Billy Ray and getting himself killed." He paused again while the members of the council exchanged knowing glances, aware of what the mayor was proposing. "Gentlemen, it's time we formed an official posse to protect our homes and businesses. We have to answer to Rachael Andrews and Ellie Ingram."

There followed an extended silence while the five men thought about the action proposed. The first to speak was Walt Collins. "John's right," he said, nodding his head as he searched the faces of his fellow council members. "We need to lynch that young hellion to let everybody know we don't stand for murderers in this town."

The others nodded soberly in agreement, all but Wilson Greenwell. "I ain't so sure we can do something like that. Maybe we ought to send Lon over to Cheyenne to fetch the marshal."

"Hard to tell how long that would take," Collins said. "Hell, Wilson, we need to take care of this right now." He shrugged. "If you ain't got the stomach for it—"

"Never you mind about that," Wilson cut him off. "I can handle a rifle as well as the next man, and I ain't afraid to use one. I'm just sayin' we don't want to call down any trouble on ourselves for steppin' outside the law."

"We won't be steppin' outside the law," Castleberry said. "I'll appoint Walt Collins temporary sheriff, and he can officially deputize all of us."

Plans were made and discussion went on until Doris Castleberry entered the kitchen to inquire if she should fix supper for the six of them. That prompted all but her husband to graciously decline her invitation and take their leave. "Tomorrow morning, seven o'clock," Castleberry reminded them as they filed out the door. "We'll meet at the stable." There had been some reluctance on the part of a couple of the councilmen, primarily Cyrus Brumby, who owned the general store. But in the end there was unanimous agreement that the mad dog in their midst had to be exterminated for the sake of the community.

* * *

When he returned to town from the meeting at the mayor's house, Walt Collins was surprised to see Sonny Demry still at work in the stables. "How come you're still here?" Walt asked, as he dismounted and led his horse in the barn.

"I didn't git finished cleanin' out them stalls in the back like you told me to," Sonny replied, his eyes downcast as if he'd been caught doing something wrong. "I reckon I got behind in my work when I went up to watch the shootin' at the Lucky Spur."

"I reckon everybody did," Walt said. He took a moment to consider the slow-witted boy, and he thought about the admiration Sonny had for Billy Ray's ability with a six-gun. "I know you cotton to Billy Ray, but what he did today was dead wrong, and he sure ain't nobody to be admired. You know that, don't you?" Sonny didn't respond, just continued to hold his head down. "He killed two innocent people today," Walt went on, "and he's gonna be held to account for what he did."

Sonny raised his eyes briefly. "But Billy Ray said Mr. Andrews was the one called him out, and Sheriff Ingram was fixin' to shoot him in the back."

Walt shook his head, exasperated. "You've been hangin' around that damn saloon again, ain't you? Hell, Sonny, it amounted to outright murder. You can't pay no attention to Billy Ray's bragging. It was murder, and it ain't gonna be tolerated in this town. You'll see how fancy your big-talking gunman is when he's swinging from a free limb tomorrow." Realizing then that his anger had allowed him to go too far, Walt quickly added, "Now go on home now. You can finish that up in the morning."

Sonny usually did as he was told, but what Walt had said troubled him. He had said *hanging from tree limb tomorrow*, and Walt always said what he meant. Billy Ray was Sonny's idol, and Sonny wondered if he should go by the Lucky Spur and tell Billy Ray what Walt had said. Billy Ray might be in trouble, and a friend would warn another friend. Sonny felt strongly about that, for he considered himself Billy Ray's friend.

Billy Ray was seated as usual at the back table of the Lucky Spur when Sonny peered over the swinging doors, searching for his hero. When Sonny pushed through the doors, Billy Ray looked up from the empty glass he was fiddling with on the table before him. He was still a little perturbed that there had not been more of a fuss in honor of his gunfight that afternoon. To the contrary, it perplexed him that everyone seemed to be giving him more space than usual. He had even had to buy his own drinks. The reception to his deadly ability had hardly been what he would have expected, and for once he was glad to see Sonny Demry come in. Sonny was a half-wit, but Billy Ray reveled in the poor boy's idolatry.

"What you doin' in here so late, turnip head?" Billy Ray tilted his chair back against the wall and greeted the young boy.

"Howdy, Billy Ray," Sonny drawled, his face beaming with delight at being acknowledged by his hero. "I come by to tell you somethin'."

When Sonny related, as close as he could remember, Walt Collins's veiled threat about a lynching, Billy Ray's first reaction was disdainful contempt. "They'll play hell tryin' to put a rope around my neck," he blustered loudly for the benefit of those seated at nearby tables. "I reckon everybody saw what happens to anybody tryin' to go up against me." His response pleased Sonny, and the half-wit left the saloon with the firm conviction that Billy Ray could take on the entire town if necessary.

One who overheard the conversation between Billy Ray and the simpleminded stable boy was Willett Burns, owner of the Lucky Spur. He took the shot glasses he had just rinsed in the water bucket behind the bar, placed them on the shelf and paused for a few moments, considering what he was about to say. His mind made up, he came from behind the bar, walked over and sat down at the table with Billy Ray. Willett had put up with Billy ever since he had come looking for a job as a thirteen-year-old. Some folks wondered why Willett had continued to let Billy Ray establish himself at the Lucky Spur after evolving into such an obnoxious loudmouth whose only apparent accomplishment was a fast gun. The kid had always been a source of amusement to Willett, even when some of his customers complained about Billy Ray's threatening swagger. Willett only laughed and chided them that Billy Ray was just talking. But recently, Billy Ray had done more than just talk. This was bad business, this thing that Billy Ray had done to the town, worse even than the underhanded way he had killed that young cowhand. Sam Ingram was a well thought-of man in Dry Fork. One of the original settlers, he was respected by almost all of the town's citizens. Will Andrews had not been a part of the community long enough for folks to know him very well, but all indications had been that he was a welcome addition to the growing town. Billy Ray was no longer amusing.

"I couldn't help but hear what Sonny said about lynching talk," Willett said. Billy Ray shrugged his indifference. Willett continued. "If I was you, I believe I'd think about that some. You killed a couple of people that are gonna be mourned in this town, and folks ain't gonna think any too kindly toward you for puttin' 'em under. You know, you mighta outgrewed Dry Fork. Might be time to move on."

At first Billy Ray was taken aback to hear Willett Burns suggest it might be best for him to leave town. Willett had been the closest thing to a father Billy had ever known. For a split second, Billy Ray started to flush with anger. "I ain't scared of Lon Fortson. I'd like to see him try to arrest me."

“Hell, it ain’t gonna be Lon Fortson. If Sonny got it right, they’re talking about a posse.”

“I ain’t runnin’ from no bunch of storekeepers. If they wanna tangle with me, I’ll see to it that there’ll be a sight less folks around here.”

“Billy Ray,” Willett began patiently, “these folks ain’t plannin’ to come at you one at a time so you can show ’em how fast you are with that damn gun of yours.” Billy Ray started to protest, but Willett cut him off. “These folks aim to string you up, son. And don’t think they won’t do it. Most every one of these storekeepers, as you call ’em, had to fight Injuns from two different tribes to hold on to their homes.” He sat back in his chair and relaxed. “I’m just offerin’ you a piece of advice. Dry Fork might become a little uncomfortable for you.”

“Yeah, well, I ain’t worried about the whole damn lot of ’em,” Billy Ray boasted.

“Suit yourself,” Willett said and got up to return to the bar.

“I always do,” was Billy Ray’s cocky retort. But as he sat there, he thought about what Willett was trying to tell him, and for the first time, he gave it serious consideration. He was no longer welcome in Dry Fork. He could defy the town for only so long before somebody took a shot at him with a rifle, or jumped him by surprise. The more thought he gave his situation, the more he began to think it might be a lot healthier for him to put the dust of Dry Fork behind him. *Hell*, he thought, *I’ve been wanting to go look for some of that gold they’ve been talking about for a while now.*

* * *

John Castleberry looked around him at the small group of men gathered in the barn. “Who are we missing?” he asked Walt Collins.

“Broadus Wells,” Walt answered. “I reckon he’ll be along. It’s still five minutes before seven.”

“You coulda put on some coffee,” Clerus Taylor said, rubbing his hands together against the chill early-morning spring air.

“Hell, I didn’t know this was supposed to be a social,” Walt snorted. “Maybe I shoulda baked up some biscuits, too.”

“Maybe,” Clerus shot back. “I notice you’re always ready to drink my coffee when you come in to get a haircut.”

“Hell, at the prices you charge, you oughta throw in a little bacon, too.”

At that moment, Broadus walked in, putting an end to the meaningless banter. “All right,” Castleberry announced, “we’re all here.” His face a mask of cold resolve, he looked around the group making eye contact with each one. “Let’s go take care of business.” The six members of the city council, rifles or shotguns cradled in their arms, filed silently out of the barn. Sonny Demry, just reporting for work in the stables, stepped back against the side of the building, and stared wide-eyed as the somber posse passed him.

At that time of morning, there were only a few early risers preparing to open their shops. Barney Tatum, a fire already glowing in his forge, stopped to stare at the solemn group that passed his shop, walking down the middle of the street. There was no word exchanged between him and the posse. He laid his tongs and hammer aside and fell in behind them. He had a fair idea where they were going. He was joined by a few other stragglers, one a cowhand from a nearby spread who had slept off a drunk in an alley. “Where’s everybody goin’?” he asked Barney, which caused John Castleberry to turn to look at him.

“This committee is on official business,” Castleberry informed the spectators, “and I’d advise you to stay back out of the way.” The curious having been fairly warned, he paid them no further attention. The posse continued down the middle of the dirt street.

Bypassing the front door of the Lucky Spur, they went directly around to the back, stopping before

the door to the small storeroom where Billy Ray slept. With a nod of the head from Walt Collins, the lynching committee readied their weapons. When all appeared to be ready, Walt nodded again to John Castleberry, and the mayor answered with a slight nod. Without further communication, Walt turned and aimed his size twelve boot at the center of the door. It didn't give on the first try, and Walt had to kick it several more times before the jamb split and the door swung open. As soon as it slammed back against the inside wall, all six weapons were aimed at the open doorway, all six men ready to pull the triggers if necessary. The room was empty.

Crowding one another in an effort to gain entrance to the room, the posse stood dumbfounded in the dark confines of the windowless storeroom. There was no evidence that Billy Ray lived there—no clothes, no personal articles. There was a cot, but the bedroll was gone. There was no saddle or bridle. “The son of a bitch ain't here,” Wilson Greenwell said, stating the obvious.

“He lit out last night. I heard him leave after midnight.” The group turned as one to see who had made the statement, finding Willett Burns standing in the shattered doorway. “I reckon he didn't wanna hang around for your party,” Willett said, oblivious of the unintended pun. “You boys made a nice mess of my storeroom. I reckon you'll pay for fixin' my door.”

“It was done on official town business,” the mayor replied, “couldn't be helped.”

“Is that a fact?” Willett responded impatiently. “If you'd tried it, you'da found out that the damn door wasn't even locked.”

“All right, Willett,” Castleberry replied, his patience growing short as well. “I'll see that your door gets fixed.” He had more important concerns than Willett's door at the moment. Billy Ray had slipped away, and he wasn't sure what, if anything, he could do about it. It was going to be difficult to explain to Rachael Andrews that the man who murdered her husband would in all likelihood go unpunished.

Chapter 2

With nothing but gently rolling prairie between him and Dry Fork, Lon Fortson could see the gathering of people when he was still over half a mile away. Somebody must have passed away while he was gone, he thought, because the only thing south of the schoolhouse was the cemetery. Curious, he prodded his horse to a faster walk, his eyes intent upon the graveyard, one hand on the rope leading his mule.

Close enough now to identify individuals, he guessed that most of the town was there, that is, most of the good folks—the mayor, the town’s businessmen, and of course the preacher. As he watched, the preacher walked over and placed his hand on Ellie Ingram’s shoulder, as if giving her spiritual comfort. Lon’s heart stopped for an instant. *Sam!* He searched the gathering frantically, scanning from one side to the other. He could not see the sheriff anywhere. Afraid now that what he feared might be true, he gave his horse his heels and galloped the rest of the way.

The townsfolk, gathered there to bid farewell to two of their citizens, turned at the sound of the galloping hoofbeats. While all recognized Lon immediately, no one spoke as he pulled up before them. In his apprehension, he had not given a thought to the possibility that he might be interrupting a solemn ceremony. He was struck with the sudden fear that something had happened to Sam Ingram, the one man who was responsible for giving him the opportunity to earn an honest living.

Ellie Ingram, upon seeing Lon, sobbed uncontrollably, and went to meet him. “He killed him!” she cried out to her husband’s deputy as he hurriedly dismounted. “Shot him down in the street. Sam never had a chance.”

Lon was horrified. Unsure of himself, he didn’t know what to do. “Who?” he gasped. “Who shot him?” He realized then that there were two fresh graves. He looked quickly around the circle of mourners, and his gaze settled upon the schoolmaster’s wife. She was dressed in a black veil and being supported by two of her neighbors as she stared back at him, obviously overcome with grief. “Dear Lord,” Lon muttered, barely able to believe the tragedy. “Will Andrews?” Ellie nodded, unable to speak as she choked back her sobs. “Who did it?” Lon asked again.

“Billy Ray,” John Castleberry volunteered. “We tried to get him, but he lit out.”

Lon was stunned. He knew it was his place to take some form of action, but at the moment, he didn’t know what to do. The service having been effectively ended, the mourners moved aside to let the gravediggers fill in the graves. Several members of the city council gathered around Lon and related the events that had led up to the funeral. Ill-equipped for a catastrophe of this magnitude, Lon listened to the accounting of the posse’s attempt to capture Billy Ray, while inside, he could feel his heart pounding against his ribs. They said Billy Ray had fled. Was he supposed to organize another posse and go after Billy Ray? He wasn’t sure, but he knew without a second thought that he would go even if no one else volunteered. He owed as much to Sam and Ellie.

“Anybody know which way he lit out?” Lon finally asked. When he was told that Willett Burns said it appeared that Billy Ray had headed due north, Lon called for volunteers. “I reckon we’re gonna need a posse. How many of you can I count on?”

Every man there volunteered. Even Wilson Greenwell, who had favored waiting for the marshal from Cheyenne, stepped forward without hesitation. Gratified with the response to his request, Lon assumed a more authoritative posture. "All right, then, we'll set out at first light. Every man is responsible to outfit himself with possibles to last at least a week or two."

Walt Collins was one of the first to volunteer for the posse. Being a practical man, he was merely showing support for the feelings of the two widows. It had been two days since Billy Ray had fled. He couldn't account for the feelings of the others, but he knew there wasn't a chance in hell that they would catch Billy Ray.

* * *

The first rays of the morning sun found all eight of the volunteers assembled in the street before Walt Collins's stables. While the others milled about, waiting for the word to mount up, Lon studied the obvious trail left in the dirt behind the Lucky Spur. As Willett had said, it was heading north. Satisfied with his scout, Lon signaled the posse, and they were soon under way, following tracks that led straight out to an oft-used trail that led to Horse Creek. With an air of determination, Lon led the posse north along the beaten wagon track, the Laramie Mountains looming on his left, silent witnesses to a futile mission.

Progress was slow in the beginning as the posse fanned out on either side of the trail, watching for signs that Billy Ray might have left the well-worn wagon track. There were many tracks along the trail, some old, some only a few days old. There was really no way anyone could distinguish Billy Ray's tracks from those of countless others made before or after him. Still, the posse pressed on, riding with a sense of duty to avenge the victims. By the end of the day, they had advanced no farther than the banks of Horse Creek where they decided to make the first night's camp.

The next morning, spirits were willing, but already a couple of the men, Clerus Taylor and Wilson Greenwell, began to grumble that the posse might possibly be wasting time. It was a suggestion that Walt Collins knew to be a fact, but he didn't say anything. He figured they owed it to Ellie and Rachael to make a show of going after Billy Ray. After a quick breakfast of coffee and bacon, they started out again, keeping to the common trail that led to the north.

Near the end of the third day, with no significant signs having been discovered, they reached the south bank of the Platte River. Cyrus Brumby was the first to voice the thought that worried most of the posse. "Fellers, I reckon this is about as far as I go. We ain't likely to run up on Billy Ray if we was to ride a month, and I've got a business to run. So tomorrow morning I'm headin' back."

"I guess I'll be headin' back with Cyrus," Wilson Greenwell spoke up. "I'm just as sorry as I can be for Ellie and Rachael, but we're just wastin' our time out here. Who the hell knows where that crazy son of a bitch is headin'? He could be thinkin' about goin' to Fort Laramie, or maybe he is headed toward Dakota territory, like Lon thinks. But we ain't picked up no sign that we know for sure was Billy Ray. For all we know, he mighta decided to double back and head south to Denver. I'm goin' back."

One by one, the others fell in with Brumby until there was no one left but Lon, Collins and Castleberry. The mayor shrugged his shoulders and glanced at Walt Collins. Walt nodded slowly and said, "They're right. It might take a year to track that boy down—might as well head on back."

The mayor took Lon Fortson by the shoulder and said, "You've done about as much as the town expects, Lon. We all have to get back to business now." It was obvious to Castleberry that the young deputy was wrestling with his conscience. After all, Sam Ingram had done a lot for the man. "Sam wouldn't have expected you to keep on going when we can't find enough sign to even know if we're going in the right direction."

Lon was not comfortable with the decision to quit the chase, even when the others were quick to endorse the mayor's comments. "I know we ain't found no real trail to follow, but I just feel like Billy Ray's headin' for Dakota territory and the Black Hills. Willett Burns said Billy Ray's been doin' a lot of talk about huntin' for gold up there."

"The Black Hills is a helluva big piece of territory," Walt Collins said. "Even if your hunch is right, a man would be hard to find in those mountains." He glanced around to acknowledge the nods of agreement from the others. "Besides, you're more'n likely to get your hair lifted by some angry Sioux warrior for messin' around in their sacred territory."

With some reluctance, Lon turned his horse around the following morning and joined his neighbors on the road back to Dry Fork. There was an almost light-hearted air about the group of riders as they retraced their trek of the prior three days. The mood didn't sit well with Lon. He had the feeling that the men had merely completed an obligation, and felt little remorse for allowing Sam Ingram's murderer to escape. With each mile covered, Lon wrestled with his conscience until he became more and more determined to search for Billy Ray on his own. And by the time they reached Horse Creek, he had definitely made up his mind to turn back again. He was about to inform the mayor of his decision when Walt Collins called out that a rider was approaching from the other side of the creek. All eyes turned to follow the direction Walt indicated. No one could identify the rider for a while, a slight figure that appeared to ride bent slightly forward as if uneasy in the saddle. When the rider was within a hundred yards, they realized it was a woman. She pulled up when she saw them fording the creek, and Lon realized the rider was Rachael Andrews.

John Castleberry was the first to reach her. "Why, Mrs. Andrews, what on earth are you doing out here all by yourself?"

"Did you find him?" she answered with a question of her own, her face grim and determined.

"Why, no, ma'am, we didn't," Castleberry replied. "I'm real sorry to have to say it, but there wasn't any use in proceeding further."

"You're giving up already?" She looked from face to face accusingly. "You're just going to let him get away with killing my husband and Sheriff Ingram?"

Exasperated, the mayor looked around him for support, but no one was anxious to answer the angry young lady. It was up to Castleberry to attempt to appease her. "Now, Rachael," he said, taking on a fatherly tone, "try to understand. We aren't quitting without good reason. There ain't any trail to follow. We'd just be guessing where Billy Ray went, and it's a mighty big prairie out there. We'd never find him." He affected a paternal smile. "Some things just can't be explained. You just have to accept Will's loss and go on with your life. A young lady your age has plenty of opportunities to marry again and start over brand-new." It was the wrong thing to say.

Rachael said nothing in response for a full minute as she searched their faces, one by one, looking to see signs of disagreement with the mayor's words. Only a couple of them returned her gaze, rather than turning away—one, Walt Collins, because he felt no obligation to anybody for any actions he might take, and the other, Lon Fortson, because he felt a responsibility to do more. "Not one of you is willing to look for that murderer?" Her gaze returned to Lon Fortson, since he was the deputy sheriff.

"I'm willin' to go after Billy Ray," Lon answered. "I think he's headed up in the Black Hills somewhere." He saw the sudden light of hope in Rachael's eyes and hastened to caution her. "I ain't sayin' it'll be easy, and it might take a long time, but it's worth a try."

"I'll help you find him," Rachael quickly replied.

Lon misunderstood her intentions. "I'm obliged. I'm gonna need some supplies, 'cause I figure to be gone a long spell. Anything you could chip in would be helpful."

"I mean I'm going with you," Rachael said.

"Oh, no, ma'am," Lon replied, taken aback by the suggestion. "You couldn't hardly go with me. I

ain't no place for a lady like yourself. Dakota territory is rough country."

Undeterred, Rachael insisted, "Then I'll go by myself. I'll not sit around at home with my needlepoint and wait. I want to be there when you catch him. I want to see his face."

Lon was at a loss for words. He looked at Castleberry for help in explaining why it wasn't right for her to go with him. Castleberry provided no help. Instead, he encouraged her. "If you really plan to go after Billy Ray, Lon, I think I can speak for the city council in saying we'll help with your supplies." He turned again to Rachael. "Lon's right. It won't be any place for a lady, but if you're determined to go, I don't see how we can stop you." Glancing at Lon, he said, "If she's bound to go, she'd be a damn sight safer with you than by herself."

The mayor found himself more in favor of the plan the more he thought about it. It eliminated some of the guilt he felt for not punishing Sam Ingram's killer. In fact, it would be a great deal easier facing Ellie Ingram if he could tell her he was sending Lon out to find Billy Ray. As far as Dry Fork was concerned, losing Lon Fortson for a time was of little significance. He would appoint Walt Collins as temporary sheriff, and who could say? Walt might be persuaded to take the job permanently. As far as Rachael Andrews was concerned, she could be Lon's problem. If she wanted to go traipsing off across the prairie with him, that was her decision to make. His mind was already working on other problems. Will Andrews hadn't even gotten settled in good, and already Dry Fork was without a schoolteacher again. Now where in the world would he find another one? There was one positive result of this tragedy, however Dry Fork was rid of Billy Ray.

* * *

Lon Fortson was not a smart man. But he was smart enough to know he was not a smart man, a quality that had been a saving grace as far as Sam Ingram had been concerned. The sheriff had hired Lon as his deputy against the advice of John Castleberry and some of the other council members. After all, they had counseled, young Lon had little to recommend him for the job.

Raised by his father, who was widowed when Lon was three years old, he had spent his formative years helping his father scratch out a meager living from the hard Wyoming soil. What little money was made from the sale of potatoes and corn, produced on the small patch of ground east of Dry Fork was almost immediately consumed by his father at one of the three saloons in town. From an early age, Lon was seen around the little settlement on a regular basis, seeking odd jobs, taking handouts when offered. He tried school for a time, but found he had neither the time nor the patience to learn. Barely able to read and write, he quit to concentrate his efforts upon the more important issue of finding something to eat.

Lon's fortunes took a turn for the better when, at age seventeen, Walt Collins hired him to clean out the stables. It was there that he became known to Sam Ingram. Sam was especially appreciative of the extra care Lon spent on his horse, and he would talk to the humble young man from time to time. Sam saw something of value in the boy's honesty and dedication to the job, no matter how menial. Three years later, when Sam's deputy decided to move on to California, Sam offered Lon the job. It was a genuine opportunity for respectability for Lon, and he eagerly accepted.

Now, after four years as Sam's deputy, Lon knew that he still lacked the respect he had hoped for and he was accepted by the founders of the little settlement as adequate at best. With Sam's death, he held no illusions that he would be offered the position of sheriff. The best he could hope for was to remain as deputy. It occurred to him that the town council's willingness to send him off to search for Sam's killer reflected their opinion that the town could do without him. It might have been smarter for him to stay close in an effort to hang on to his job, but bringing Billy Ray to justice was foremost in his mind. To do otherwise would have been an insult to Sam's memory. Deep in these thoughts, he di

not hear Rachael Andrews's footsteps on the board walkway until her hand was on the doorknob.

He looked up from the rifle he was cleaning on the desk. Her face still wearing the same grim determination she had exhibited since meeting the posse at Horse Creek, she offered a clipped greeting. "Morning," she said. "I'm ready to get started."

He had hoped she would have a change of heart after thinking for a day about going with him. There was no evidence of such a development. Standing defiantly in the doorway, dressed in what appeared to be a pair of her husband's trousers, which were tucked inside a pair of boots that came almost to her knees, and a heavy coat, she fixed an unblinking gaze upon him, solidly prepared to meet his objections. Before he even spoke, her gaze informed him that it would be a waste of time to try to persuade her to remain there while he searched.

He made one last attempt anyway. "Morning, Mrs. Andrews," he said politely. "I see you got yourself outfitted for the trip." He paused, trying to think of the best way to say it.

Reading his face, she cut him off before he could form the words. "You might as well save your breath. I'm going to Dakota territory with or without you, so let's get started." There was no thought in her mind of remaining in the grieving little settlement, bathing in self-pity, seeking the sympathy of her neighbors. How long could she survive living on the charity of people she had known for such a brief time? John Castleberry would waste little time in looking for someone to replace Will, and she would have to move out of the house provided for the schoolmaster. She had given no thought at all toward returning to Kansas City. She had no family there. Will had been her future, and all the family she had left. An only child, she had been orphaned at the age of twelve when her father and mother were killed when their buggy was overturned on the Canonsburg Pike. No, she had no desire to return to Kansas City, where she had been passed from family to family, little more than a servant, until she caught young Will Andrews's eye. With his wavy black hair and shy smile, Will had come into her dreary existence like a brilliant sunrise, bringing the promise of a happy future. How exciting it had been, like a fairy tale. They had journeyed west with the promise of the whole world ahead of them. Now all that had been taken away by one despicable saloon loafer. She would not hesitate to kill Bill Ray Blevins if given the opportunity.

Lon flushed momentarily, realizing that she was going to have it her way, no matter what argument he might make. "All right, then," he acquiesced, "let's get goin'." He finished loading the rifle, picked up a sack of cartridges and followed her out the door.

She paused to watch him lock the door to the sheriff's office. "You might as well start calling me Rachael," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, then turned away from the door, pausing to look up and down the street. Now dusty again, the wide wagon track showed no evidence of the recent rain. He had a feeling it might be the last time he saw the town as a deputy sheriff. "We'll drop these keys off at the stables on our way out."

Walt Collins stood watching the two as they rode away, the bumbling deputy and the schoolmaster's widow. A more compassionate man might have felt at least a twinge of guilt as he watched Rachael's efforts to press her horse into a faster gait. He had sold the gangly-legged blue roan to Will Andrews, knowing the horse had little stamina. But Walt was never troubled by fits of conscience. Young Will Andrews might have proven to be a good schoolteacher—he wasn't around long enough for anybody to know—but he sure as hell didn't know much about horses. *God knows that's a fool's mission*, Walt thought. *They'll come dragging their tails back here after a week or two if they don't lose their scalps nosing around in Sioux country.*

The risks involved in riding through Indian territory had entered Lon's mind. In fact, he had given it a great deal of thought. He was confident in his ability to avoid trouble with the Lakota Sioux if he was alone. He was not so sure of himself now that he had a woman to be concerned with. But as John

Castleberry had said before, it would be a lot safer for Rachael Andrews to travel with Lon than by herself. Lon didn't care to have the young widow along, but he didn't like to think about her riding into the Black Hills alone. And he did not doubt her determination to do just that, even though he wondered what in hell she was going to do if she found Billy Ray. Leading his pack mule, he kicked his horse up a notch to a faster walk. Behind him, Rachael Andrews urged her horse to follow. Lon glanced back to make sure the lady kept up. Satisfied that she was able to control the large blue roan she rode, he looked back again toward the trail they would follow. The thought occurred to him then that he would be just as lost as she was once they rode beyond the Platte. *I wish to hell I knew a little bit about the Black Hills country.* Approximately two hundred miles to the northeast of the man and woman, there was a man who knew a great deal about the Black Hills.

Chapter 3

Moving with catlike grace uncommon for a man of his size, the buckskin-clad scout darted like a shadow from boulder to boulder along the rocky cliff, following the progress of the Sioux war party below him. They were searching for him, *Wanigi Ska*, White Ghost, just as the other war parties combing the mountains had searched that morning.

Unaware of the name the Lakota had given him. Clay Culver watched with detached patience as the Indians spread out among the tall pines on the slope below, searching for his trail. After more than a quarter of an hour with no sign of the white scout, the warriors gathered at the base of a rocky outcropping where the tracks had ended.

The discussion went on too far below for him to hear their words, so Clay could only guess what they were saying. It was obvious that he had ridden up into the rocks. And from the animated conversation and the intense scanning of the mountain above them, he could surmise that they were arguing about the most likely route he had taken. Most of the warriors seemed to look toward a short powerfully built man for his opinion. Clay figured him to be the leader of the war party, for the others listened when he spoke, and paid close attention when he indicated with long sweeping gestures where the obvious passage would be. *Yep, that's the most likely trail*, Clay said to himself as he followed the direction indicated by the war chief. *That would be the quickest way down the mountain all right*. Clay counted on the war party to make the assumption that he had made his way down to the narrow valley below in order to escape. But the war chief hesitated, still considering the higher elevations of the rocky-peaked mountain. After a few moments, he turned to talk to his warriors. After a few moments more discussion, the war party split up with half of the warriors starting down the slope. The rest, led by the stocky war chief, immediately started climbing up the steep rock-strewn face on foot, leading their horses, just as Clay had done.

"Damn," Clay muttered with no show of alarm, "that fellow's pretty good." Pausing for just a moment, he took the time to take a longer look at the war chief. Even at this distance, Clay could see a marked difference in this man and the average Sioux warrior. Unlike most Lakota men, who were smooth-muscled and lithe, the war chief was broad shouldered with knotty muscles that spoke of latent power. It was little wonder the others seemed to treat him with respect.

Knowing he was bound to be discovered if he stayed where he was, Clay backed away from the edge of the boulder and stood up. Retracing his path, he doubled back to a brace of stunted pines, where he had tied his horse. Taking the paint's reins, he climbed farther up toward the peak, avoiding the patches of snow scattered about at that altitude. When he reached a spot that looked safe enough to the side across the mountain's face, he continued to traverse the slope, but this time in the opposite direction from his original trail. It was his hope that the war party would assume that he had continued in the direction first taken. *I just hope to hell this doesn't lead me to a cliff*, he thought as he passed above the point where he had earlier quit climbing and watched the war party's progress below him. He would have to hustle to make it across an open stretch of loose shale and snow before the war party reached that point below him.

He was positive that if he had continued on down the mountain following the old game trail that led through the dense pine forest now several hundred feet below him, he could have reached the narrow valley. But that would have led the Sioux war party right to Lieutenant Fannin's patrol, and no doubt a confrontation that might have turned out badly for the fifteen-man patrol. From his perch a while back, Clay had counted more than thirty warriors, most armed with a variety of repeating rifles as well as single-shot Springfields. So he figured it best to lead them in another direction. Fannin's troopers were for the most part untested and, in Clay's opinion, ill-suited to take on a well-armed war party of blooded Sioux warriors.

Clay had accomplished the mission he had agreed to undertake. He had found the camp of twelve miners who had sent a rider back to Fort Laramie for help. The rider, having been seriously wounded in his escape, had driven his horse night and day to reach the post, bringing the news that the mining camp had been under siege by a band of Sioux for three days. He pleaded with Colonel Bradley to send soldiers to relieve his embattled partners. They were running low on food and ammunition. It would be a matter of days, he had said.

It was supposed to be the army's job to keep miners out of the sacred Indian territory, but Bradley begrudgingly sent Fannin with a fifteen-man detail, all the troops he could spare, knowing that it might be too little too late. In no shape to take the return trip, the wounded rider was forced to remain at Laramie. It would be up to Clay Culver to find the camp.

Knowing it would take at least four days to reach the general area where the miners were under siege, Fannin had made the best time he could. But after riding hard for four days, the soldiers were still at least a half a day away from the camp. At Clay's suggestion, Fannin sent the scout out ahead to find the camp and appraise the situation for him. Clay had found the miners, all right, but it was too late to do anything but pray over their mutilated bodies. It had been Clay's misfortune to linger at the scene of the massacre a few moments too long. He had been spotted by a Sioux scout who had come back to the camp, which resulted in Clay having thirty angry warriors chasing him across the mountain.

Looking behind him now, Clay was gratified to see that the lead scouts had not emerged from the rocks as yet. A few more yards, and he disappeared from their sight as he worked his way around a sharp curve in the ledge. *Looks like I'm gonna have to take the long way home*, he thought, since he would now have to traverse the mountain to make his way back to the cavalry patrol.

Luck seemed to be with him, for halfway around the rugged mountain he came to a little-used game trail that would lead him down between the rocks to a gentler slope where the lodgepole pines began. The trail must have been used by mountain goats and sheep, because from that point upward, nothing but a goat could have climbed any farther. He smiled when he realized that just beyond the trail was a cliff that would have presented the dead end he hoped he would not encounter.

Leading his horse along the trail, carefully watching his step to avoid suddenly skating on the loose gravel, he worked his way down to the trees. Once there, he found the trail level enough to climb back in the saddle. *Might as well follow the trail down*, he decided, *and see where it leads me*. Then he could determine the best way to return to Lieutenant Fannin and the patrol.

If the stocky war chief failed to realize that Clay had reversed his direction once the warriors split up, then hopefully both groups of warriors were now on the other side of the mountain, opposite the trail he followed. If his luck held out, he could reach the valley floor, and follow the stream to the south end. From there, he would only have to cross a low ridge to reach the tiny branch where the soldiers waited. He knew already that, based on the number of warriors he had seen, he would not encourage the lieutenant to proceed to the small stockade the miners had erected.

He had the distinct impression that Fannin wasn't overenthusiastic about taking the patrol into the Black Hills in the first place. Fannin never expressed it. That was the kind of officer Fannin was. A

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