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WILLIAM W. JOHNSTONE

WITH J.A. JOHNSTONE

FIRST TIME
IN PRINT!

A man in a brown cowboy hat, a blue shirt, and a brown vest is aiming a handgun forward. He is in a Western town with wooden buildings and mountains in the background. In the distance, several people on horseback are visible. The scene is set in a dusty, sunlit environment.

MACCALLISTER
THE EAGLES LEGACY
KILL CRAZY

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William W. Johnstone *with J. A. Johnstone*



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Chapter One

The sound of a shot rolled down through the gulch, picked up resonance, then echoed back from the surrounding walls. Emile Taylor, who was holding a smoking pistol, turned to the others with a smile on his face. He had just broken a tossed whiskey bottle with his marksmanship.

“I’d like to see somebody else here who can do that,” he snarled.

Emile was one of six men who had made a temporary camp in an arroyo that was about five miles west of the town of Chugwater.

“Emile, there ain’t nobody said you wasn’t good with a gun, so there is no need for you to be provin’ yourself to us,” Johnny said. Johnny was Emile’s brother. “Anyhow, that don’t really matter all that much.”

“What do you mean, it don’t matter?”

“Hopefully, we ain’t goin’ to be gettin’ into no gunfights. The only thing we’re goin’ to do is ride into town, rob the bank, then hightail it out of there before anyone knows what hit them. And if we pull this off right, there won’t be no shootin’.”

“What if someone tries to shoot at us?” Emile asked.

“Then you can shoot. But I don’t want no shootin’ unless we absolutely have to.”

Emile was about five feet four inches tall, with ash-blond hair and a hard face. Johnny was two inches taller, with darker hair. Johnny was missing the earlobe of his left ear, having had it bitten off in a fight the last time he was in prison. Although the two men were brothers, they didn’t look anything alike until one happened to look into their eyes. Their eyes were exact duplicates: gray, flat, and soulless.

“After we do the job I think we ought to split up . . . ever’ man for hisself,” Al Short said. “That way, if they put a posse together they won’t know which one to follow.”

“No, but they might choose to follow just one of us,” Julius Jackson pointed out. “And whoever that one is they choose to follow is goin’ to be in a heap of trouble.”

“Besides which, if we do that, where at will we divide up the money amongst us?” Bart Evans asked.

“I don’t know,” Short said. “I didn’t think about that.”

Evans chuckled. “You didn’t think about it? Hell, man, the money is what this all about. How can you not think about it?”

“What we ought to do is, once we leave town, just wait behind a rock and shoot ’em down,” Clay Calhoun suggested.

“You mean you’d shoot them from ambush?” Emile asked. “That ain’t a very sportin’ thing to do.”

“Hell yes. I ain’t like you, Emile. I ain’t tryin’ to build myself no reputation. If someone is comin’ after me, I don’t need to kill the son of a bitch fair and square. . . . I just want to kill him.”

“Clay has a point,” Evans said. “The best way to handle a posse would be to set up an ambush. Besides which, most of ’em will be nothin’ but store clerks and handy men anyway. Prob’ly ain’t none of ’em ever used a gun more ’n once or twice in their life anyway, so even you faced ’em down they wouldn’t be nothin’ you could call sportin’ about it.”

“Well, then if we’re goin’ to do that—ambush ’em, I mean—maybe it would be better for us to all stick together,” Jackson said.

“No,” Short replied. “I still think it would be best if we split up. I think we’ll have a better chance that way.”

“All right,” Calhoun said. “How about this? Instead of all of us separatin’, what if we was to break into two groups? That way the posse will still have to make a choice as to who to follow. And if they decide to split and follow each group, it will cut their numbers in half, which means we would have a better chance.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a pretty good idea,” Short said.

“No need for any of that,” Johnny said. “I’ve got an idea that will throw them off our trail, once and for all, so that we all get away clean. Only we’re going to need different horses.”

“What do you mean, we are going to need different horses?” Jackson asked. “We got horses already. We got good horses.”

A big smile spread across Johnny’s face. “Yeah,” he said. “But these ain’t the horses we’re goin’ to use when we hold up the bank. These horses ain’t even goin’ to get close to town.”

“That don’t make no sense to me a’tall,” Evans said.

“Then let me explain it to you,” Johnny said. “The way I got it planned out, we’re goin’ to steal up some horses from several different places. Then, just before we go into town to hold up the bank, we’ll hobble our horses in some place out of the way, and when we go into town to rob the bank, we’ll be ridin’ the stolen horses.”

“I don’t understand,” Jackson said. “Why would we take a chance on ridin’ stoled horses when the ones we got is perfectly good? What if we have to leave town at a gallop? We won’t know nothin’ a’tall ’bout the mounts we’ll be stealin’.”

“All they have to do is get us into town and out again, and any healthy horse can do that,” Johnny said. “Then when get to a place that we will have picked out, we’ll dismount, take off our saddle and harness, then send the stolen horses on their way.”

“Why would we do that?” Short asked. “I mean, if we go to all the trouble to steal ’em, why would we just turn ’em a’ loose?”

“You said it yourself, Al. Like as not after we rob the bank, the marshal will be rounding up the posse,” Johnny said.

“I reckon he will, but what does that have to do with stoled horses?”

“The posse will be trailin’ us by followin’ the tracks and such we leave when we ride away from the bank, right?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, now follow me while I try to explain. When we turn them horses loose, where do you think they will go?” Johnny asked.

“Well, I reckon they would—” Short started. Then he stopped in midsentence as a huge smile spread across his face. “Son of a bitch! They’ll more ’n likely go back wherever it was we stole ’em from.”

“Yes,” Johnny agreed. “And if we steal each horse from a different place, then the horses will lead the posse all over hell’s half-acre. And while the posse is followin’ them, we’ll be takin’ off on our own horses.”

“Yeah!” Short said. “Yeah, that’s real smart. Did you come up with that all by yourself?”

“Ha!” Emile said, hitting his fist in his hand. “I may be the best shot in the family, but there can’t be nobody say Johnny ain’t the smartest. And that’s why he is in charge.”

“You need to get on into town now, little brother,” Johnny said. “Look around, see what you can see. But don’t get into no trouble.”

“I’ll have a drink for all you boys,” Emile said as he started toward his horse. “One for each one of you.”

“Just don’t get drunk and foolish,” Johnny cautioned.

Duff MacCallister's ranch, Sky Meadow, was fifteen miles south and slightly east of where John Taylor and the others were plotting to hold up the Chugwater bank. Duff MacCallister had left Scotland four years earlier, and shortly after arriving in the United States he'd moved to Wyoming. Here, by homesteading and purchasing adjacent land, he'd started his ranch. Since that time, he had been exceptionally successful, and Sky Meadow now spread across some thirty thousand acres of prime range land lying between the Little Bear and Big Bear creeks.

Little and Big Bear creeks were year-round sources of water, and that, plus the good natural grazing land, had allowed Duff to try an experiment. The experiment had been to introduce Black Angus cattle. He'd been well familiar with the breed, for he had worked with them in Scotland. His experiment had been successful, and he now had ten thousand head of Black Angus cattle, making his ranch one of the most profitable in all of Wyoming.

Duff's operation was large enough to employ fourteen men, principal of whom was Elmer Gleason, his ranch foreman. In addition to Elmer, who had been with Duff from the very beginning, there were three other cowboys who had been with him for a very long time. These three men, Al Woodward, Case Martin, and Brax Walker, not only worked for him, but also were extremely loyal and top hand, occupying positions of responsibility just under Elmer Gleason.

Though the relationship between Duff and the three men was solid now, it had not gotten off to a very good start. Their first encounter had been at a community dance that had been held in the ballroom of the Antlers Hotel. The hotel was on the corner of Bowie Avenue and First Street in the nearby town of Chugwater.

On that night, Duff had escorted Meagan Parker to the dance, but Woodward, Martin, and Walker had shown up without women. Given the general disproportionate number of single men to single women in the West, it was not all that unusual for young cowboys to come alone. But Woodward, Martin, and Walker spent the first half hour getting drunk on the heavily spiked punch.

"I got me an idea," Woodward said. "Martin, let's me 'n' you join one o' them squares."

"We can't. We ain't got no woman to dance with us."

"That don't matter none," Woodward explained. "Once we start the dancin' and the do-si-do'n and all that, why, we'll be swingin' around with all the other women in the square."

"Yeah," Martin said. "That's right, ain't it?"

"No, it ain't right," Walker said.

"What are you talkin' about? What do you mean it ain't right?" Woodward asked.

"Well, think about it. Whichever one of you takes the woman's part will be do-si-do'n with all the other men when you get to swingin' around."

"Yeah, I hadn't thought about that," Martin said.

"Hell, that ain't nothin' to be worryin' about," Woodward said. "Next dance, why, we'll just switch around. Martin, you'll be the woman on the first dance, then I'll set the next one out, and Walker, you can come in and let Martin be the man. Then on the third dance, why, I'll come back in and be the woman. That way, all three of us can do-si-do with the other women."

"All right," Martin said. "But let's pick us a dance with some good-lookin' women in it."

When the next sets of squares were formed, Woodward and Martin joined the same square as Duff MacCallister and Meagan Parker.

"Well, lookie here, Martin," Woodward said, pointing toward Duff. "Looks to me like you won't have to do-si-do with all men. You'll get one man that's wearin' a dress. That ought to count for somethin'."

The "man in a dress" remark was prompted by the fact that Duff MacCallister had arrived at the dance wearing a kilt. But it wasn't just any kilt; it was the green and blue plaid, complete with

Victoria Cross, of a captain of the 42nd Regiment of Foot, better known as the Black Watch, the most storied regiment in the British Army.

“Man in a dress,” Martin said derisively, laughing just as the music started.

As the couples broke apart to swing with the others, Martin made a round with the men, including Duff. But on the next round he rebelled. Pushing one of the men aside, he started swinging around with all the women until he got to Meagan. That was when Duff stepped out into the middle of the square and grabbed him by the arm.

“Get out of my way, girlie,” Case Martin said to Duff. He reached for Meagan, but as he did so Duff, using his thumb and forefinger, squeezed the spot where Martin’s neck joined his shoulder. The squeeze was so painful that Martin sunk to his knees with his face screwed up in agony. The other squares, seeing what was happening in this one, interrupted their dancing. Then the caller stopped, and did the band—the music breaking off in discordant chords.

“If you gentlemen are going to dance in our square, you’ll be for doing it correctly,” Duff said talking quietly to the man who was on his knees in pain.

“Missy, you done started somethin’ you can’t finish,” Al Woodward said, throwing a punch at Duff.

As gracefully as if he were performing a dance move, Duff bent back at his waist and allowed Woodward’s fist to fly harmlessly by his chin. Duff counterpunched with one blow to Woodward’s jaw, and Woodward went down to join Martin, who was still on the floor.

Walker, who had been sitting this dance out, pulled his pistol and leveled it at Duff.

“No!” Meagan shouted.

Duff reacted before anyone else did. Pulling the *sgian dubh*, or ceremonial knife, from its position in his right kilt stocking, he threw it in a quick, underhanded snap, toward Walker. As he had intended, the knife rotated in air so that the butt, and not the blade, hit Walker right between the eyes, doing so with sufficient force to knock him down.

Marshal Ferrell and his deputies took charge then, escorting all three of the troublemakers out of the dance hall and down to the jail.

Chapter Two

Within three months of that unpromising beginning, Woodward, Martin, and Walker had begun working at Sky Meadow. On this day, almost two years after the three had been hired, they were working the south range of the ranch. They weren't herding—they were just making certain that the cattle, which had a tendency to wander about as they were grazing, stayed within the confines of the ranch. As they were riding up a long, low hill, they heard a cow bawling.

"Listen to that," Woodward said.

"Listen to what? It ain't nothing but a bawlin' cow," Martin replied.

"That ain't no ordinary bawlin'. That's a-scared bawlin'," Woodward insisted.

The three cowboys urged their horses into a rapid lope up the rest of the rise and, when they crested the ridge, saw that a pack of wolves had brought down one of the animals.

"The sons of bitches! Look at that!" Martin said. He pulled his rifle from the sheath.

"No," Woodward said, holding his hand out to stop Martin. "You can't hit the wolves from here. We need to get closer."

Thinking the newly killed cow would keep the attention of the wolves, the three men rode down the hill as fast as they dared across the uneven ground, hoping to close the distance so they could come within range of the wolves.

Just before they got into range though, the wolves sensed their presence and darted off.

"The bastards are getting away!" Martin said, angrily. Pulling his rifle, he began shooting, though the range was too great and the bullets did nothing but kick up little dust clouds where they hit. The wolves escaped easily.

Dismounting, the three cowboys walked over to the steer. It was lying on the ground now, still alive even though the wolves had already begun to eat him. Too weak to make any sound, the animal looked up at the three men with big, brown, pain-filled eyes.

"Damn," Woodward said. "Look at the poor bastard."

Pulling his pistol, he shot the animal in the head, putting it out of its misery.

"This is the third one we've found like this," Walker said.

"Yeah, well, now we know for sure what's causing it, 'cause we actual seen the wolves while they was doin' it," Martin said.

Woodward chuckled. "What did you think was doin' it, Case? Prairie dogs, maybe?"

"No, but I thought it maybe could have been a cougar or somethin'."

"Yeah, I guess it could have been. All right, come on, let's see if we can find them wolves before they get 'em another one."

The three cowboys hunted the wolves for the next two hours, but without success.

"What do we do now?" Martin asked.

"We need to tell Elmer," Woodward said.

"I ain't lookin' forward to tellin' him about a problem that we ain't took care of yet," Walker said.

"I know what you mean, but it's got to be done."

Back at the ranch, Elmer was supervising the half dozen or so men whose duties this day had not taken them out on the range. Cowboys—as Elmer explained patiently, almost patronizingly, anytime he hired a new hand—had to be jacks-of-all-trades.

“You got to be part carpenter so’s you can keep the buildings up, and part wheelwright so as to keep the wagons repaired. You need to be some veterinarian too, so’s you can take care of the animals, and even a little bit of a doctor to take care of wounds and such, seein’ as we’re so far from town that ain’t always that easy to get to a real doc.”

At the moment, a couple of the cowboys, Ben and Dale, had one of the ranch wagons jacked up with the left rear wheel off. They were packing the hubs with grease, a job that was so dirty and unpleasant that it was passed around among the men so that one person didn’t have to do it all the time. Elmer approached the two men, carrying two glasses of lemonade.

“I thought you boys might like this,” he said, offering a glass to each of them.”

“A cold beer would have been better,” Ben said. “But this will certainly do. Thanks, Elmer.”

The two men wiped as much grease from their hands as they could before they took the glasses.

“How is it goin’?” Elmer asked.

“This here is the last wheel on the last wagon,” Ben replied. “What you got in mind for us after this?”

“I don’t have nothin’ more in particular for you, today. Why don’t you boys just look around and see if you can find somethin’ that you know needs doin’. If you do find something needs done, just go ahead and take care of it.”

“All right. Hey, Elmer, after we’re done for the day, you don’t mind if we run into town, do you? They say there’s a new girl at Fiddler’s Green,” Ben said.

“I don’t mind, if all your work is done,” Elmer said. “New girl, huh?”

“Yeah, and they say she’s really a looker,” Dale added.

“She’ll just be one more way Biff has of getting money from you boys,” Elmer said. “By the way, have either of you seen Simon Reid?”

“Reid? Ain’t he mucking stalls today?” Dale asked.

“He is supposed to be. But he ain’t there.”

“He ain’t? You mean he’s left Earl to muck the stalls all by his ownself?”

“It sure looks like that,” Elmer said.

“I don’t like to tell tales on others,” Dale said. “But if you got three men workin’ and one loafin’ on a job, you can bet the one loafin’ will be Reid.”

“I tell you what,” Ben added. “If that son of a bitch ran out on me like he did to Earl, I’d near ’bout lay an axe handle up alongside his head next time me’n him seen each other.”

“And I’d hand you the axe handle,” Ben added.

“If you see him, tell him I’m lookin’ for him,” Elmer said.

“Will do,” Dale promised.

Elmer left the two men, mumbling to himself as he started back toward the ranch office. The ranch office was a relatively new addition to the Sky Meadow compound, a small building that sat between the “big house,” as the cowboys called Duff MacCallister’s residence, and the bunkhouse. Duff was in the office tallying the latest numbers, compiled from the count the cowboys gave him almost daily.

“Elmer, you’re looking a bit peeved,” Duff said when Elmer came into the office and sat down at his own desk, with a disgusted sigh. “Would you be for tellin’ me what has you in such a state?”

“It’s Simon Reid, again,” Elmer replied. “That son of a bitch is as worthless as tits on a bull. I thought I was a better judge of men than that. I shoulda known from the time I hired him that he wasn’t worth a cup of warm piss.”

Duff laughed. “Elmer, ’tis no one I know with a more colorful grasp of the English language than you. Sure ’n’ sometimes I wonder if ’tis English at all that you speak.”

“Damn it all to hell, Duff, I’m tryin’ not to cuss, I really am. But Reid absolutely makes my ass know barbed wire.”

Duff laughed again. "Och, mon, now your language has gone from colorful to incomprehensible. How does one's arse knit barbed wire? Never mind, I know the answer to my own question. One's arse would knit barbed wire very painfully."

At that moment there was a knock on the door.

"Maybe that's Reid," Elmer said, getting up to answer the door.

It was Woodward, Martin, and Walker.

"We need to talk," Woodward said.

"Duff is cipherin' an' such. Let's talk outside, so's not to disturb him," Elmer responded, stepping out of the office, then shutting the door behind him.

"We've got problems, Elmer," Woodward said. "Big problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"Losin'-beeves kind of problems," Woodward said. "We found three of 'em down half eaten."

"Half eaten?" Elmer replied, confused by the comment.

"By wolves," Walker added.

"You're sure it's wolves?"

"Yeah, hell, they was still workin' on one of the beeves when we seen them," Woodward said. "Five of the critters they was."

"Why didn't you shoot 'em?"

"We tried to shoot 'em, but we can't get close enough to the bastards to hit 'em," Martin said.

"They're too damn smart. They either see us or hear us or somethin'. But we can't get no closer about two or three hunnert yards from 'em before they start runnin'. And you can't hit no wolf from three hunnert yards away. Hell, you can barely see the sons of bitches from that far," Walker said.

"The bastards started eatin' on that last poor critter even before it died. We had to put it out of its misery," Woodward said.

"Good, that was the right thing to do," Elmer said. He sighed. "All right, thanks for tellin' me about it. I'll let Duff know."

"I agree, Duff needs to know," Woodward said. "But for the life of me, I don't know what he will be able to do about it."

"This is Duff MacCallister we're talking about, remember?"

Woodward laughed. "Yeah," he said. "Now that I think about it, I have no doubt but that he will take care of it."

"Listen, you boys haven't seen Simon Reid, have you?"

"Reid? No, not since this mornin'," Woodward said. "Didn't you toll him out for workin' in the barn today?"

"Yeah, I did. But he ain't there, and accordin' to Earl, he ain't seen hide nor hair of him since ju after lunch."

As Elmer, Woodward, Martin, and Walker were having their impromptu conference, Simon Reid was the subject of their conversation and the man who had been the cause of Elmer's earlier agitation, was having a business meeting with three men. The meeting was being conducted five miles away from the ranch compound. It was at the extreme west end of Sky Meadow, and its remote location was by design, for the business at hand was cattle rustling. The cattle being rustled belonged to Duff MacCallister.

"As you can see, I've cut out ten of 'em," Reid said, referring to the cattle that stood stoical nearby. "They're Black Angus, which is the finest and most expensive cow in the country. Do you have any idea how much these here cows is bringin' at the Kansas market?"

The three men Reid was making his pitch to weren't Sky Meadow cowboys. They weren't even local men. Creech, Phelps, and a third who called himself Kid Dingo, were from Bordeaux, a town that lay twelve miles north of Chugwater.

When none of the three answered him, Reid continued his pitch. "Right now, these cows, at the Kansas City market, is bringin' forty dollars a head."

"Yeah, well that's interestin' an' all, but you may have noticed that we ain't exactly the Kansas City market," Creech replied.

"And I ain't askin' for no forty dollars, neither," Reid said. "I'm just tellin' you that so's that you know what a good deal I'm givin' you. I'm only askin' twenty dollars a head."

"We'll give you five dollars."

"Five dollars?" Reid replied, reacting sharply in response to the low offer. "What do you mean, five dollars? Come on, Creech, are you out of your mind? I'm takin' a hell of a risk by sellin' these cows to you in the first place. I stole these here cows from Duff MacCallister's herd, and if you don't know much about him, well, let me tell you, he ain't somebody you cross. Besides which, I know you're goin' to get at least thirty dollars a head for 'em, when you get 'em back to Bordeaux."

"What we sell 'em for ain't no concern of your'n," Phelps said.

"Come on, fellers, me 'n' you've know'd each other a long time," Reid said, continuing to plead his case. "You ain't got no call to try and cheat me like that."

Creech, Phelps, and Kid Dingo moved away a few feet so they could talk privately. They consulted for a moment; then, nodding, Creech turned back to Reid.

"All right, we'll give you ten dollars a head for 'em, but that is as high as we are goin' to go. That's a hunnert dollars for you, and we'll take it from here. All you got to do is put the money in your pocket and ride away," Creech said.

"A hunnert dollars," Phelps added, with a smile. "Think of the whiskey and the whores you can buy with a hunnert dollars."

"All right," Reid said. "Give me the hunnert dollars and the cows is yours."

The transaction made, Reid pocketed the money and started back toward the barn. He was supposed to be mucking out the stalls. That was a job he hated, but he smiled as he thought of the one hundred dollars riding in his pocket right now. Having that much money would make the job bearable.

Chapter Three

At the butte where Woodward and the others had told him they had seen the wolves, Duff MacCallister reined up his horse, Sky, then sat in the saddle for a moment as he perused the range before him. Except for roundup, and cattle drives, such as when he would drive a herd down to the loading pens and rail head in Cheyenne, the cattle were never in one, large herd. Rather, they tended to break off into smaller groups, bound to each other within those groups as if they were family units.

Duff saw one such group now, gathered near the water and standing together under the shade of a cottonwood tree.

With a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck, Duff dismounted, then walked out onto a flat rock overhang. Lifting the binoculars to his eyes, he studied the open range below him. That was where he spotted them—at least eight wolves, sneaking up on the cattle.

Duff walked back to his horse, then pulled a Remington Creedmoor rifle from his saddle sheath. The rifle, a recent purchase, had been developed especially for the Creedmoor Marksmanship Club. It had a well-deserved reputation for accuracy, featuring a telescopic sight as well as a device that would allow the shooter to compensate for range and wind.

Woodward had reported that when anyone tried to get close enough to the wolves to shoot them, the crafty creatures would see, smell, or hear them, then dart quickly out of the way. That meant that the only way the wolves could be eliminated was if someone could shoot them from a standoff position that was so far away that the wolves would not even realize they were in danger.

Such a feat would take a rifle with extreme range, as well as a marksman who was skilled enough to take advantage of that superior range. The scoped Creedmoor was that rifle, and Duff MacCallister was that marksman.

Lying down on his stomach, Duff took up a prone firing position on the rock. He cranked in the telescopic sight, then picked up a few grains of grass and dropped them to estimate the windage. That done, he sighted in on the wolves. The wolves were at least five hundred yards away, so distant that without the magnification of the scope, they could barely be seen.

Because of the great distance, the wolves were totally unaware of Duff's presence. They approached their prey with the extreme confidence of predators who knew that, collectively, they were superior to any creature that might be near.

But Duff was not near, and they were not superior to him.

Duff squeezed the trigger; the gun boomed and kicked back against his shoulder. One and a half seconds later, the lead wolf was sent sprawling by the impact of the heavy bullet. A tenth of a second after the strike of the bullet, the sound of the shot reached the remaining pack, but it came from so far away that they were unable to connect that sound to what had happened to the leader of the pack.

A second shot killed a second wolf, and within less than a minute, Duff had killed every one of them. His work done, he picked up the remaining shells, returned to his horse, replaced the rifle in its scabbard, mounted Sky, and started back home.

When Duff returned to the compound, he could hear the blacksmith's hammer ringing, and outside the machine shed, he saw Ben and Dale painting a wagon. He could also hear his foreman's voice coming from the barn. The voice was loud and angry, and Duff heard Reid's name being spoken.

"I gather Elmer has found the errant Mr. Reid," Duff said to the two men who were painting.

“It ain’t as much Elmer findin’ him as it is Reid just come ridin’ back in without so much as a by your-leave,” Ben said.

“He told Elmer he thought he was finished with the work he was give to do,” Dale added.

“And Elmer took issue with that, did he?”

“Yes sir, he sure did, an’ ol’ Elmer’s been givin’ Reid hell ever since.”

“Keep the damn stalls clean!” Elmer’s voice said loudly. “You wouldn’t want to be sleeping ankle deep in horse shit, would you?”

“They’re horses,” a voice replied. “This is only natural for them. Horses is supposed to live in shit.”

“It ain’t natural at all,” Elmer said. “If we was doin’ things natural, the horses wouldn’t be in stalls in the first place. They’d all be runnin’ free. We’re the ones that’s got ’em all cooped up, so the least we can do is give ’em a clean place to be. Now get it done.”

“I didn’t sign on to clean horse shit out of a stall,” Reid said. “You want the shit cleaned, you clean it yourself.”

“I’ve had about enough of you, Mr. Reid,” Elmer said. “You’ve been slacking off way too much here, lately. You lollygagged around all mornin’ long, and after lunch you wasn’t nowhere to be found. You left Earl to do the work all by himself.”

“I told Earl where I was goin’. Yesterday, my rain slicker fell offen’ my saddle, and I went back to look for it. Then, while I was lookin’ for it, I seen some cows drifting off the ranch. I figured savin’ them cows was more important than cleanin’ up horse shit.”

“Did you now? Well, here is the thing, Reid, how do I know you was actually roundin’ up wanderin’-away strays? Or even lookin’ for your rain slicker for that matter? I mean, you lied about greasing the wheel on the hay wagon last week, and because it didn’t get no grease, the axle got wore down that it’s out of round and we’re goin’ to have to put on another one.”

“Then why don’t you have me doin’ somethin’ important like that, instead of shovelin’ shit out of a stall?”

“I tell you what, Reid. You don’t have to worry about cleaning out no more shit because you ain’t a goin’ to be working here no more. Get your tack and get out of here. You’re fired.”

“You can’t fire me, old man. The only one who can fire me is the man that owns this place.”

Duff had been just outside, listening in on the discussion, and he chose that moment to walk in the barn.

“That is where you are wrong, Mr. Reid,” Duff said. “Elmer Gleason is the executive administrator of this operation, and as such, has full authority to fire anyone he deems needing fired.”

“He’s the what?” Reid asked.

“I’m the ramrod,” Elmer said. “Now, get.”

“Someday you are going to regret this,” Reid said.

“That wouldn’t be a threat now, would it, Reid?” Elmer asked. “Because if it is, well, by God, mornin’ you can just settle this out here and now.”

“I’ll leave, but I ain’t goin’ nowhere without drawin’ my pay,” Reid said.

“How much are you owed?” Duff asked.

“I’m drawin’ forty dollars a month.”

“Reid, you do know that Mr. MacCallister is payin’ more than any other rancher in the valley, don’t you? Most anyone else is paying is thirty dollars and found.”

“Here’s twenty dollars,” Duff said.

“You’re bein’ awful generous, Mr. MacCallister,” Elmer said. “The most we owe him right now is ten dollars, and we don’t even have to settle up with him for that until the end of the month.”

“If I am for understanding the way you feel about him, Elmer, the more distant he is from Sky Meadow, the better things will be.”

“I guess that’s true, all right.

Duff smiled. “Then let’s just say he can get farther away on twenty dollars than he can on ten.”

Reid took the twenty-dollar bill, then glared for a moment at both Elmer and Duff.

“You got your money, Reid. Now get,” Elmer ordered.

Reid walked outside where his horse, still saddled, stood tied to a hitching rail.

About half the cowboys employed by Duff owned their own horses, while half rode horses that belonged to Sky Meadow. Reid was one of the cowboys who owned his own horse, and from the very first day that had given him an attitude of superiority over those who did not. Now, as he rode away from the compound, a few of the other cowboys turned out to watch him leave.

Reid’s air of superiority and his lack of cooperation with the others who worked on the ranch, as well as his general laziness, had not engendered strong friendships. As a result, those who had turned out to watch him leave did so with a sense of satisfaction that he was gone. A few even called insults out to him.

“Ha! I’ll bet this here is the first time anyone ever seen a bag o’ shit ridin’ a horse before,” one of the cowboys called.

“Look there, boys. That’s somethin’ you don’t see all that often,” another said. “Two horse’s asses at the same time, one at the horse rear end, and the other sittin’ in the horse’s saddle.”

There were other insults and derisive comments shouted until Reid, who urged his horse into a gallop, moved out of range.

“It looks as if your decision to fire Mr. Reid is being well received by the others,” Duff said.

“It looks like it, don’t it?” Elmer replied. “It turns out there didn’t nobody like the son of a bitch. So tell me, Duff, did you see any wolves?” he asked.

“Aye, eight of the creatures I saw,” Duff said.

“Good. I’ll get someone out there to bury them.”

“Sure now, ’n’ how is it that you know I killed them?” Duff asked.

“How do I know? Because you seen ’em, that’s how I know. You ain’t a’ goin’ to tell me they run off now, are you?”

“They’re dead,” Duff said.

“Uh-huh. Like I said, I’ll get someone out there to bury ’em. If we leave ’em to lay around and rot, the next thing you know the water could get bad.”

“I’m going into town this afternoon to check the mail and collect a few items at the store,” Duff said. “Would you be for wanting me to pick something up for you?”

“Better get some coffee,” Elmer said. “You bein’ an Englishman, you always remember tea, but you don’t always remember coffee.”

“Och, ’tis a Scotsman I am, and nae an Englishman,” Duff corrected. He smiled. “Sure now, and have you nae corrected me anytime I refer to you as a Yank?”

“Lord, no, don’t do that,” Elmer said with a wince. “You know damn well I ain’t no Yankee.”

“Aye, I know well, Elmer Gleason. ’Tis a pair of rebels we both be, but in differing ways.”

When Elmer walked back out to the barn, he saw the wagons painted and glistening, with the wheels greased and reattached.

“Good job, men,” he said.

“Al, Case, and Brax are goin’ into town. Since all the work you give us to do is done, can we have the rest of the afternoon off to go into town with them?”

“I reckon so,” Elmer said.

Ben smiled, broadly. “Come on, Dale. Let’s get washed up some.”

Ben, Dale, Woodward, Martin, and Walker lived in the bunkhouse. Long and relatively narrow, the bunkhouse was one of several buildings that now occupied the compound. It had seven beds on either side. Each individual bed, and the area immediately around it, became the personal domain of the cowboy who slept there, his space as inviolate as if it were his home. And, in fact, it was his home.

The cowboys used different forms of expression to personalize their “homes,” which not only established them as their private areas, but gave them a sense of belonging and identity.

Dale had a picture of a fancy saddle that he had cut from a Sears and Roebuck catalogue pinned to the wall above his bed. Ben had a blue ribbon he had won in a foot race in Cheyenne the year before. There were other pictures and bits of memorabilia tacked to the wall above other bunks, from a calendar featuring a picture of a passenger train roaring through the night, to more than one “lucky horseshoe.”

Ben and Dale filled a number-two washtub with water, then flipped a coin to see who got to use the water first.

Ben won the coin toss and was now sitting in the tub in the middle of the floor, scrubbing his back with a long-handled brush.

“Dale, you ever been to a big city?” Ben asked.

“I been to Cheyenne.”

“No, I mean a big city, like maybe Denver, or San Francisco, or St. Louis, or someplace like that.”

“Well, I was borned in St. Louis, but I don’t remember it.”

“I ain’t never been to no big city either, but I’d dearly love to go someday.”

“Why?”

“I’ve heard tell that in San Francisco they got a whore standin’ on near ’bout ever’ corner.”

“They got whores in Chugwater.”

“Yeah, but most of the whores in Chugwater are so ugly they’d make a train take five miles of dirt road. The ones in the city is all real pretty, and ’cause they got so many, it don’t cost you hardly nothin’ at all to go to bed with ’em.”

“Maybe someday me ’n’ you can go to San Francisco,” Dale suggested.

Ben climbed out of the tub then and started toward his bunk.

“The water is all your’n now,” he said.

Dale walked over to look down into the tub. “What water?” he asked. “Looks to me like I’m about to climb into one of them bog holes we sometimes got to pull the cows out of.”

Chapter Four

There were two saloons in Chugwater. One was the Wild Hog. It made no pretensions and existed for the sole purpose of providing inexpensive drinks to a clientele who didn't care if the wide plank floor was unpainted and stained with spilled liquor and expectorated tobacco juice. The Wild Hog did offer a limited food menu, but the biggest thing that set it apart from Fiddler's Green, the other saloon in town, was its women. While the girls who worked the bar at Fiddler's Green provided pleasant conversation and flirtatious company only, the women who worked at the Wild Hog were soiled doves who, for a price, would extend their hospitality to the brothel that was maintained on the second floor of the saloon. Nippy Jones, who owned the Wild Hog, made it very clear to the girls he hired that they would be expected to offer that service.

Because the evening rush had not yet started, Nippy was working the bar himself when Simon Reid came in.

"What are you doin' here, Reid?" Jones asked. "I thought all you Sky Meadow boys was connected to the Fiddler's Green by the hip."

"They might be," Reid said. "But not me, seein' as I don't ride for Sky Meadow."

"What do you mean you don't ride for Sky Meadow? You been with Duff MacCallister for near 'bout a year."

"I ain't with him no more," Reid said without any further explanation. "Let me have a beer."

Everyone agreed that the other saloon in town, Fiddler's Green, was an establishment that was equal to anything you could find between St. Louis and San Francisco. Fiddler's Green was owned by Biff Johnson, a retired army sergeant who, while he was with the Seventh Cavalry, had served with Custer at Reno, and Benteen.

Fiddler's Green was practically a museum to the Seventh Cavalry in general, and to Custer's last battle in particular. The walls were decorated with regimental flags and troop pennants, with arrows, lances, pistols and carbines picked up from more than a dozen engagements. He had one of Custer's hats. Libbie Custer had personally given it to him when he'd escorted her back to Monroe, Michigan after George A. Custer was killed.

Even the name "Fiddler's Green" was indicative of Biff's service in the cavalry. Cavalry legend held that anyone who had ever served as a cavalryman would, after they died, stop by a shady glen where there was good grass and a nearby stream of cool water for the horses. There, cavalrymen from all wars and generations would drink beer, chew tobacco, smoke their pipes, and visit. They would regale one another with tales of derring-do until that last syllable of recorded time, at which moment they would bid each other a last good-bye before departing for their final and eternal destination.

Emile Taylor was one of the customers in Fiddler's Green this afternoon. He was sitting at a table with Cindy Boyce, one of the bar girls, and Francis Schumacher, a local citizen. Cindy was a very pretty young woman, with red hair, blue eyes, a peaches-and-cream complexion, and a slender body with womanly curves. Schumacher was rawhide thin, with a handlebar moustache and hair that hung down to his shoulders. Until recently, he had been a deputy. A month earlier Marshal Ferrell had fired him for beating up a drunk that he had brought into jail. Now, Schumacher was working at the livery stable, a position he considered a come-down.

At the moment, Emile was giving Schumacher tips on how to make a fast draw.

“What you have to do is always keep your holster and your pistol well oiled,” Emile said. “That way when you go to draw your gun, it won’t get hung up on you.”

“How many men have you killed?” Schumacher asked.

Emile chuckled. “That’s not somethin’ you ever actually want to ask someone,” Emile said. “Let’s just say that I’ve seen the elephant a few times.”

“Can’t you two find something better to talk about than guns and killing?” Cindy asked.

“Ha!” Emile said. “I suppose the only thing you want us to talk about is how pretty you are.”

Cindy smiled. “That wouldn’t be a bad subject,” she agreed.

When the five Sky Meadow cowboys came into town, the first place they visited was Fiddler’s Green. As soon as they pushed in through the swinging batwing doors, they were greeted by two of the bar girls, one blond and one brunette.

“Hello, boys,” the brunette said.

“Hello, Nell, hello, Mattie,” Woodward said.

“Hey, Mattie, is that the new girl over there?” Ben asked, pointing to the redhead who, instead of wandering around the bar pushing drinks, was sitting at a table with two men.

“Yes, that’s Cindy,” Mattie said. “She just started working here last week.”

“Folks have been talking about her, and they are right. She’s a pretty thing,” Martin said. Then realizing that he may have committed a faux pas, he added, “Course, she ain’t no prettier than you two are, though.”

Both Nell and Mattie laughed. “Don’t worry about it, honey,” Nell said. “I know she’s younger and prettier than I am. But I ask you this. Who is it that came over here to talk to you?”

“You did,” Ben said, smiling at her, grateful for the way she handled it.

“Who’s the man she’s sitting with? I know Francis Schumacher—he’s been around a long time. Do you mean the other one?”

“His name is Emile, but I haven’t heard anyone say his last name,” Mattie said.

“She sure seems to be friendly with them,” Walker said.

“Would you like me to ask her to come visit with you boys for a while?” Nell asked. “I’m sure she would be happy to.”

“Why would we want to talk to her when we have you two girls?” Woodward said.

Smiling, Mattie removed Woodward’s hat and ran her hand through his hair.

“Now isn’t that a smart thing to say?” she asked. “Oh, there are some new customers. We have to go talk to them for a while, but don’t you boys leave. We’ll be back,” Mattie promised.

The five cowboys, who had stopped by the bar to get their beer when they came in, watched Nell and Mattie walk over to greet the new men. Then they found a table that would accommodate all five of them, and started rehashing the day’s events.

“I guess you heard about the wolves,” Woodward said.

“Yeah,” Ben replied. “We spent the whole day workin’ on wagons, tightening spokes in the wheels, greasing hubs. We even painted a couple, but we did hear about the wolves. Someone said that Mr. MacCallister shot five or six of ’em.”

“Eight of them,” Martin corrected. “I don’t know how he done it. We couldn’t none of us get close enough to the damn things to hardly even get a good look at ’em. But Mr. MacCallister went out there and I swear, no more ’n an hour later he come back in, leavin’ eight of them critters lyin’ dead in the dirt.”

“Folks say he is as good a shot as there is in Laramie County,” Woodward said.

“Laramie County? Huh! I’ll bet there ain’t no better shot in all of Wyoming,” Walker said. “Al, I’ll

sure you mind the time he shot an apple off Miss Parker's head from a hundred feet away. And wan't no ordinary apple, neither. It wan't no bigger 'n a plum."

"We had a little excitement of our own today," Dale said.

"What was that?" Woodward asked.

"I reckon you fellas heard what happened to Simon Reid, didn't you?" Dale asked.

"No, what?" Martin replied.

"I heard," Walker said. "Reid quit, didn't he?"

"Quit, my ass," Dale said. "He got hisself fired is what happened."

"What did he do to get hisself fired?" Woodward asked.

"He got to mouthin' off to Elmer, and Elmer up and fired him. That's what he done," Ben said, stepping in so that Dale didn't get to tell the entire story.

"Elmer ain't the kind of person you want to get mad at you," Woodward said. "I reckon Reid lucky that fired is all that got done to him."

"Elmer's sort of strange duck," Ben said.

"What do you mean, he's a strange duck?"

"Most of the time he's kind of quiet. But when you are around him, you always get the idea that he's sort of like a stick of dynamite, just waitin' to explode."

Chapter Five

Elmer Gleason, the subject of their conversation, had a most interesting background. In a way, one could say that Duff had inherited Elmer with the ranch, because when Duff had come to develop the land he had filed upon, Elmer had already been there.

“They say the place is haunted,” R.W. Guthrie had told Duff when he’d first arrived in the territory. He had been talking about Little Horse Mine, a worked-out and abandoned gold mine that was on the land Duff had just taken title to.

“Course, I ain’t sayin’ that I believe in haints, you understand. But that is what they say. Some say it wasn’t the Spanish, that it was injuns that first found the gold, but they was all kilt off by white men who wanted the gold for themselves. But what happened is, after the injuns was all kilt, they become ghosts, and now they haint the mine and they kill any white man who comes around tryin’ to find the gold. Now, mind, I don’t believe none of that. I’m just tellin’ you what folks says about it.”

As it turned out, the “haint” Guthrie had spoken of had been Elmer Gleason. Elmer had located a new vein of gold in the mine and, unable to capitalize on it, had been living a hand-to-mouth existence in the mine, unshaved and dressed only in skins.

Then Duff had discovered Elmer in the mine, and because the mine was on the property Duff had just filed upon, everything Elmer had taken from it so far had actually belonged to Duff. Duff had had every right to drive Elmer off, but he hadn’t. Instead, he’d offered Elmer a one-half partnership in the mine.

That partnership had paid off handsomely for both of them. Now, Elmer was Duff’s foreman and closest friend. And Duff’s half of the proceeds from the mine had built Sky Meadow into one of the most productive ranches in Wyoming.

Before going into the mine, Elmer had lived for two years with the Indians. He’d married an Indian woman who had died while giving birth to their son. He didn’t know where his son was now, and he didn’t care, even though he knew that he probably should. He had left him with his wife’s sister, and he had not seen him since the day he was born, nor did he have any plans to.

As a part of Quantrill’s irregulars during the Civil War, Elmer had taken part in the raid on Lawrence, Kansas.

* * *

From the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative* of August 23, 1863:

150 Male Citizens of Lawrence Slaughtered

T \$2,000,000,

C \$250,000

The scene along Massachusetts Street, the business artery of Lawrence, is one mass of smoldering ruins and crumbling walls. Only two business houses are left upon the street—one known as the Armory, and the other the old Miller block. About one hundred and twenty-five houses in all were burned, and only one or two escaped being ransacked, with everything of value carried away or destroyed.

After the war, Elmer had ridden for a while with Frank and Jesse James. Separating from the James gang shortly after the disastrous Northfield, Minnesota raid, Elmer had cut a swath of lawlessness through the West. Then, leaving the outlaw trail behind him, he'd become a sailor, and later an armed mercenary fighting in Afghanistan during the British-Afghan war.

Elmer had never told Duff about his time in Afghanistan because, as a mercenary, he had been fighting for the Afghans against the British. He knew that Duff had not been there, and he was glad that he hadn't been. But this was a part of Elmer's history that he had no intention of sharing with his friend.

It was raining hard as Elmer waited on the Khyber Pass Road in Afghanistan, in the shadow of the Hindu Kush Mountains. He had information that a British pay officer would be coming this way accompanied by a small guard detail. Elmer's men were hidden in the rocks completely out of sight, whereas the British soldiers and the stagecoach were on the road, in plain view.

As the pay detail approached, Elmer held his hand up, preparing to give the signal. He held back though when, unexpectedly, the British officer in charge of the guard rode to the front, stopped, then looked down the road.

The officer in charge, a captain, sent two of his soldiers down the road ahead of them, and Elmer turned in his saddle to make certain that his men were well concealed. He motioned for Sajadi to get out of sight. At his signal, the Afghan slipped back behind the rocks.

If the advanced guard had been more observant, the British captain might have been forewarned. One of the boulders had been set up to be rolled down upon the trail, and the path between it and the road had been cleared of rocks and natural elevations that might impede the deployment of the boulder. But the Brits gave no more than a cursory glance ahead.

It was obvious that the soldiers were miserable in the cold rain that ran down their shakos and dripped under the collars of their soaked red jackets, making them miserable and less attentive than they should have been. Their scout ahead of the detail was perfunctory at best; then they rode back on a quick trot through the muddiest part of the narrow road to report that all was well.

The captain sat on his horse for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether or not he should trust the report.

"Come on, Brit," Elmer whispered under his breath. "They told you it was clear. What are you waiting for?"

Finally, the British officer gave the order to proceed.

With a sigh of relief, Elmer waved once, and Sajadi returned to his position by the boulder that had been freed to roll easily. Elmer stood by, watching the coach and the escort detail continue ahead, waiting until all were fully committed.

Choosing the exact moment, Elmer brought his hand down. He heard two sharp reports as a sledgehammer took out the wedges that were holding the big rock back. With crunching and loud popping sounds, the boulder started down, reaching the middle of the muddy road with the crashing thunder of an artillery barrage. At the same time the boulder blocked the path of the coach, Elmer and his men moved out onto the road behind the Brits and fired several shots into the air.

"You're surrounded!" Elmer shouted, urging his horse onto the road from the boulders that were right alongside. He leveled his pistol at the soldiers. "Throw down your guns and put up your hands."

"Mercenaries!" one of the soldiers shouted, and he threw down his rifle. The other soldier, perhaps taking their cue from him, threw their weapons down as well. Only the British captain refused the order. He brought his pistol up, pointed it at Elmer, then pulled the trigger. Elmer saw the cylinder turn and heard the hammer click, but the cartridge misfired.

Elmer aimed at the officer. "Drop your gun, Captain! Do it now! Don't make me kill you!"

The captain lowered his pistol, then let it drop into the mud.

“Good Lord! That accent. Are you a Yank?”

“Don’t be callin’ me a Yankee, damn you. I fought agin’ them Yankee bastards for four years.”

“You are! You are an American! What are you doing fighting on the side of the savages?”

“They’re payin’ me. You ain’t,” Elmer said. “Now, I want all you boys to get down off your horses

Grumbling, the men got down. As soon as they did, a couple of Elmer’s men, all of whom were Afghans, began gathering up the horses.

“You’re stealing our horses?” the British officer asked.

“It ain’t called stealin’, Sonny,” Elmer explained. “It’s called confiscating enemy assets. You’re the enemy of these boys, and these here horses are assets. And, speaking of assets, I’ll take the money satchel.”

“What makes you think we are carrying money?”

“Because you are delivering the payroll.” Elmer chuckled. “But I’ll bet you didn’t know that you were delivering the payroll to my boys.” He pointed his pistol at the captain. “Now tell the pay officer inside the coach to throw out the money satchel, or I’ll shoot you dead.”

“Lieutenant Fitzsimmons, please, deliver the satchel,” the captain called.

A canvas bag was tossed out through the coach window. Sajadi retrieved it, then, using his Khyber sword, whacked off the top part of the bag. He let out a little chortle, then reached down inside to pick up a handful of gold coins. He showed off the gold coins to a round to cheers; then he dropped the bag back into the bag.

“You’re making a big mistake, mister,” the captain said. “That money belongs to Her Majesty.”

“Does it now?” Elmer asked, sarcastically. “Well, I’ll just bet the old bag has a lot more where this came from.”

At that moment, Elmer saw the end of a pistol poke out from the passenger window. He fired at the stagecoach, not to hit whoever was inside, but merely to get his attention.

“Get out of the coach now, friend,” Elmer ordered, “or the next time I’ll shoot to kill.”

The coach door opened and the pay officer stepped down. He was an overweight man, wearing a red jacket with white lapels.

“You bloody bastard Yank!” the pay officer swore angrily.

“I done told this other feller, I ain’t no damn Yankee,” Elmer said.

By now, his men had loaded all the money into two other sacks. They tied the necks of the sacks together, then handed them to Elmer, who lay them across his saddle in such a way as to allow one bag to hang down on each side of the horse.

“Captain, would you and your boys be so kind as to shuck out of them clothes right now?” Elmer asked.

“Shuck out?” the captain replied, not understanding the term.

“Take ’em off,” Elmer said. “All of you. Take off your clothes. Strip down to your long johns.”

“Now, just a damn minute, sir,” one of the soldiers, a sergeant said. “I have no intention of taking off my clothes.”

Elmer made a signal with his pistol. “Get out of them.”

Grumbling and protesting, the soldiers began undressing. A few moments later all of them, including the captain and the pay officer, were standing in the mud in their long johns. This was in accordance with the plan, since Elmer believed that a lack of clothing and horses would preclude any chase. The two men Elmer had assigned to pick up the uniforms now did so.

“Look at these here officers, men,” Elmer said. “Without them fancy uniforms and all that braid and braid, they don’t look all that highfalutin, do they?”

“You bloody bastard. You’ve no right to demean our officers like that.”

Elmer recognized the man who spoke as one who, a moment earlier, had been wearing the stripes of a sergeant.

“You are a good man, Sergeant,” he said with what, to the sergeant and the other British soldiers, seemed to be a surprising amount of respect. He turned to the driver. “Unhitch the team.”

“What’s the reason for that?” the driver asked.

“No reason,” Elmer replied. “I just want to keep you folks busy for a few minutes after we’re gone, that’s all. It’ll take you that long to get back into harness. By then we’ll be gone. Oh, and you’ll find your clothes in a big heap, about a mile down the road.”

It was easy now to recall that day, for that was the day he had decided to quit being a mercenary. Fighting on the side of people whose language he couldn’t understand, against people who spoke his same language, hadn’t seemed right to him. At least during the Civil War everyone had spoken the same language.

Elmer had left Afghanistan with over two thousand dollars in cash. He’d returned to New York where he’d spent every cent he had in less than two months.

At that moment, Duff came out onto the porch, interrupting Elmer’s reverie. Although Duff wasn’t particularly dressed up, he had cleaned up, shaved, and dabbed his face with a bit of bay rum.

“Looks to me like you’re plannin’ on doin’ a little courtin’,” Elmer said.

“Elmer, you know why an Englishman wears a monocle?”

“Hell, Duff, I don’t even know what a monocle is.”

“It’s an eyepiece that you wear in one eye.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve seen them things,” Elmer said. “The feller that’s wearin’ ’em has to kinda squish down on ’em to hold ’em in place.”

“Aye.”

“So why does an Englishman wear a monocle?”

“He wears a monocle so that he will only see half of what he can nae understand. Sure, and you remind me of that Englishman, Elmer. You see only half of what you can nae understand.”

“Just ’cause I said it looks to me like you’re goin’ to do a little courtin’?”

Duff made a circle with his thumb and forefinger, then held to his eye as if it were a monocle. He laughed, then started toward the barn to saddle Sky.

Chapter Six

Burt Kennedy was a cowboy from the Bar H Bar, a ranch that was located about three miles north of Chugwater. Kennedy had a six-foot-three-inch frame, upon which was well distributed two hundred and twenty-five pounds of mostly muscle. He was smitten with Biff Johnson's recently arrived red-haired beauty, and had put on his finest clothes to come into town this afternoon.

He brought twenty dollars with him, and intended to use as much of the money as was necessary to entice Cindy Boyce to spend all her time, just with him.

He had been waiting patiently for her to leave the table where she was sitting with Schumacher and some other man, a short, sandy-haired man whom he didn't recognize.

Finally, after waiting for at least half an hour, he walked over to the table.

"Cindy, I been here for half an hour," Kennedy said. "I wish you would keep me company. I got some money to spend, and I aim to spend it on you, which you should like, 'cause I ain't seen either one of these fellers buy you so much as one drink in all the time I been here."

Cindy smiled up at Kennedy.

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't know you were waiting for me. Of course I'll spend some time with you."

Kennedy grinned broadly, but the grin left his face when he saw the little sandy-haired man reach out and pull Cindy back down in her chair.

"You ain't goin' nowhere," he said. "You'll be stayin' right here with me."

"Mister, if you don't get your hands offen her, I'm goin' to mop up this floor with your scrawn little ass," Kennedy said angrily.

"He's right, Emile. I have been with you long enough," Cindy said. "I need to spend a little time with some of my other friends, now."

Emile smiled as well, but his smile was totally without mirth.

"Cowboy, I don't believe I know your name," Emile said.

"It's Burt Kennedy. Not that it makes any difference to you."

"Oh, that's where you're wrong. It does make a difference to me, Kennedy. You see, me an' you are about to have us a fight."

Kennedy grinned broadly. "A fight? Yeah," he said. "But you're a little scrawny to be fightin' me all by yourself, ain't you? What about you, Schumacher? You aimin' to join in? That would make two of you and one of me. That might even the odds up a bit."

"Kennedy, I don't think you know what you are getting into here," Schumacher said.

Kennedy laughed. "Yeah, I do. Come on, I think I'm goin' to enjoy this." He made his hands into fists, then held them out in front of his face, moving his right hand in tiny circles. "Come on," he said. "I'm goin' to put the lights out for both of you."

"Huh-uh," Emile said. "That ain't the kind of fight I'm talkin' about. We're goin' to fight with guns 'cause I plan to make this permanent."

"No, I ain't goin' to get into no gunfight with you or anyone else," Kennedy said.

"I ain't in this fight," Schumacher said, getting up from the table and walking away.

"Well, that just leaves me an' you now, don't it?" Emile said.

"That's right, just me an' you," Kennedy said. He smiled. "But don't worry, I'll make it quick for you."

"How quick? This quick?" Emile replied.

Emile drew his pistol, pointed it at Kennedy's head, then put it back in his holster.

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