

1

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

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

" There is no justice."

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

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

" Why not?"

" I didn't see any corridor here."

" Then you were not looking, sir. "

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

" I am Mr. Melbourne."

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

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

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

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

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

" Not in this reality."

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

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

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

" I've been watching you from the shadows of your life. I know the intensity of your commitment to the truth, your integrity and your quest for justice. What will happen in MacKenzie's courtroom in the next half hour is not justice. I can assure you that."

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

" Have I lost my mind?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

" No comment."

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

Jake looked back toward the men's room door. Melbourne's image was implanted in his mind and his words bounced around his brain. " No, Cara, I don't think this is fair."

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

" After we're done upstairs." Jake veered left up the spiraling staircase to a rotunda with a mosaic floor. Around the rim, white marble Greek statues stood like guardians outside Hades and huge murals from American history

led to the varnished courtroom doors. His chief investigator put out a cigarette and shook his disheveled gray hair as Jake approached. Jake looked into his angry dark eyes. " Nothing we can do about it, Alby. "

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

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

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

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

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

from his ear above a clump of sinewy dark hair, dangling down his neck. Jake read his lips. " You're a loser, McBride."

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

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

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Damn."

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

" Jake McBride."

" Jake... Alby."

" What's the good news, Alby?"

" I don't have good news."

" Lay it on me."

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

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

" What the hell did he do now?"

" There's a kid over at City Hospital. A Robert J. Pauntok. Security guard. Shot in the gut. I don't think he's going to make it. Another drug deal."

Jake fell back to the bench and rubbed his eyes again. " You there, Jake?"

" Yeah..."

" You want me to do anything?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Oh, no. Not this guy again."

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

" And I think you're an aberration."

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

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

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

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

" *Reasons are not as important as reality.*"

" What's that supposed to mean?"

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

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

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

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

" How do you do that?"

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

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

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

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

" *Butkis' killings are real.*"

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

Melbourne shook his head and removed a finely wrapped cigar from his coat pocket. He struck a thin wooden match against a match box's abrasive strip and produced a flaring, orange flame. He lit the cigar. After a few puffs, once the tobacco glowed red, he exhaled a blue smoke stream. "

No, you are free to visit the Nexus House. No agreement is reached until you actually walk into your new existence."

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

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

" *Welcome.*"

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

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

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

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

" Interesting." Jake moved past Melbourne. His eyes were drawn to the odd painting of a clown with wide red lips and waxy white make-up, balancing on a unicycle and pedaling toward a high door marked in black letters, **ANYTHING**. In his left hand was a wad of cash and his right hand was brilliant gold key. The tarnished brass tag on the bottom of the gold leaf frame had the painting's title etched into the metal.

ANYTHING GOES

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

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

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

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

The butler awaited his reply. " Sure."

Melbourne placed his cigar in a glass ashtray and motioned Jake to high back chairs as the butler set the crystal goblets on the table. He popped the cork of a large green bottle full of bubbles and moisture formed on the glass's exterior. Jake slowly sat down and the butler nudged his chair forward. Melbourne lifted the Champagne glass into the air. " *To your good fortune.*"

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

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

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

" What exactly do you propose?"

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

" You mean nailing Butkis?"

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

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

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

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

" *Then you're ready?*"

" I am."

Melbourne brought the tobacco to an orange-red luminescence.

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

" *Exactly my intention.*"

Melbourne balanced the cigar between his fingers and motioned him past the painting. The butler slowly nodded as Melbourne guided Jake to an antique elevator with a rounded gold dial above the polished brass doors.

" *The Nexus House has three floors. We of course will be going to the fourth floor.*"

" Fourth floor?"

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

The brass doors spread with machine smooth precision and Melbourne pulled back the inner gate. Clear sconces, set amidst more red velvet wallpaper, cast a crimson glow across the car. Jake stepped onto buffed black and white tiles and stood next to a leafy plant filling the corner. The same clown painting, in a smaller form, hung in a gold frame on the side wall. Melbourne closed the gate, the outer doors clamped shut and he stood next to a manual brass lever. " *Would you like to operate the elevator, Jake?*"

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

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

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

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

" How did we get to this existence?"

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

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks

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

Moan round with many voices. Come my friends,

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world

Push off, and sitting well in order smite

The surrounding furrows; for my purpose holds

To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths

Of all the western stars until I die

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

" *Your destiny.*"

" Really?"

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

" What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Exactly.*"

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

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

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

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

" The Arroyo Saloon. Are you ready?"

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

Melbourne extended his hand and kept the cigar in his mouth as he spoke. " *Good luck, Jake. Remember, when you're dead, you're dead.*"

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

A smile brushed his face as he paused and turned. Another new life awaited him ahead. As his boots clicked against the wooden floor and his spurs jingled, Jake McBride strutted down the hall and into the bar. The loud saloon sounds, the dried beer and the pungent drift of cow punchers in need of baths reminded him the scene was real. Dozens of gritty, drunk, animated patrons surrounded chipped and stained pine tables, scattered below a stretch of bright frosted front windows. Rows of colored liquor bottles lined the bar mirror. He saw the reflections of long haired, unshaven cow hands plopped along the long waxed bar. O'Malley, a little man in a white shirt and red striped vest, his hair thinning, banged the piano keys near the unoccupied stage's maroon curtain.

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

3

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

" Whaddaya got, Johnny? "

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

" Fill it, John."

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

" What rustler?"

" Back early?"

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

Johnny nodded, opened the bottle and filled the shot glass. " And someone's playin' games with them telegraph wires. Andy Bisbane says they're still down. But that ain't the big news." He plunked the stubby glass and then the bottle on the shiny bar. Jake grabbed glass and poured the bourbon down his throat. It was smooth just like Johnny said; very smooth.

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

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

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

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

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

" I know that, too."

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

" Don't understand that."

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

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

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

" Filled?"

" Yup."

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

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

" Gone where?" asked Jake.

" Dunno."

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

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

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

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

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

" She's one wild woman."

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

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

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

" What is it, Alby?"

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

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

Alby's dark eyes opened wide as he spoke, curling up his top lip and exposing two missing teeth as he jumped up and down like a monkey.

" They wanna string-up Dan Dalton!"

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

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

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

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

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

" Is he alive?"

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

Jake pulled out a gold coin and flipped it onto the bar. He tipped his hat to Johnny and plowed behind Alby through the saloon, making eye contact long enough with Pam Grayson to send a burst of energy through his gut. Alby parted the louvers. The sunlight hurt Jake's eyes as he trotted along the boardwalk. Menewa was hitched in front of his office across the street.

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

* * *

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't intend ta."

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

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

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

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

Jake, with his gun drawn, followed the smaller Rody across the dirt. This would not be the first time he shot a someone threatening his manhood.

" You can talk plainer than that, brother."

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

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

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

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

" Pa is fur it," said Junior.

" Shut up, Junior!" yelled Mike.

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

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

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

" What happened, Dan?"

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

" You rode in and what happened?"

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

" You kill Dunbar, Dan?"

" Nope."

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

" Will do, Jake."

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

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

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

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

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

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

She cried into Grace Whitman's shoulder. The kids looked up at McBride with wide tearful eyes. Growing up without a father was not fair.

They still did not fully know or understand the death of their father. Jake spun back to the crowd. " Did anybody see what happened out here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

" What's that?"

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

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

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

Jake scanned the dirt as they crossed the yard. He moved across the porch and stepped in the opening. Across the clean swept floor Tom Dunbar, in a mass of long curly auburn hair, lay face down on the floorboards under his stone fireplace. One precise round hole had pierced his dark vest. Doc checked the body while Jake looked through the house.

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

Jake laughed. " Looks like a saw."

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

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

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

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

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

" Good move," said Jim.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Yup."

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

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

" Don't know."

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

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

" Whaddaya sayin', Doc?" asked Jake.

" Train's empty. "

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

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

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

" Dunno..."

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

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

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

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

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

4

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

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

" Soaring Bird first saw this?" asked Jake.

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

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

" Nope. Only that engineer and his helper."

" Where the hell are they?"

" Dunno," answered Doc.

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

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

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

" Look at this, will ya?"

" Wagons removing the passengers?" asked Coltraine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Well, that's another good one," said Jake. The wagon tracks converged around one of the freight cars and had chewed up the gravel beds.

" Wreck happens yesterday and the railroad has a man out here in less than a day? The Overland's office is in Omaha."

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

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

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

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

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

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

" We?"

" Yeah, you comin' with me?"

" Jake, I'm not a scout."

" A southern gentlemen, Coltraine."

Coltraine grinned. " We all have our responsibilities."

" We do."

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

Jake squinted and half grinned.

" Look!" shouted Doc.

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Those days are behind us, McBride."

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

" Welcome back."

" Some welcome."

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

" You saw it blow up?" asked Jake.

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

" The army?"

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

Jake gazed across the mud caked flats toward Sierra foothills.

" Many soldiers?"

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

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

" Mexicans. They were robbed by Mexicans."

" Mexicans?" shouted Jake.

" Did you see Mexicans?" asked Coltraine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

" Maybe." Jake looked back at the buckled train. Then he turned to Coltraine and Soaring Bird. " I'm movin' out tonight. Tommora mornin' at the latest. We'll find out whether the army has the gold or it wuz stolen. I'd like to wire Fort Churchill right now... You wanna come with me and find that gold?"

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

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

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

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