



THE  
WANTED  
LAWMAN

A NOVEL

*HAVING A BADGE*

*DOESN'T SAVE YOU*

*FROM THE GALLOWS*

A. C. SMITH

THE WANTED  
LAWMAN



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*THE FOLLOWING CONTAINS SAMPLE CHAPTERS EXTRACTED FROM THE  
WANTED LAWMAN AND HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR PDF*

*A Gray Ghost Publishing book*

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# PROLOGUE



April 1884  
Colorado

Emily was crying again. Poor kid, it seemed like she was always crying these days.

“What’s wrong, Em?” her brother asked as he stood and brushed his hands on his breeches. The campfire made his eyes water when it engulfed him in smoke, crackling to life as it took to the pile of sticks he’d just added.

Emily dashed through the camp to him, sniffing.

He plucked a twig out of her curls. “What were you doing?”

“I was trying to get berries, over there.” She pointed to the nearby trees. “And my necklace got caught.”

She held up a little grubby hand. A delicate gold chain hung from between her clenched fingers.

A pang of grief struck him when she put it in his open palm. *Her locket*. He examined the chain. It was definitely broken.

“I’m so sorry, Em. We’ll get it fixed when we get to a town somewhere.”

Part of him wanted to open the locket. Sometimes, he noticed her staring at it before they went to sleep at night. The picture of their parents. There were times that he struggled to remember what Mom looked like. He’d have to squeeze his eyes shut and think of something specific, like the way she used to laugh at Pa when he’d wiggle his eyebrows at her.

He shoved the locket deep into his pocket.

“I want to go home. I miss Pa,” she said between sniffles.

“I know, kiddo. I do too.” He dropped to one knee. “Come here.”

She threw her arms around him. He loved her little bear-hugs. For an eight-year-old, the kid could really squeeze.

It broke his heart whenever she said she missed Pa. It meant that she really didn’t

remember Mom. Emily was only four when she'd died. He had been eleven when it happened and remembered her well. Emily looked so much like her.

"I'm tired of camping. Why can't we go home?" Her dirty, tear-streaked face turned up to him while she pleaded with her big brown eyes.

"Because it's not ours anymore, Em."

He made his way over to Blue, his father's aging Appaloosa, to unsaddle him. Mom had named the horse. Now, he could remember her smile when she cuffed his Pa for joking that they should name him 'Glue' instead.

Blue was all he and his sister had left.

Every day, Emily asked him why they couldn't go home. He'd grown weary of explaining to her the bank owned it now. He'd never realized that their financial situation was so dire until that day the bankers showed up at their door two weeks ago. That was when he discovered Pa had borrowed against everything when Mom got sick. He sent her out east to see different doctors, tried everything under the sun. Consumption, they called it. And consume her, it did. Just like the mine consumed their father that snowy day in January only three months ago. It was unforgettable, the way their house shook the day it happened. The whole town of Crested Butte trembled when over fifty fathers, brothers, and sons were lost in the explosion at the Jokerville mine. Nothing was the same again after that.

"Here, Em." He held out the saddle blankets. "Take these. You can have some of the jerky out of the saddlebags."

She obeyed, lugging the blankets over to spread them by the fire while he finished tending to old Blue.

A few hours later, Emily was asleep on the saddle blankets, the dying embers giving illumination to her cherub-like features.

The crack of dry twigs in the nearby woods startled him from his thoughts. He sprang to his feet and quieted his breath, straining to see in the dark. His fingers brushed the handle of his father's Colt 1851 Navy holstered on his narrow hips just as the chattering sound of an animal lifted from the foliage.

He surmised it was a raccoon and sighed, squatting to put more wood on the fire. He desperately hated the night, especially because he couldn't see if any predators—animal or otherwise—were trying to sneak up on him and his sister. There was always something skittering and rustling in the woods. The bounding of a squirrel sounded as loud as the footfall of a bear on a still night like this.

In the daytime, in contrast, he felt somewhat invincible. Even though he was fifteen years old, he felt like a man and figured he could protect his sister from anything. But when darkness fell, a heavy shroud of hopelessness and fear descended upon him, and he was nothing more than a scared little kid again. It was only when sheer exhaustion took over that he was able to sleep.

So far, they'd only met one other person on the trail. The man had been nice enough to share his food with them a few nights earlier. The grizzled-looking man left them with what few provisions he could spare, and a grim warning that still resonated in the boy's mind:

*"This is no place for a little girl to be—keep that gun close, kid. There are more outlaws out here than there ain't, and you don't want to know what some of 'em do to girls, no matter how young."*

The words haunted him as he poked at the fire with a stick. There was no way he'd take any chances with his sister. Ever since that meeting, he'd avoided encountering any more strangers.

Just then, old Blue jerked his head up, suddenly alert, his ears swiveling to pinpoint a noise. The sound of an approaching horse arose from the nearby trail.

Alarmed, he yanked Emily up to her feet, startling her awake. Her little eyes went wide with fear when he shoved her toward the trees.

“Someone’s coming!” he hissed under his breath. “Hide!”

She dutifully scampered from his view. The woods quieted when her movements stopped.

He turned and straightened to full height to meet the approaching stranger. The fire illuminated the glossy black mount as it halted next to the campfire. He could see one hand expertly controlling the reins, and the other resting on a deadly looking six-shooter before the rider’s face came into view. The man was clean-cut but formidable-looking, with a dark, sharply trimmed mustache. The firelight glinted from the man’s eyes like sparks on black coal.

The boy’s stomach tensed with dread as he narrowed his eyes at the stranger. “Can I help you?” He tried his best to sound manly.

The stranger said nothing, surveying the scene. He had an unsettling presence about him.

“You alone out here?” the stranger drawled as his eyes settled on his father’s revolver.

The boy nodded, trying to look casual with his hand resting on the handle of his .36. He hoped his trembling fingers didn’t give him away.

The rider dismounted, seated himself next to the fire and lit a cigar. The flame from the match illuminated his face before he waved it out. “What’s your name, kid?”

The boy hesitated. Something about the old man’s warning made him want to lie to this stranger. “Uh, Nick . . . Nick Thomas,” he stuttered, sounding uncertain. It was the name of his best friend, once.

The man raised an eyebrow.

He swallowed. Maybe the man knew he’d lied and had somehow heard the story of how Nick Thomas drowned three years ago in that icy lake when they’d tried to go ice-fishing.

“You any good with that thing there, ‘Nick?’” The stranger gestured to the .36 hanging awkwardly from his hips.

He shrugged. “I don’t want any trouble, mister.”

The stranger gave a half-chuckle at that. “You ever heard of the Haskins Gang, kid?” The man paused and puffed on the cigar casually. “Cause you’re camping on our territory.”

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Of course he’d heard of them. Everybody had. The Haskins brothers and the men who rode with them were notorious for their heinous brutality. They were wanted across several states and territories for rapes, murders, and robberies.

In that moment, he was glad his sister was hidden. He lifted a shoulder in a little shrug. “I don’t think so,” he said. As if playing dumb would somehow help.

“Well, I’m Lander Haskins.” The man studied him, waiting for a reaction.

Nick gave Lander a curt nod of acknowledgment. “Oh, okay. Uh, good to meet you.”

That seemed to amuse Lander, who chuckled around his cigar and slapped his knee. “I’ll tell you what, kid, I don’t know why I’m in such a charitable mood right now, as I normally would kill anyone I found camping so close to us, but if you’re decent with that thirty-six, maybe—just maybe—I’d be willing to take you on.” He took another puff. The smoke blew from the sides of his mouth around the cigar between his teeth. “It so happens that we’ve, uh, come up a bit short on men lately.”

Nick remained silent.

“Your alternative is that I could kill you where you stand.” Lander shrugged and ashed his

cigar with a tap.

Nick considered drawing on Lander but thought better of it. Men like this made their living from the gun. Although he'd always believed the stories exaggerated the tales of their speed, he didn't want to find out.

"Here, kid." The man grabbed a tin can left over from dinner and perched it on the pile of fire logs. He motioned toward Nick. "If you get that can down in two shots, I might not kill you tonight."

Nick eyed the can, trying to fight the bile rising in the back of his throat. He held his breath and drew his father's revolver. It was hard not to shake as he lined up the sights. The muzzle flashed, and the can clinked and disappeared behind the logs.

Lander chuckled. "Well, hell, I guess it's your lucky night there, Nick. Saddle up and come with me."

He didn't think it was his lucky night at all, but knew better than to argue, figuring it was wiser to get Lander away from the possibility of discovering Emily. He obediently saddled old Blue and forced himself not to look toward his sister's hiding place, silently willing her to stay where she was.

Lander pointed at the rest of their meager belongings near the fire. "You leaving that stuff?"

The bedroll, his saddlebags, and food—his sister would need it until he got back.

"Yeah, I'll travel light, I suppose." He shrugged.

He was sick with worry while they rode away into the darkness. He didn't hear a sound or a rustle from her as they disappeared into the night.



The air smelled of booze and sweat, and the five men circled around a stump near the campfire took little interest in Nick over their card game as Lander introduced him to the gang. Two tents were pitched nearby, and four dirty bedrolls fanned out on the opposite end of the fire ring like spokes on a wagon wheel.

"My brothers, Merl, and Jed." Lander pointed to two of the men, who both eyed the newcomer from over their cards but said nothing. Merl acknowledged the boy's presence with a line of tobacco spat in his direction.

"That there is Tom, Lester, and Stubs," Lander said with a brusque wave toward the other men, seeming impatient to be done with the boy.

Nick lifted his hand in a wave which no one returned. Tom gave him a curt nod, Lester drew a card, and Stubs gnawed on an unlit cigar and stared into the fire.

"Where's Vargas?" Lander boomed.

The men suddenly looked alert, glancing around.

"I'm here, boss," a voice came from behind as someone stepped out of the darkness. "I was lookin' after the horses."

Vargas appeared to be only a year or two older than Nick, with dark hair and a lean build.

Lander's eyes narrowed. "This here's Nick." He shoved the boy in Vargas's direction. "I'm puttin' it on you to keep yer eyes on him."

Lander turned toward the fire and then seemed to think better of it. He spun around and jabbed his finger at his new recruit. "Let's be clear on the rules here, kid. The only thing that matters is that I don't trust you—not now, and not ever. You don't go anywhere, you don't do anything without my say-so. Don't even think about dribbling piss on your own boots without asking me first. You do everything I tell you, and we'll get along fine." He gestured toward

Vargas and said with a smirk, “He can tell you what happens when you don’t do what I say.”

At that, he turned away from the boys and disappeared into a tent. Silence hung in the air while they looked at each other.

“Name’s Jesse Vargas.” His new warden extended a hand.

Nick’s eyes went wide for a moment upon hearing the name. “Jesse? Really? That’s funny because. . .” He stopped himself as he grasped Jesse’s outstretched hand. This wasn’t the place to trust anyone. “My name’s Nick, uh, Nick Thomas.” He tilted his head in the direction of the tent. “So, what did Lander mean? What happens when you don’t do what he says?”

A dark pain resonated in Jesse’s eyes before he responded. “Just don’t test him. You’ll get a beating, or a whipping—or worse.”

Jesse stepped away to unsaddle Lander’s horse and began to brush him. The horse’s withers shuddered when the brush met its hide with brisk strokes.

Nick’s panic grew. “I didn’t even want to go with him. I need to get out of here—my little sister—I left her alone in the woods.” His voice became more shrill with his growing anxiety.

Jesse grimaced and held a finger up to quiet him. His voice was barely above a whisper as he leaned in, glancing at Lander’s tent. “I’ve only been with the gang for a couple years, and I seen him kill *three* others who tried to get out, and one of ‘em was just last week.”

“You don’t understand, she’s only eight.” He grabbed old Blue’s reins and swung up into the saddle.

“No, *you* don’t understand.” Jesse pulled his revolver and gripped Nick’s leg. “Now that you’re in, you ain’t getting out.” He cocked the hammer back. “I’m sorry, but you ain’t leavin’. He’d take it out on my hide if you turned up gone.”



For the next day and night, Nick kept quiet and stayed near Jesse. He didn’t sleep at night, but quietly watched the men from his bedroll while they took watch in shifts. The only thing he could think about was Emily, all alone in the woods, but there was no chance to break away.

Finally, an opportunity presented itself the second morning when the men were breaking camp to move. Nick was helping Jesse saddle the horses. As he finished tightening the cinch on Blue, he noticed Jesse step away to take a piss.

His heart racing, Nick put his foot into the stirrup, keeping his eyes fixed on the gang as he lifted himself onto his horse. Staying low in the saddle, he coaxed Blue to start walking. He was only a short distance away when a shout arose from the camp, and he anxiously spurred his horse into a gallop. The other horses weren’t fully saddled yet—he hoped it would create enough of a delay for him to get away.

Unfortunately, whistles followed by the whinnying of horses and the thundering of hooves rose up behind him sooner than he’d expected. The leather reins slapped against old Blue’s withers as the boy urged him to go faster.

He nearly passed his old camp before he recognized it and yanked his reins into a skidding halt. Dust billowed over him as he leaped down and ran to the fire ring.

There was evidence that animals had been there, but little else. A hole was chewed through his saddlebags, and the kerchiefs he’d used to wrap the jerky and hardtack were torn up all over the camp. The bedroll and the rest of their meager possessions were strewn about. Daylight streamed through the trees, revealing no hiding places his sister could be.

His stomach dropped to his feet when he spotted a dark stain on the ground. Drag marks. . . A bloody paw print on a flat rock.

Another large paw print was embedded in the soft dirt. The pads were rounded and

smooth, but there were no dots above them to indicate claws. It wasn't a coyote or a wolf.

A gasp and then a sob tore from his throat.

*A cougar.*

He was screaming Emily's name when the gang caught up with him. Lander appeared first, cocking his revolver at Nick as the others stopped behind him.

Nick met eyes with Jesse, who gave him a grim look and shook his head.

*It's over.*

There didn't seem to be much point to living now, knowing it was all his fault that Emily was gone, most likely dead.

Lander narrowed his eyes as he spoke. "That was a hell of a stupid stunt to pull just to come back to your old camp." He raised an eyebrow as he glanced around at the littered ground.

"He left his kid sister out here," Jesse piped up behind Lander.

Lander shot Jesse a lethal look before he turned back to Nick. "Is that so?"

All Nick could do was nod, and he lowered his head and fixed his stare on the hooves of Lander's horse. It made him sick to imagine her in the powerful jaws of a cougar. He hoped Lander would end it quickly for him.

Lander swung down from his horse, and in one swift stride across the bloody ground, his face ended up inches away from Nick's.

"So, it didn't cross your mind to tell me that the first night?"

His breath smelled rancid, like a dead animal carcass.

"I was scared to tell you," Nick said quietly.

Lander straightened and gestured over the camp with a sweep of his hand. "Well, did you find what you were looking for?"

A lump gathered in his throat. He dared not speak.

"You know, I really should kill you for trying to take off," Lander mused as he pulled off his leather gloves and made his way to his horse, where he rummaged for something in his saddlebags. "So, consider yourself lucky if you get away with just a whipping for this."

Nick's eyes widened at the sight of the braided leather in Lander's hand.

The rest of the gang dismounted from their horses. Lander's brother, Merl, and the large Mexican man they called Stubs grabbed him and dragged him over to a tree.

"Vargas!" Lander shouted from where he stood. "Don't think you won't get a whipping, too, on the account of you turning your back on the little shit. It was your job to watch him."

Jesse's mouth gaped open at that, but he didn't protest. His face was a mask of anger as he locked eyes with Nick.



Nick cried out and pressed his face into the bark of the pine tree when the first lash came. He tensed in anticipation before each strike, unable to keep from screaming out each time. The snap of the leather against his skin seared like fire. He'd never endured such brutal pain before, but the only thing he could think of was losing Emily. It was impossible to control the tears that streamed from his eyes.

After ten lashings, they untied him. He took a few steps before he slumped to the ground, sniffing as he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

Jesse bravely stepped up to the tree.

Nick's eyes went wide when Jesse took off his shirt and he glimpsed the ugly scars streaking across his back. He didn't want to know what things the other boy had done to earn

those.

It was harder to watch Jesse getting whipped than it had been to get the punishment himself, knowing it was all his fault.

Lander laughed cruelly at them when it was over, then shouted at everyone to get on their horses.

Jesse jostled past Nick's shoulder and stooped to pick up his shirt from the ground.

"I'm sorry," Nick offered lamely.

Jesse seemed to be grinding his teeth against the pain. "I told you he would take it out of my hide if you left."

Nick said nothing as Jesse eased his shirt down against his bloody back and swung up into his saddle. He had no choice but to do the same.



The life of an outlaw was not as glamorous as the dime novels had led him to believe. They spent much of their time moving from place to place, mostly camping in the mountains, and occasionally staying in ramshackle saloons in lawless little mining camps. Nick tried his best to assimilate into the gang. In the daytime, he occupied himself with chopping wood, cooking, and tending to the horses. At night, when he wasn't keeping watch, he gazed sleeplessly up at the stars from his bedroll and grieved for Emily.

Jesse eventually forgave him and became his only friend among the outlaws. Nick took great measure to stay out of the way of the others, especially Lander. The gang boss had a temperament that swung wildly from being almost amicable one day to a murderous dark fury the next. On those days, Nick was under constant threat to prove his value to Lander or be killed.

A few months later, Nick was initiated by blood into the life of an outlaw. It was his first run with the gang, and he wasn't sure what was pounding louder: his heart in his chest or the horses' hooves as they closed in on the Wells Fargo Overland stage.

The shotgun messenger blasted at them with his sawed-off 10-gauge while the driver next to him hollered at the team, urging them to go faster. The gang stayed back out of range of the guard's shotgun until the trail widened, then Merl and Jed split off and spurred their horses along the driver's side of the Concord. After several shots, they picked off the driver.

The messenger guard turned his fire on the two brothers. Meanwhile, Tom and Stubs ran their horses up the other side of the coach and shot him in the back. The messenger fell from the coach, tumbling past old Blue's hooves as he disappeared into the gang's cloud of dust.

It took considerable effort for the gang to get the six-horse team stopped.

Afterward, all was quiet except for the panting of the horses while the dust drifted over them.

"Get that strongbox down," Lander ordered.

Nick dismounted and watched Merl and Jed climb up on the stage. Suddenly, rifle fire blasted from around the heavy curtains of the Concord's window, narrowly missing Nick's head. Though unable to see who did it, he fired back at the window before he could think.

A groan that sounded from the inside of the coach let him know he'd hit his mark. A frightened and girlish-sounding shriek arose a moment afterward.

Nick's eyes widened, and he exchanged glances with Jesse. There weren't supposed to be any passengers on this coach.

Tom backed up beside the door and opened it, his revolver at the ready. "He's dead," he

declared when he saw the man inside.

Nick gazed at his victim in shock, taking in the man's graying hair and long mustache. The man's white shirt and black vest were soaked in blood from the center of his chest. His eyes were frozen wide in surprise and seemed to stare right through him.

"Nice shooting, kid," Lander said.

Tom trained his revolver on someone else in the coach sitting opposite of the dead man. "Come on out of there," he ordered with a wave of his gun.

The tear-streaked face of a girl appeared as she scooted toward the door.

Nick's heart shrank to the size of a pebble when she grasped the dead man's pant leg and whimpered, "Daddy."

"You too," Tom ordered, gesturing to someone else in the stage. "Come on out."

Before anything else happened, Tom reached into the Concord with a growl. He produced another young girl, who screamed and grasped her head when Tom dragged her out by her hair. Both girls appeared to be close to Nick's age.

Nick's stomach twisted with dread, knowing what would happen to them.

Merl stepped up and lifted the older girl's chin with his finger to gaze at her face. "Take a look at these pretty little things. . ."

The drooping scar near Tom's mouth curled up when he smiled, as if in agreement. His hand stayed clasped to the younger girl's head.

"Nick! Go watch the trail!" Lander barked.

Nick ignored Lander's order and gripped Tom's elbow, yanking him back. "Leave them alone! Just let them go."

Tom whipped his arm out of his grasp and shoved him backward.

Nick recovered his balance and sprang toward Tom, his fists balled and ready. Before he could strike, stars exploded in his vision and a violent bolt of pain shot through his skull. He dropped to the ground.

Nick glanced up to see Lander towering over him with his revolver turned around in his hand. Bright red blood on the handle showed where he'd struck him.

"What the hell did I say about following orders?" Lander's voice was level and deep as he turned his revolver on him. The hammer clicked back, and Nick covered his face.

"Don't kill him!" Jesse's voice came from behind. "He don't know any better—I promise I'll work with him! We can still use him. You know, he . . . he did show us he's a good shot today, right?"

Lander narrowed his eyes at Nick. Finally, he gestured with his revolver toward the back of the Concord. "Go watch the trail," he ordered, his voice low and sinister. "I won't tell you again."

Jesse yanked Nick to his feet. "Just do what he says," he muttered, giving him a gentle shove.

Nick couldn't look at the sniffing girls as he moved one wooden leg in front of the other. He gritted his teeth and kept moving until he reached the point he could see around the far bend in the trail. Blood trickled down the side of his face, and he ran his fingers through his wet and matted hair, pressing his hand flat against his skull.

He tried to concentrate on the landscape around him in a meager attempt to avoid thinking about what was about to happen behind him. The woods that edged the road stood dark and silent. Storm clouds gathered on the distant mountain range beyond the stopped Concord and six-horse team.

When the screams came, he was unable to think of anything else. He tried vainly to block

the sound from his ears with his fingertips.

When it was quiet, he unplugged his ears. He could hear Lander call Jesse's name.

Nick swallowed when he didn't hear any form of refusal from his friend, and hot tears streamed down his face while the atrocities on the girls continued.

Then all was quiet again.

Nick jumped when he heard the first gunshot. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, but couldn't keep himself from flinching at the sound of the second.

Upon hearing footsteps coming up behind him, he wiped his eyes. The sound of Lander's voice gave him a start.

"You'll get your turn next time if you don't act like such a saphead."

When he turned to face Lander, his eyes widened to see the spray of blood up Lander's shooting arm.

"And you better pray you keep being a decent shot, or I sure as hell won't have any use for you." Lander narrowed his eyes. "Come on."



The bodies were left littering the ground around the stagecoach as the gang rode away. Nick couldn't even bear to look at Jesse. He was afraid he would become him.

For the next two days, Nick moved around in a dull haze, unable to eat, unable to speak. The faces of the man and his daughters plagued his dreams and were all that occupied his mind when he was awake.

"Try not to feel bad about it—it was gonna be either him or you," Jesse told him one evening as they brushed out the horses.

Nick furrowed his eyebrows. "You don't feel bad when you kill someone?"

The look of remorse in Jesse's eyes said it all.

"How many men have you killed?" Nick asked.

"Six," Jesse said quietly. "I told you, though, it's either them or you," he repeated, almost as if it was a mantra for himself.

Nick gritted his teeth. "I couldn't do what you all did to those girls."

Jesse gazed away into the darkness. "Lander whipped me almost to death the first time I refused, and they *all* gave me a hell of a beating the second time I said no." He shook his head a little. "Take it from me, when it's your turn someday, it's smarter you just do it. Besides, as you saw, they always just kill 'em, anyway. Saying no ain't ever saved them."

Eventually, Nick came to the point where he realized he couldn't survive with Emily, the man, and the two girls in his head all the time. It hurt too much to think of them. He wasn't Emily's big brother anymore—he was a murderer now, and she would have been ashamed of him. Better if he just never thought about them anymore. He would never speak her name again.



A few weeks later, the gang made plans to hold up a bank in Leadville. It was a bold move to make in the fairly large and rich city, but Lander told them he had it in mind to do one last big heist and then go to Mexico for good. Nick held onto the hope that it meant he could be freed from all association with the gang.

The holdup did not go as planned. The sheriff and deputies arrived much sooner than any of them had expected.

Upon seeing the lawmen, Tom signaled to Nick from his watch-post on the nearby balcony of the saloon. Nick drew his revolver and kicked the heel of his boot three times against the door of the bank, letting the others know to get out. In that moment, he glanced around, wondering if this would be a good chance to make a break for it.

Gunfire erupted, and Nick dropped to the porch of the bank, cowering with his arms over his head.

Stubs was the first one out of the bank, taking a bullet to the forehead while Lander and his brothers used him as a shield. They ducked out of the bank with bags in hand. Lander booted Nick in the ribs when they rushed over him.

“Get the hell up!”

Lander and his brothers disappeared around the corner of the bank, leaving the rest of the gang trapped in a gunfight with the lawmen while they spurred their horses out of town. Nick crawled toward a nearby wagon where Lester and Tom were already taking cover as they fired upon the deputies. He took aim at the lawmen along with them, hoping that Lester and Tom didn’t notice his bullets exploding in the wood a couple of feet over their targets’ heads. Ever since he’d killed the man on the stagecoach, he never wanted to kill again, but he knew he had to look the part.

A moment later, a bullet ricocheted, hitting Lester in the neck. Nick gasped when he was sprayed with hot blood as Lester collapsed to the ground.

Tom continued to fire at the lawmen. Just then, upon hearing a low whistle, they both glanced behind them to see Jesse waiting around the corner of the building with their horses.

“Cover me!” Tom shouted, making his way to Jesse. Nick took a couple of shots at the building the deputies cowered behind. When Tom and Jesse finally called for him, he made a dash for them through a hail of bullets and scrambled up onto old Blue, spurring him to catch up to the others. The zip and thud of a bullet sounded somewhere around his leg, but he didn’t think anything of it until he rounded the corner and Blue shuddered and tripped below him. His ribs smashed into a water trough in the street when he went down with his horse. Breathless from the impact, he lay panting in the dirty water and glanced over in anguish at his father’s beloved Appaloosa, now lying still on the dusty street.

Moments later, Jesse appeared above him with his hand extended.

“Let’s go!”

He leaped from the water and shoved his friend’s horse from behind. “Leave me here!”

Jesse hesitated, his face a mask of confusion.

“I’m turning myself in! Just go—get away! And don’t go back to the gang!”

To prove his point, Nick turned away from Jesse and lifted his arms in surrender.

Jesse spurred his horse into a gallop. Nick glanced over his shoulder to see his friend disappear around the corner.

His hands were shaking as the lawmen closed in on him.



“It’s over, son.” The marshal threw his saddlebags on the table in front of Nick with a dust-raising *slap*. “They were right where you said they’d be. Unfortunately, two of ‘em got away, but we got Lander and his brother Merl alive, and we recovered the money.”

The kind way the corners of the marshal’s eyes creased reminded him of his father. Nick felt he could trust him.

The marshal chuckled. “Somebody sabotaged them—cut their saddle cinches. They got dumped flat on their backs when they tried to get away.”

Jesse. . .

Nick smiled to think of his friend doing that. However, thinking about what Lander and the others would do to Jesse and him for payback wiped the smile from his face.

“Anyhow, Nick,” the marshal continued, “I’m sure I can arrange a pardon for you, so long as you hold up your end of the bargain and testify. We have to wait for the judge to get here, but that should happen early next week. After that, I suggest you lie low until Jed Haskins and the other two are caught.”

Nick nodded. For the first time in many months, he had hope.

“In the meantime,” Marshal Hendricks continued, “we’ve got someone here we’d like you to help. We want sketches done so they can get posters out on the rest of the gang.” He nodded to a small-framed man with glasses who strode into the room and began setting up at the table.

The drawings of Jed Haskins and Tom Parker were surprisingly close to their likenesses. It astounded Nick that the artist could draw them in such detail just from asking a few questions.

Then the man began asking him questions about Jesse.

“How old is he?”

Nick hesitated. “I don’t know. My age, I guess.”

When the artist asked him about Jesse’s features, Nick closed his eyes and described the first things that came to mind that *didn’t* look like Jesse Vargas.

Once finished, the artist raised an eyebrow at him, glancing from the charcoal drawing to his face. The man narrowed his eyes and studied Nick.

He cringed inwardly, fearing the man somehow knew that he’d lied.

The artist opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off when Marshal Hendricks came back into the room.

“You finished here?”

“I suppose so,” the man replied, the strange look still fixed on his face.

“Come on, son,” Marshal Hendricks said. “You’ll be staying with me.”



Nick stayed in Marshal Hendrick’s home the entire week. During that time, he practically became the marshal’s shadow.

Elmira Hendricks, the marshal’s wife, filled his belly every day with home-cooked meals, and he was grateful for some semblance of peace while they awaited the trial.

Finally, after six days, the judge arrived in town. Nick’s stomach churned when the marshal told him the trial would be held the following day. He wasn’t sure he was ready to stand up and testify against Lander.

Later that same morning, he was lying in the Hendricks’ guest room, tracing the lines of the quilt with his finger when he overheard a conversation in hushed tones outside.

“—but he’s just a kid,” Elmira’s voice came through. “They can’t hang him.”

It was followed by silence, then the approach of footsteps through the house. A knock sounded on the door. Nick sat up, his heart racing. Before he could respond, the marshal opened the door and stepped inside.

Marshal Hendricks seemed unable to speak, and his eyes held such sorrow that it made Nick’s palms sweat.

“There’s a bit of a problem,” the marshal admitted as he sat on the end of the bed. “I was

certain the judge would grant you immunity for your testimony, but now he says he won't. And he still wants you to testify."

Panic washed through Nick as he tried to piece everything together.

"I'm so sorry, son. I explained your side to him, but he's a stubborn son of a—" The marshal cut off his last statement and sighed heavily. "It's my fault. This judge and I have bad blood between us, going way back. Even though he knows pardoning you is the right thing to do, he won't do it, seeing as the idea came from my mouth."

The marshal leaned his head back and looked at the ceiling. "He's going to try you, just like the rest of them."

Nick considered what he overheard Elmira say. "Are they going to hang me?"

"No . . ." The marshal removed his hat, turning the brim in his hands. "I don't know," he admitted. He put his hat back on and sighed. "I'm supposed to bring you in. You'll have to stay in the jail tonight."

Marshal Hendricks stood up slowly and extended a hand. "I'm sorry, son."

Nick began sobbing as he followed the marshal outside.

They walked together on the hard-packed dirt streets, the marshal guiding him with a firm hand on his shoulder. Nick could hardly see through his tears. The fear of the gallows froze his stomach into a rock. The realization he would be in jail with Lander made him cry even harder.

He tried to think of a way to plead with Marshal Hendricks, but before he could speak, the marshal turned him sharply off the street just after they'd passed the train depot. They stopped behind a building, standing just a few feet from the rail cars.

"I don't care if this bungles up the entire trial. I won't see you hang."

Nick's eyes widened when he realized what the marshal was going to do.

"Is Nick Thomas your real name?" the marshal asked.

He considered it a moment before shaking his head no. Down the tracks, the engine strained. The cars rumbled as they jostled in their positions.

"Well," the marshal said, "maybe you should start living under a different name, son. I'm afraid you'll always be wanted by the law—and the gang. Just because Lander is in prison, don't think he won't be able to reach you."

Marshal Hendricks boosted Nick up to the metal rungs of the coal car. The train began moving, and the marshal walked a few feet with him while he spoke. "Ride this as far as you can. Keep your nose clean, and have a good life, kid." The marshal patted his leg, and the boy scurried up the ladder.

The coal pile bulged in the middle, but he found that the corners of the car offered enough space to keep hidden. He was filthy by the time he made it to a corner and peeked over the top of the car in time to see the marshal touch his hat goodbye.

He rode the train into the night. As he looked at the stars from his bed of coal, he wondered what it would be like to live wanted. It brought thoughts of Jesse in that moment, and he wondered where his friend was. The movement of the train made him blink sleepily, and he sent out a silent wish that his friend would be able to find a more quiet, and honorable, way of life.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE LAWMEN



September 1894

Jesse Morgan made his way to his regular spot in the Fat Bandit Saloon in St. Elmo, Colorado, and propped his elbow on the worn, wooden bar top. He rested his head in his hand for a moment, gingerly pressing his palm against his eye socket.

The saloon was nearly empty, save for a few men circled up at a nearby table. Willard, a slender, bespectacled man, sat at his normal place at the piano. Tinkering notes, rather than anything that resembled a song, plinked from the aging ivories.

“Deputy Morgan,” the barman acknowledged, which was followed by the sound of a glass tapping the bar top and the familiar glug of amber liquid being poured from a whiskey bottle.

*God bless you, Otis.*

Jesse lifted his head. He would normally toss his drink back in a gulp, but decided to nurse the whiskey with slow, gut-burning sips.

Otis corked the bottle, gesturing at Jesse’s eye. “Damn, Jesse. Looks like you’ve got a hell of a shiner started there.” The corner of his mouth turned up. “Did someone not take kindly to yer enforcement of the law today?”

With a barely audible snort, Jesse shook his head, focusing on Otis’s black string tie. “No, I wasn’t working today,” he muttered.

Otis kept an eyebrow raised.

Jesse sighed. Otis wouldn’t give up until he had an answer.

“This was from Annie O’Brien,” he admitted, his voice low.

Otis’s eyes widened. “Brogan’s daughter? That pretty red-headed one? She’s a little spitfire, even for you.”

Jesse tipped his glass toward the barman. “Yeah, she packs a hell of a punch,” he admitted with a wince as the liquid burned from his throat down to his stomach.

“If you keep making all the single women in this town bitter, soon there won’t be one left that will give you the time of day. Then I bet you’d finally think about calling on the whores here.”

Jesse shook his head. “No, you know I’m not really one for whores.”

Otis gave a knowing grin. “Well, just because you’re lucky enough to get some of them so-called ‘respectable’ women around town to spread their legs for you, doesn’t mean you’re too good for one of the girls in here.”

“You may be right, Otis.” Jesse felt like rolling his eyes. It frustrated him that he’d gotten such a reputation around town. So maybe he wasn’t exactly a saint. He had broken one heart—Lynn Hartford’s to be exact, the local school teacher. Okay, maybe two, if you counted Sarah Middleton, but she’d already been betrothed to another man, and she was just as responsible as he was for everything that had happened.

So, what if he wasn’t the marrying kind? Annie should have known that, given his reputation. He had his reasons, and it didn’t mean he never cared about any of them. Hell, it still hurt a little to see them around. Especially Lynn. . .

Otis shook his head. “I forgot what we were even talking about. . . Oh, Annie—I was gonna say you’d better watch out for her father, Brogan. He would show you where that Irish temper of hers comes from.” He turned to peer at the swinging door when four new customers entered.

Jesse glanced at the newcomers. He hadn’t seen them in town before, and judging by their gun belts and the way they were sizing up the room, they could be trouble. He downed the last of his whiskey and regarded them from the corner of his eye while Otis set them up with drinks.

The man nearest to him glanced in Jesse’s direction. He had a gray planter’s hat pulled down to his dark eyebrows. He looked clean-cut enough to be a preacher if not for the .44 that peeked from under his knee-length frock coat. Given the man’s upright posture and his commanding demeanor, Jesse guessed him to be the leader of the group.

Jesse slid a coin across the bar and tipped his hat to Otis as he left. He avoided meeting eyes with the newcomers but sensed one of the gunslingers watching him. A familiar prickle rose on his neck, but he brushed the feeling off and stepped outside, squinting in the harsh sunlight. He paused at the sight of the gunslingers’ horses hitched in front of the saloon. Two looked pretty worn-out from the trail, evidenced by their dirty coats and the crust of dried sweat on their necks. The other two, a nice-looking pinto and a glossy quarter horse, stood out, appearing much more fresh.

An itching suspicion arose in him while he idled beside their horses. He took a sidelong glance at the saloon before lifting the bedroll tied to the back of the pinto to examine its brand. Part of the burn looked fresh. Jesse memorized the lines of it before inspecting the other horses’ brands. Finding the same marks on the quarter horse, he brushed his hand on the mare’s glossy hindquarters.

He lit a cheroot and smoked while he considered what to do.



The bell jingled overhead when Jesse stepped inside the office. Sheriff Lee Davis looked up from the paperwork on his desk.

“What happened to you?” he inquired.

“What?” Jesse touched his eye. “Oh, this. . .” He shrugged. “An accident.”

Lee’s eyebrow quirked.

Jesse ignored the knowing look from his boss and changed the subject. “You know of any stolen horses in the area?”

Lee shook his head. “None I know of here, but I think the Buena Vista sheriff sent a message about some a while ago.” He rummaged through his desk, stacking piles of yellow

papers onto the top. "Here." Lee finally produced something and held it out for Jesse. "Looks like a rancher by the name of John Powell reported a bunch wrangled from his outfit a couple weeks ago."

Jesse grabbed the paper and examined it.

Lee stood from his chair. "Why are you asking about this?"

"Four gunslingers just rode up to the Fat Bandit. I suspect a couple of their horses might be from that missing string." He snatched a pencil from Lee's desk and scratched out something on the back of an envelope. "Here, I think their brands were altered."

Lee rubbed his beard while he examined Jesse's drawing. At forty-three, deep creases were starting to pull at the corners of his eyes from long days of squinting in the sun and the worry of the job. He wore his dark hair combed back, and his thick mustache was often neighbored by a stubbly beard.

"Yeah, it's more than possible." Lee tapped the envelope. "Pretty simple to turn a Rocking P into a Circle B." He looked up at Jesse. "You sure about this?"

Jesse nodded. "Part of the brand looks a little raw. Plus, the two horses with these marks are a lot more fresh for coming off the trail than the other two without those brands."

Lee stood and buckled his gun belt. "So much for a day off for you, huh?"

Jesse shrugged and gestured toward his eye. "Yeah, pity too—the rest of the day was going so well."

"I'd wager that had something to do with a woman," Lee said dryly and settled his hat onto his head.

Jesse couldn't help but smile at that, imagining what Lee would say if he knew what Jesse and Annie had done on top of the deputies' desk. Or in the jail cell. Or especially in Lee's chair .

..

Lee would kill him. He wiped the smile from his face as he searched through the other desk for his badge. "What makes you say that?" he remarked.

Lee said nothing, but shook his head.

Jesse closed the drawer and dropped the beat-up 'Sheriff's Deputy' star into his shirt pocket. It was rare that he ever wore the thing—he felt it asked for more trouble than it was worth when meeting strangers. But a bigger part of him felt he didn't deserve it.

Lee pointed at the Spencer repeating rifle racked on the wall. "You'd better take that."

Jesse nodded and shrugged on his canvas trail coat, even though it was unseasonably warm for September in Colorado. He had stitched long pockets inside of the duster that held six extra magazine tubes for the Spencer. He might need them. Each metal tube was already loaded with seven cartridges, allowing for a speedy reload of the rifle. It made him formidable with the weapon. On a good day, he could crack off twenty rounds per minute.

"Where's Tracker?" Jesse asked of the other deputy. They would need all the help they could get to confront the gunslingers. Horse thievery was a hanging offense. No one in their right mind would stand accused of it without a fight.

"He went to rustle up some grub at Flo's. Let's go get him," Lee said, holstering his revolver.

Jesse grabbed the Spencer, along with a 10-gauge shotgun off the wall for Tracker.



Tracker nodded to them in greeting when they entered Mama Flo's Kitchen. He sat alone at one of the four rickety tables in her sparsely decorated parlor, halfway tucked into a plate of chicken and dumplings. Flo offered the best place to get a decent meal in all of St. Elmo. Both

deputies frequented her restaurant when they weren't scrounging for a meal at Lee and Clara's house.

Mama Flo gave Lee and Jesse a warm greeting. The delicious smells wafting from the kitchen made Jesse's stomach growl.

"Are you all gonna be taking supper here tonight?" Flo asked, heading toward the kitchen. Flo's ebony skin, glowing and smooth, showed little signs of her age, though the tight curls pulled back in a high bun were sprinkled heavily with gray. Jesse adored Flo like he would a beloved aunt, and it was no secret that Flo had a soft spot for the deputy.

"No, darlin'—we've got business with Tracker here," Jesse called after her.

Flo's head poked back out from the kitchen. Her dark brown eyes danced with delight. "Darlin', he says. . ." She grinned broadly and wagged her spoon at him. "Jesse, you keep up with your sweet-talking and you gonna end up married to Mama Flo someday."

Jesse chuckled. "No, ma'am, you'd try to make an honest man out of me—I couldn't be having that." He winked, which garnered another wide smile from her as she disappeared back into the kitchen, shaking her head.

Tracker scraped his fork across his plate, finishing the last of the chicken gravy while he waited for them to speak. He was in his mid-twenties, only slightly younger than Jesse. The deputies were close friends, both sharing a boarding room across town.

"Jesse thinks there's a couple of stolen horses with some gunslingers at the Fat Bandit saloon," Sheriff Davis said in a low voice.

Tracker lifted his gaze to meet Jesse's. "How many?"

"Gunslingers? There's four of them," Jesse replied.

Tracker stood from his chair and plunked down a few coins on the table. He set his hat low on his tousled blond hair.

Jesse passed him the 10-gauge.

"How come I get the mule-kicker?" Tracker asked.

"Because you need the scatter to have a hope of hitting anything."

"Oh, hah-hah." Tracker snipped. He turned to the sheriff. "You thinking of confronting these men here?"

"I'd rather avoid a gunfight in the saloon," Lee said. "Not to mention, I'd like to track down the rest of Powell's horses, seeing as there were about ten reported missing."

Jesse nodded. "It would be better if we could ambush them in their camp or wherever they're holed up."

Sheriff Davis stood quietly for a moment. "How about you boys poke your head into the saloon—no badges. It would be good if you find a way to spook them out of town so they don't stay the night." His eyes leveled on Tracker. "I want to follow them and find out where those other horses are being kept."

Tracker raised an eyebrow. "I'm supposing you'll be nearby if shit blows up?"

The sheriff nodded. "I'll go ready the horses and will wait around the corner if you boys need help."

Everyone knew that Lee didn't drink, and he never stepped into a saloon unless he had to. His presence inside would ruffle the feathers of the regular patrons. The deputies wouldn't create a stir since the Fat Bandit was the one saloon out of the five in town they favored.

The men bid farewell to Flo, who insisted on imparting sourdough biscuits on Jesse and Sheriff Davis before they left. Jesse stuffed the whole biscuit into his mouth while he and Tracker made their way down the dusty street.

"You're gonna choke and die on that before we get there," Tracker admonished him.

A few moments later, they rounded the corner and the Fat Bandit came into view. Jesse tapped Tracker on the arm and pointed ahead. "There, that pinto and the quarter horse, they're the ones with the altered brands."

"I hope you're right about this." Tracker plucked the badge from his shirt and tucked it away in his vest pocket.

The four men were seated at one of the round tables dealing a card game when the deputies walked in. They looked pretty settled in for the evening, and Jesse wondered if they had already paid for rooms.

Tracker and Jesse made their way to the far end of the bar, winding through the patrons that had filled up the place since Jesse left. They leaned the shotgun and rifle against the bar between them.

Otis glowered as he poured them whiskeys. "You two are armed heavy for an evening of drinking. If you're here to take anyone down, it better not happen in my bar."

Jesse held up a hand and gave a little shake of his head to assuage the barman's fears.

Otis grumbled and flipped his bar rag over his shoulder, moving on to take care of other customers.

"They're eyeing us," Tracker said, touching the whiskey glass to his lip. "Let's wait a bit, then see if we can get in that card game."

Jesse nodded.

Tracker turned to him. "So, you gonna tell me how you got that eye?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Jesse mumbled into his whiskey.

"I take it the other guy looks better than you, then."

Jesse cleared his throat. "So, you got any ideas on how to talk to these guys?"

Tracker shrugged. "I was thinking we could say we're ranch hands with Powell's outfit. If we make some conversation about the stolen horses, maybe they'd get spooked enough to clear out."

Jesse rubbed his neck. "That's pretty bold."

"Got any better ideas?"

"Not really," Jesse admitted. He stole a glance at the table. "We've waited long enough. Let's try to get in on their game."

Tracker gave him a curt nod and set his jaw. It looked like he was trying to steel his resolve.

Jesse felt the same way and had a fleeting wish they could just sit and drink and let the men pass through the doors without confrontation.

Tracker sauntered to the gunmen's table while Jesse waited by the bar.

With a friendly smile, Tracker produced a roll of bills from his vest and waved it between his fingertips. "Care to deal a couple more in?" He nodded his head to indicate Jesse.

The leader narrowed his eyes at Tracker. It seemed like ages before he answered, "We don't play for cheap. If you won't cry like whores when you lose your asses, we'll deal you in."

Jesse grabbed his rifle and the 10-gauge and made his way to the table, propping the guns against their chairs while they seated themselves. The leader puffed on a cigar across from them and dealt the cards. Willard plinked out one of his favorite songs on the old piano, the tune cutting through the din.

One of the saloon girls sauntered over and wiggled her way in between two of the men across the table. Her large breasts jiggled over her low-cut bodice as she bent over the table and asked if anyone wanted a drink or company.

"Maybe later, darlin'," the gunslinger to her left acknowledged.

Jesse's hat was low over his eyes while he fumbled in his pockets for cash for the game.

"Hey, don't I know you from somewhere?" the man to his right asked loudly.

Jesse raised his head when the woman didn't answer. She had already sauntered on to another table. He locked eyes with the man when he realized he was the one being addressed, and his throat tightened in sudden recognition.

*Oh, fuck. It's Tom Parker!*

Jesse couldn't even blink as he scanned the bar, halfway expecting Jed Haskins to be there. He sat in stunned disbelief that he hadn't recognized Tom earlier. Though their ten years apart showed a lot more on the older man, Tom's scar drooping from the corner of his mouth was unmistakable. Jesse concentrated on calming his racing heart and tried to clear his head for an answer.

He furrowed his brow as if trying to recognize Tom. "I don't think so," he answered and picked up his cards, trying to organize them and keep his hands from shaking.

Tom's eyes burned into him. "You look like someone I knew who rode with the Haskins Gang. He—"

Jesse cut him off sharply, "—Maybe we worked on a ranch or some other outfit together."

Jesse could feel Tracker's gaze on him, and he turned to meet his friend's eyes with his best attempt at a baffled look. His mind raced for a way out of the situation.

Tracker leaned over the table, his eyebrows raised. "You rode with the Haskins Gang?" he asked Tom in disbelief.

The other men at the table didn't seem to foster any amount of surprise at his question. They blinked plainly at their cards.

Tom scratched at his neck and glanced at Tracker. "No, *I* didn't," he lied, "but I know someone who did—and I know of some brothers who'd love to know his whereabouts." He gave Jesse a sidelong look. His expression said he remembered *exactly* who Jesse was. "What's your name?"

Jesse's pulse pounded in his neck. He panicked to think what would happen if Tracker learned about his past. He could kick off everything now—start a gunfight—but he knew Lee and Tracker would be full of questions later if he tried something so brash.

He scooted his chair closer to the table and stole a glance around to see everyone had their eyes on their cards. Jesse slowly eased his revolver from its holster. He kept his left hand resting casually on the green felt, and acted like he was pondering over his own cards while he slowly moved his weapon under the table. An old, familiar anxiety welled up inside him, telling him to get the hell out, but it was tempered with a moment of clarity. He realized he cherished his way of life in St. Elmo, and he would do anything to keep it.

"The name's Jesse," he said. He pressed the end of the barrel against Tom's leg and coughed loudly to mask the sound of the hammer being pulled back. Tom glanced under the table and stiffened. He glowered at Jesse when their eyes met, and the deputy shot him an icy look he hoped was enough to convey the depth of his intent.

Sweat formed on his neck. It seemed like an eternity while he waited for Tom to either draw on him or back off of his line of questioning.

"Huh, well, I guess I'm mistaken—you look just like him," Tom said, just loud enough to be heard over the saloon girls singing and cowboys hollering.

Tracker glanced up at Tom for a moment, then Jesse, before his eyes returned to his cards.

Relieved, Jesse slowly re-holstered his pistol, but Tom kept glaring at him as the poker game continued.

"So what do you gentlemen do for work? You look to be packing pretty heavy," the leader

asked, his cold eyes setting on the long guns leaning between the deputies.

Tracker was faster than Jesse to answer, “We work for an outfit run by a man named Powell. We’re cowpunchers by trade, but the boss has us tracking some horses that were wrangled from the ranch a lil’ less than a week ago.”

Two of the gunslingers exchanged glances. Jesse tensed his fingers near his revolver, ready to draw if they reacted.

“That’s too bad. Any luck in your endeavors?” The leader twisted the ends of his mustache with a mocking grin.

Tracker shrugged. “Nah, and I doubt we’ll ever come on anything. It’s just nice to get a clean bed and a stiff drink on the boss’s dime,” he said, giving the man his trademark lopsided smile.

After a few more hands, the poker game concluded—a little to Jesse’s chagrin, having lost most of his salary for the week.

“Well boys, we’d best hit the trail,” the leader said as he stood and crushed his cigar out underneath his boot.

Jesse and Tracker exchanged glances but remained seated as the chairs grated against the dirty floorboards while the men rose to their feet. Jesse’s hair stood up on his neck when Tom brushed behind him.

“Much obliged for the game.” Tracker acknowledged the group’s departure with a tip of his hat. The deputies sat together in the din of the saloon for a moment after the gang left.

“That man who thought he knew you—do you think he actually rode with the Haskins Gang?” Tracker inquired as he stacked the cards.

“I don’t know,” Jesse said, his stomach flipping again at the mention of it.

Tracker’s green eyes met his while he continued, “Well, if he did, he’s bad shit. You know, I think there’s still a reward on those guys who escaped when those two brothers were caught.”

Jesse forced himself to keep his reaction from crossing his face, but he felt nauseous just thinking about the old gang. “Huh, yeah.” He shrugged. “Well, I’d be willing to bet none of them are first-time horse thieves. There’s probably bounties on all their heads.”

Tracker nodded. “A reward would be nice. Hell, I bet Powell would put out money too, if we recovered his horses.”

Jesse figured enough time had passed for the gang to feel they weren’t being followed. He stood and slapped Tracker on the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Lee emerged from the darkness around the corner of the saloon when the deputies stepped into the street. “They’re headed south toward the Mary Murphy Mine. You boys ready?”

Jesse patted the neck of the old mare the sheriff had readied for him and slid the Spencer into the scabbard. He was anxious to get after the gunslingers before Tom said anything to his counterparts. God forbid if they got away tonight and Tom talked to any of the Haskins brothers.

“Ready as we’ll ever be,” he said, adjusting the saddle cinch.

[Chapter 2 has been omitted from this preview]

# CHAPTER 3

## BAD ENOUGH



Jesse's mare swiveled her ears forward and whinnied a greeting in the darkness. Instinctively, Jesse's hand went to his revolver as he strained to see the approaching horse. He relaxed when Tracker emerged through the trees, guiding his surefooted strawberry roan through the pines to where Lee and Jesse were waiting near the road to the Mary Murphy Mine.

"They're camped not too far off Hancock pass, about a half-dozen miles from here," Tracker said when he got closer and pulled up on the reins.

"How many are there?" Lee asked.

"Just the four. It looks like they got a dozen horses penned up between some trees."

Lee nodded as the cry of a screech owl filtered through the woods. "Enough to be Powell's herd?"

"Looked to be the size of it," Tracker confirmed.

Lee cocked his head toward Jesse. "Any place for him to set up with the rifle?"

"Yeah, I checked 'em out from the hillside—the view's good enough to see over the whole camp."

"All right, Track. Show us the way."

The silence thickened between them for the next several miles as they rode down the pass.

Tracker reined his mare beside Jesse's. "So, you gonna tell us what happened to your eye?" he asked.

Jesse groaned inwardly. He really didn't want to talk about it in Lee's presence. The sheriff was a churchgoing man, and probably thought bad enough about Jesse's reputation with the ladies.

Jesse gave him a sideways look. "I think maybe we should keep quiet."

"Aw, their camp is still miles away. Let's hear it."

Jesse sighed. "I had a little misunderstanding with Annie O'Brien, is all. It was nothing, really. An accident."

"As in, you got fresh with her and she 'accidentally' cleaned your plow?" Tracker grinned.

"No, to tell the truth, *she* was the one who came on to me. I mean. . ." Jesse glanced at Lee.

"I didn't know the two of you were courting," Lee said.

*Huh—courting.* That was one way to put it.

Annie had shown up outside the sheriff's office one night while Jesse was closing up, insisting that he make a report. Someone was stealing things from her garden, she told him. He couldn't convince her it wasn't important enough to warrant his attention right away, but she persisted until he relented. When they went inside, she found her way into his lap and started

kissing him, brazen-as-you-please, and things didn't stop there. Turns out, there weren't any garden thieves—other than the rabbits. She admitted she just wanted to get him alone.

He was feeling pretty lucky and rather high-on-his-horse until two days later, when she sprang the idea on him that they should get married. Soon. He should have seen it from the beginning for the trap that it was. Why she wanted him though, he didn't know.

The black eye came sometime around the point he'd commented that she shouldn't use what was between her legs as a bear-trap to get a husband. In hindsight, that wasn't the smartest thing to say. And it hurt like hell. For being a little thing, Annie sure hit like a man. But, damn, what a little spitfire she was in bed. Just thinking about that made him miss her a little already. . .

"Well. . . ?" Lee asked. By his tone of voice, Jesse could tell he'd missed the question.

"What?"

"How did she give you that black eye?"

Jesse shrugged. "Minor disagreement about a subject."

"What subject?"

"Me marrying her."

Lee scoffed under his breath. "Well, doesn't that beat the band? You've never had a disagreement about that with a woman, ever."

Jesse winced at the sound of judgment in the sheriff's voice. "We'd only known each other for three days. It's crazy to think of wanting to marry someone so quick."

"But plenty of time for you to get what you wanted out of her, am I right?"

"Aw, come on, Lee. I'm not like that."

"Uh-huh," Lee said, shaking his head. "Maybe what you really do need is a good woman who can keep you home and out of the saloons."

"I think that would take a really big gal. Who could sit on him," Tracker said over his shoulder.

A few miles later, clouds screened the moon overhead when Tracker finally raised his hand, signaling them to stop. The only sound was the creak of the leather saddles as they dismounted and tied the horses to the brush. Jesse pulled the Spencer out of the scabbard and patted the neck of his mare.

Lee drew in his breath. "Okay, Jesse, you'll work up to a good point above them on the hillside. Tracker, back me up with the 10-gauge." He narrowed his eyes at Jesse. "If they resist going quietly, don't hesitate to pick them off."

Jesse's mouth formed into a grim line as he nodded in acknowledgment. If Tom said anything when they arrested him, Jesse was as good as hanged.

Tracker stepped up beside him to whisper, "Cut through those trees to the left and start up the hill where you'll see the rocks going up. You can't miss it."

Jesse glanced in the direction Tracker pointed, then opened his coat and looked over the extra magazine tubes. He pulled his revolver and spun out the chamber. It was loaded, but he found comfort in checking.

Even though covering them with the rifle would give the lawmen a serious advantage, he hated to think about being so far removed from Lee and Tracker. He slapped Tracker on the shoulder. "Don't get any holes in your ass, Track."

"I already got a good one," Tracker whispered back. "So, shoot straight with that thing and don't be tryin' to give me any more."

Jesse shook his head. "Oh, I wouldn't, cause I know you'd figure out a way to talk from it, and then you'd pester me twice as much."

Lee stepped in before Tracker could retort back. "We'll wait awhile so you can get set up," Lee told Jesse quietly. "Give us some kind of call for a signal when you're ready for us."

"I will," Jesse said, touching the brim of his hat. "Good luck." His stomach tensed with dread as he turned away from them and disappeared into the brush.

It grew considerably more difficult to stay quiet once he started following the spinous line of rocks that ran up the mountain. Jesse's breath caught in his throat when several small rocks broke off, sliding down the loose dirt of the hillside. He froze, waiting for evidence he'd been heard.

No sounds came. He continued to pick a path up the mountain among the rocks, testing every step before putting his weight onto it.

The moonlight illuminated the valley below. Scraggly brush punctuated the short grass until meeting the dense line of willows surrounding the creek. The flickering embers of a dying campfire caught his eye while he crept up to a better vantage point between the sparse, looming pines.

Jesse eased his rifle down onto a sharp-edged rock and spread out behind it on his stomach. The earth felt cool and damp through his duster as he surveyed the camp below. It looked to be about forty yards below him.

He counted the shapes of three men that filled out bedrolls near the fire but couldn't see the fourth. The missing outlaw was likely keeping watch. Jesse narrowed his eyes, scanning between the shadows and brush, straining to pick him out. He needed to get the man to stir so Lee and Tracker could see him. He cupped his hand to his mouth, making a lousy impression of a hoot owl.

Sudden movement caught his attention. The fourth man materialized when he arose from behind a rabbitbrush, aiming his pistol as he turned in a slow circle, looking for who'd made the noise.

Jesse settled his cheek against the rifle and centered the man in his sights. He cocked the hammer back.

"Who's there? Show yourself!" the outlaw shouted, setting off a commotion as the other men woke and scrambled for their weapons.

In that same moment, Lee stepped out from the shadow of a tree several yards in front of the man, his revolver trained on the outlaw. Tracker appeared just behind him, making a level sweep over the men in the camp with the shotgun.

"I'm Sheriff Davis," Lee boomed, "and you're all wanted for horse theft. Either come back with us nice and easy, or we'll kill you all where you stand."

"Pretty bold, to think the two of you could take on all of us," the leader shouted, still standing on his bedroll.

Everyone stood rigid. The fire flickered, casting wavering shadows over the outlaws as they trained their guns on Lee and Tracker.

"We've got you surrounded," Lee threatened. "And my other deputy's here, too. He has a repeating rifle trained on you, and he's damn quick with it, so don't test him."

The clear night air carried their voices up to Jesse. He steadied his breath as his eyes darted from one man to the next, waiting for any sudden movement from any of the outlaws.

"I'm sure this is a big misunderstanding," the leader retorted. "If you check my horses'

brands, you'll see they aren't what you're looking for."

"Oh, I'm sure you have a running iron somewhere in this camp," Lee said, "seeing as my deputy told me those brands looked fresh. Pretty simple thing, how you turned those Powell brands into a Circle B. But, why don't you all come back to town with us so we can sort this out in front of a judge?"

Tom piped up from behind the leader and gestured toward Tracker. "Was that Jesse guy in the saloon your other deputy? 'Cause if yer looking for a wanted man, then—"

The sudden ear-splitting crack of Jesse's rifle made everyone jump in surprise. Tom's legs buckled underneath him. He thrashed on the ground and groaned in agony, clutching at his chest. A moment of stunned silence hung in the air.

All at once, the rest of the outlaws fired on Lee and Tracker.

Jesse's heart felt like it was going to leap out of his throat.

*Shit. What have I done?*

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